



Subjective happiness among mothers of children with disabilities: The role of stress, attachment, guilt and social support



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ABSTRACT

Background: Parenting a child with disabilities might affect the happiness of the mothers. Hence we adapted Wallander, Varni, Babani, Banis, and Wilcox's (1989) disability-stress-coping model to examine the impact of risk factors (specific stressors related to the child's disability) on the mother's adaptation (happiness). Intrapersonal factors (attachment) and social-ecological factors (social support) were hypothesized to predict adaptation. Both constitute 'risk-resistant' factors, which are mediated by the mother's perceived general stress and guilt.

Method: 191 mothers of a child with a developmental disability (ages 3–7) answered questionnaires on happiness, specific and general stress, attachment, guilt and social support. **Results:** Attachment avoidance was directly and negatively associated with mothers' happiness. General stress was negatively associated with happiness, and mediated the association between anxious attachment, support, and specific stress with happiness. Guilt was negatively associated with happiness, and served as a mediator between attachment anxiety and support and happiness.

Conclusion: The findings of the current research show direct and indirect associations of risk factors with happiness and the role of general stress and feelings of guilt as mediators. **Implications:** This study stresses the importance of attachment and social support to happiness and sheds light on the unique role of guilt in promoting or inhibiting happiness.

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1. Introduction

The birth and the presence of a child with a developmental disability often lead to stress and challenge for the child's entire family. Families are forced to cope with numerous economic and financial costs involved in raising a child with a disability, while balancing the needs and expectations of other family members. These families often contend with social embarrassment and isolation (e.g., Estes et al., 2013; Florian & Findler, 2001; Papaeliou et al., 2012; Safe, Joosten, & Molineux, 2012). Because mothers are often the primary caregivers, they are particularly exposed and vulnerable to these stressors (e.g., Florian & Findler, 2001; Montes & Halterman, 2007; Rogers & Hogan, 2003). Despite the challenges they face, considerable

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variation has been noted in mothers' adaptation to such challenging life circumstances (Pelchat, Levert, & Bourgeois-Guérin, 2009; Van Der Veek, Kraaij, & Garnefski, 2009); some mothers find raising a child with a disability burdensome and difficult, while others successfully adapt to the situation and even experience positive outcomes (Flaherty & Masters Glidden, 2000; Greenberg, Seltzer, Krauss, Chou, & Hong, 2004; Hastings, Beck, & Hill, 2005; Hastings & Taunt, 2002).

The theoretical model of Disability–Stress–Coping developed by Wallander, Varni, Babani, Banis, and Wilcox (1989) was utilized and adapted for the purposes of this research. In this model, various factors that are hypothesized to play a role in adjustment to chronic conditions (i.e. the child's disability) are organized into a risk-resistance framework. Specifically, the main factor presumed to be responsible for elevating the risk of developing psychosocial problems is continuous stress. The authors list several sources of stress including a disease or condition, severity of the disability, and associated functional limitations that result from the condition. According to our adapted model, the impact of risk factors (operationalized in the current study as specific stressors related to the child's disability) on mothers' adaptation (operationalized in this study as happiness) is predicted by intrapersonal (i.e. mother's attachment) and social-ecological (i.e. social support) factors, which are mediated by general stress and feelings of guilt. These factors are assumed to constitute a set of "risk-resistant" factors, and directly and indirectly relate to adaptation (Wallander et al., 1989).

1.1. Risk factors

1.1.1. Raising a child with a disability—disability-specific stress and general stress

Ample attention has been devoted in the literature to the extensive physical, emotional, and practical impact that a child with a disability has on his or her family (e.g., Davis & Carter, 2008; Florian & Findler, 2001; Johnston et al., 2003). The challenge involved in raising a child with a disability tends to continue for many years (albeit in different forms and with different implications), and accompanies the parents throughout their lives. These unique circumstances may cause emotional (e.g., Burke & Hodapp, 2014; Florian & Findler, 2001; Smith, Oliver, & Innocenti, 2001; Weitlauf, Vehorn, Taylor, & Warren, 2014; Wulffaert, Scholte, & Van Berckelaer-Onnes, 2010), financial (Goudie, Narcisse, Hall, & Kuo, 2014) and social stresses (Green, 2007).

Many studies have revealed higher levels of stress among mothers of children with disabilities in comparison with mothers of typically developing children. For example, Oelofsen and Richardson (2006) found high levels of parenting stress and poor health among mothers of preschool children with developmental disabilities. Similarly, Florian and Findler (2001), who examined stress, mental health and the marital adaptation of mothers of a child with cerebral palsy and mothers of a typically developing child, found that mothers of a child with cerebral palsy reported a significantly higher number of stressful life events. Studies have found similar results among mothers of a child with other disabilities such as autism (e.g., Siman-Tov & Kaniel, 2011) and intellectual disabilities (e.g., Johnston et al., 2003). Child behavior is a factor that has been found to be related to the level of parenting stress. For example, Lecavalier, Leone, and Wiltz (2006) studied the experiences of parents of a child with autism, and found that children's externalizing behaviors, especially problems with conduct, were significant predictors of stress.

Alongside disability-specific stress, parents may experience general stresses that are part of typical life transitions, such as the loss of a job, financial hardship, divorce, and the death of a loved one (Armeli, Gunthert, & Cohen, 2001). While these stresses can affect anyone, families coping with disability-specific stress may be weakened and more vulnerable to general-stress, which in turn may impact their adaptation. Findings of a previous longitudinal study of female health science students showed that perceived stress served as a mediator between emotional intelligence and well-being indicators, specifically life satisfaction and happiness (Ruiz-Aranda, Extremera, & Pineda-Galán, 2014).

Despite the perceived disability-specific stress and the perceived general stress of mothers of children with disabilities, many adjust well and even report positive experiences and feelings (e.g., Hastings et al., 2005; Kayfitz, Cragg, & Robert Orr, 2010; Scorgie & Sobsey, 2000).

1.2. Adaptation

1.2.1. Subjective happiness

Happiness is a subjective emotion measured by the degree to which a person feels satisfied with his or her life (Diener, 2000). A person's sense of happiness has wide-spread implications on their ability to function in all aspects of their lives. Happier people have been found to respond better to crisis situations and to not dwell on negative emotions or self-blame. Happier people are also more flexible and do not give up on the goals they have set for themselves (Abbe, Tkach, & Lyubomirsky, 2003).

Numerous studies have debated the association between happiness and functioning, specifically questioning whether life circumstances and individual characteristics affect happiness and if happiness levels or dispositions affect behavior (Seligman, 1994). Studies have found that life circumstances do indeed affect the level of happiness; people who have experienced many negative events usually experience fewer positive emotions than others and as such, are less happy (Lehman, Wortman, & Williams, 1987). Nonetheless, happiness has been associated with higher levels of self-esteem (Abbe et al., 2003), and was found to be a stable and genetically-determined trait. Though happiness may change in response to life events it will eventually return to its prior and steady baseline (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; Lykken & Tellegen,

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