

SELF-COMPASSION, SOCIAL SUPPORT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING IN PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

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Abstract

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by challenges in social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviors. Parents of children with ASD often experience significant psychological distress due to the unique challenges associated with raising a child with special needs. This study aims to investigate the relationship among self-compassion, social support, and psychological well-being in parents of autistic children. A cross-sectional correlational research design and purposive sampling technique was used to recruit sample of (N=100) parents who have children with ASD. Three instruments were utilized to collect data i.e., psychological well-being scale, multidimensional scale of perceived support, and self-compassion scale. The results show significant positive correlations among self-compassion, social support, and psychological well-being, with both self-compassion and social support emerging as strong predictors of well-being. Additionally, fathers reported significantly higher psychological well-being than mothers, indicating notable gender differences in adjustment to parenting a child with autism. This study emphasizes the need for self-compassion training and social support programs to enhance parents' well-being, especially for mothers facing greater challenges.

Keywords: *self-compassion, social-support, psychological well-being, parents of children with ASD*

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by cognitive and social deficits, as well as restricted and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals with ASD experience daily challenges in various aspects of life, including poor adaptive functioning, anxiety, hyperactivity, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors (Shahid et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2014). Parents of children with ASD face unique difficulties directly related to their child's condition. Various personality traits influence how parents cope with these challenges in their daily lives. One significant factor that can play a crucial role in managing daily stressors and difficulties is self-compassion. Self-compassion involves being kind to oneself in times of difficulty, acknowledging that human suffering is a shared experience, and maintaining awareness of negative thoughts and emotions (Neff, 2003).

Parents of children on the autism spectrum encounter multiple obstacles, including early diagnosis, identifying effective care and educational systems, and managing the financial burden of treatment and services (Whitman, 2004). These parents experience higher rates of depression (Olsson & Hwang, 2001), elevated stress levels, and overall poorer health outcomes due to the demands of caring for a child with ASD (Ekas et al., 2009).

Self-compassion is a crucial psychological construct that involves treating oneself with kindness, understanding, and acceptance during times of struggle or personal failure (Neff, 2003; Iqbal et al., 2025). It consists of three major elements: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification (Neff, 2003). Having self-compassion is similar to showing compassion to others. When witnessing someone in distress, individuals often experience empathy and a desire to help; similarly, self-compassion allows individuals to extend the same kindness to themselves during

difficult times (Iqbal & Bashir, 2021). In contrast, a lack of self-compassion may result in self-criticism and emotional distress (Neff, 2003).

Barnard and Curry (2011) further elaborate on self-compassion by describing three essential components: (a) being kind and understanding towards oneself rather than being self-critical, (b) recognizing personal failures as part of the shared human experience rather than seeing them as isolating occurrences, and (c) adopting a balanced perspective towards painful emotions rather than over-identifying with them. In essence, self-compassion fosters emotional resilience and encourages a healthier approach to personal shortcomings (Barnard & Curry, 2011).

Self-compassion can also be conceptualized as a self-attitude that involves treating oneself with kindness and understanding in difficult situations and acknowledging that making mistakes is an inherent aspect of human nature (Breines & Chen, 2012). Neff (2003) suggests that self-compassion comprises three interdependent components: Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgment: Self-kindness involves being gentle and understanding with oneself rather than engaging in harsh self-criticism. When faced with adversity, individuals high in self-compassion are more likely to respond with self-care and patience rather than frustration and self-judgment (Neff, 2003). Research suggests that individuals who practice self-compassion exhibit greater emotional well-being and resilience, as they accept their imperfections with empathy and self-support (Breines & Chen, 2012).

Common Humanity vs. Isolation: This component emphasizes the recognition that suffering and personal failure are universal human experiences. Rather than feeling isolated by their struggles, self-compassionate individuals understand that difficulties are a shared aspect of human existence (Neff, 2003). The acknowledgment of common humanity helps in reducing feelings of loneliness and promotes a sense of connectedness with others (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Mindfulness vs. Over-Identification: Mindfulness involves maintaining a balanced awareness of one's thoughts and emotions without suppressing or exaggerating them. This perspective enables individuals to observe their negative emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them (Neff, 2003). Mindfulness in self-compassionate individuals fosters a healthier emotional regulation strategy, allowing them to navigate distressing situations more effectively (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011).

A meta-analysis by MacBeth and Gumley (2012) demonstrated that self-compassion is significantly associated with lower levels of psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and stress. Additionally, self-compassion has been linked to positive psychological outcomes such as greater happiness, optimism, and life satisfaction (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011). Research also suggests that self-compassion serves as a strong predictor of motivation, as it fosters greater intrinsic confidence and reduces fear of failure (Smeets et al., 2014). Moreover, individuals with higher self-compassion exhibit greater perseverance and commitment following setbacks (Breines & Chen, 2012). In terms of health-related behaviors, self-compassion has been associated with healthier lifestyle choices, including increased physical activity, better dietary habits, and moderate alcohol consumption (Brooks et al., 2012). Social support refers to the perception and reality of being cared for, valued, and having access to a supportive network of family, friends, and community members (Kazmi et al., 2023; Hameed et al., 2022). It plays a crucial role in buffering against psychological distress and promoting overall well-being (Umar et al., 2024; Javed et al., 2021). Social support can be categorized into different types, including emotional support (expressions of empathy and encouragement), instrumental support (tangible help such as financial assistance or childcare), and informational support (guidance and advice) (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Zulfiqar et al., 2025). Research suggests that individuals with strong social support networks are better equipped to manage stress, cope with life challenges, and maintain positive mental health outcomes (Iqbal

et al., 2025; Uchino, 2009). Among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), social support is particularly essential, as it helps mitigate the emotional and psychological burden associated with caregiving responsibilities (Benson, 2012).

Parents raising children with ASD often experience higher levels of stress and emotional exhaustion, making social support a critical protective factor. Studies indicate that parents who receive emotional and instrumental support from family, friends, and professional organizations report lower levels of depression and anxiety (Zablotsky et al., 2013). Additionally, support groups and community networks provide opportunities for parents to share experiences, receive practical advice, and reduce feelings of isolation (Boyd, 2002). Formal support from healthcare professionals and special education services further contributes to improved coping strategies and resilience among parents (McCabe, 2012). Given the challenges associated with raising a child with ASD, fostering strong social support systems can significantly enhance parental well-being and overall family functioning.

Psychological well-being refers to an individual's overall emotional and mental state, encompassing aspects such as life satisfaction, emotional balance, personal growth, and the ability to cope with stress and adversity (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). It is a multidimensional construct that includes positive relationships, autonomy, self-acceptance, purpose in life, and environmental mastery. Psychological well-being is strongly linked to various protective factors, including self-compassion, social support, and resilience (Diener et al., 2009). For parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), psychological well-being is particularly significant, as the caregiving burden, financial stress, and emotional demands can negatively impact their mental health (Hayes & Watson, 2013). Maintaining high levels of psychological well-being enables parents to better navigate challenges, provide effective care, and sustain a positive family environment.

Parents of children with ASD often report higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms compared to parents of neurotypical children, which can adversely affect their psychological well-being (Dunn et al., 2001). However, factors such as strong social support, adaptive coping strategies, and self-care practices contribute to greater resilience and improved well-being (Pottie & Ingram, 2008). Research suggests that interventions focused on mindfulness, self-compassion, and social engagement can enhance psychological well-being by reducing caregiver burnout and promoting emotional stability (Weiss et al., 2012). By fostering a supportive environment and accessing mental health resources, parents can better manage their psychological distress and enhance their overall quality of life.

Parenting a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) presents significant emotional, psychological, and financial challenges, particularly in a developing country like Pakistan, where awareness, resources, and support systems for ASD remain limited (Naseer et al., 2020). Parents often struggle with high levels of stress, anxiety, and social stigma, which can negatively impact their psychological well-being (Hassan et al., 2021). Given the crucial role of self-compassion and social support in mitigating stress and enhancing well-being, it is essential to examine how these factors influence the mental health of parents raising children with ASD in Pakistan. This study aims to bridge the existing research gap by exploring the interplay between self-compassion, social support, and psychological well-being in this population, ultimately contributing to the development of culturally relevant interventions and support strategies.

Objectives of Study

- To examine the relationship among self-compassion, social support and psychological wellbeing in parents of children with ASD.
- To investigate the predicting role of self-compassion on psychological wellbeing in parents of children with ASD.

- To find out gender differences in self-compassion, social support, and psychological well-being in parents of children with ASD.

Hypothesis of Study

- There would likely to be a significant positive correlation among self-compassion, social support and psychological wellbeing in parents of children with ASD.
- Self-compassion and social support would likely to be significant positive predictors of psychological wellbeing in parents of children with ASD.
- Psychological wellbeing would likely to be higher in the fathers as compared to the mothers in parents of children with ASD.

Material and Method

A cross-sectional correlational research design and purposive sampling technique were employed to collect data from 100 parents of children with ASD, including 50 fathers and 50 mothers. Ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their confidentiality and anonymity. The research complied with institutional and ethical standards at all stages. The Self-Compassion Scale (SCS), developed by Neff (2003), was used to assess self-compassion among participants. This 26-item self-report measure evaluates self-compassion on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Almost Never) to 5 (Almost Always), with higher scores indicating greater self-compassion. The scale comprises six subscales: self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification. The SCS has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92, indicating high internal consistency.

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), developed by Zimet et al. (1988), was used to assess participants' perceived social support. This 12-item self-report scale measures support from three sources: family, friends, and significant others. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Very Strongly Agree), with higher scores reflecting greater perceived social support. The MSPSS has exhibited excellent psychometric properties, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88, confirming its reliability and validity in measuring social support.

The Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being (PWB), developed by Ryff (1989), was used to assess the psychological well-being of participants. This self-report measure evaluates six dimensions of psychological well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. The scale consists of 42 items, with each item rated on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree), where higher scores indicate greater psychological well-being. The PWB scale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with a Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.86 to 0.93 across different subscales, indicating high internal consistency and reliability.

Results

Table 1

The Cronbach's Alpha, Mean, and Standard Deviation for the Self-compassion Scale, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and Psychological Wellbeing Scale

| Scales | <i>k</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>Range</i> | <i>α</i> |
|--|----------|----------|-----------|--------------|----------|
| Self-compassion Scale | 26 | 81.98 | 9.69 | 26-130 | .76 |
| Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support | 12 | 64.79 | 13.22 | 12-84 | .91 |
| Psychological Wellbeing Scale | 42 | 172.88 | 27.60 | 42-252 | .90 |

Note. *K*= Number of items, *M*= Mean, *SD*= Standard deviation, *α*= Cronbach's Alpha

Table 1 presents the reliability and descriptive statistics for the Self-Compassion Scale, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and Psychological Well-Being Scale. All three measures demonstrate adequate to high internal consistency, as indicated by their Cronbach's alpha values. These results confirm the reliability of the measures used in the study.

Table 2

Pearson Product Moment Correlation of Self-compassion, Perceived Social Support and Psychological Wellbeing in Parents of Children with ASD (N = 100)

| Variable | N | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|-----------------------------|-----|---|-------|--------|
| 1. Self-compassion | 100 | - | .53** | .64*** |
| 2. Perceived Social Support | 100 | - | - | .41** |
| 3. Psychological Wellbeing | 100 | - | - | - |

Note. N= Total sample size, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2 presents the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation among Self-Compassion, Perceived Social Support, and Psychological Well-Being in parents of children with ASD. The results indicate significant positive correlations between all three variables. Higher self-compassion is associated with greater perceived social support and psychological well-being. Similarly, perceived social support is positively linked to psychological well-being, suggesting that increased support enhances overall well-being.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analysis for the Prediction of Self-compassion and Social Support on Psychological Wellbeing in Parents of Children with ASD

| Variable | β | p | R ² |
|-----------------|---------|------------|----------------|
| Self-compassion | .56 | ** (p<.01) | 42 |
| Social Support | .49 | ** (p<.01) | 38 |

Note. β = Standardized Coefficient of Beta; R² = R square

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive role of self-compassion and social support on psychological wellbeing in parents of children with ASD. The results revealed that both self-compassion and perceived social support significantly contribute to predicting psychological well-being, with notable effect sizes.

Table 4

Independent Sample t-test for Mean and Standard Deviation of Psychological Well-Being Based on Gender Differences in Parents of Children with ASD

| Variable | Father (n=50) | | Mother (n=50) | | t | p | Cohen's d |
|-------------------------|------------------|-------|------------------|-------|------|--------|-----------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| Psychological Wellbeing | 180.25 | 25.30 | 165.50 | 28.10 | 2.50 | .014** | 0.50 |

Note. ** $p < .01$.

The table presents the results of an independent samples t-test comparing psychological well-being based on gender differences in parents of children with ASD. The results indicate that fathers reported significantly higher psychological well-being compared to mothers, with a moderate effect size (Cohen's d = 0.50). This suggests that gender differences exist in psychological well-being.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between self-compassion, social support, and psychological well-being in parents of children with ASD. The findings revealed significant positive correlations among these variables, supporting the study's hypotheses. Additionally, self-compassion and perceived social support were found to be significant predictors of

psychological well-being. Furthermore, fathers reported higher psychological well-being compared to mothers, highlighting potential gender differences in coping mechanisms.

The positive correlation between self-compassion and psychological well-being aligns with previous research, indicating that self-compassion serves as a protective factor against stress and emotional distress (Neff, 2003). Self-compassionate individuals tend to practice self-kindness, mindfulness, and a balanced perspective on suffering, which contributes to greater psychological resilience (Neff & Germer, 2013). This finding is particularly relevant for parents of autistic children, who often experience heightened caregiving stress and emotional exhaustion (Hayes & Watson, 2013). By fostering self-compassion, parents may develop healthier coping mechanisms, reducing the negative psychological impact of caregiving.

Similarly, the significant association between perceived social support and psychological well-being is consistent with previous studies emphasizing the critical role of social networks in buffering stress and promoting mental health (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Parents of children with autism often face social isolation, financial strain, and difficulties in accessing appropriate healthcare services (Dunn et al., 2001). Social support from family, friends, and support groups provides emotional validation, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging, all of which contribute to improved psychological well-being (Smith et al., 2012). This study's findings reinforce the necessity of social interventions aimed at strengthening support systems for these parents.

Furthermore, self-compassion and social support were found to be significant predictors of psychological well-being. These findings align with previous literature suggesting that individuals with higher self-compassion report lower levels of stress and anxiety, leading to enhanced mental health outcomes (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Similarly, research has demonstrated that strong social support networks act as a buffer against psychological distress, particularly in populations experiencing chronic stressors, such as parents of children with developmental disabilities (Benson, 2010). The predictive role of self-compassion and social support underscores the importance of psychological interventions that focus on enhancing these factors to improve overall well-being in this population.

The gender differences observed in psychological well-being, with fathers reporting higher scores than mothers, are consistent with prior research indicating that mothers of children with autism experience greater stress and depressive symptoms compared to fathers (Davis & Carter, 2008). Mothers often take on the primary caregiving role, leading to increased emotional and physical strain (Hastings et al., 2005). Additionally, societal expectations and caregiving responsibilities may contribute to higher levels of distress in mothers, whereas fathers may engage in different coping strategies, such as focusing on employment or seeking external support (Gray, 2003). These findings highlight the need for targeted mental health interventions that address the unique challenges faced by mothers and provide them with adequate support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study contributes to the growing body of literature on the psychological well-being of parents of autistic children by emphasizing the significant roles of self-compassion and social support.

Implications

The findings suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing self-compassion and strengthening social support networks could be beneficial in improving the mental health of these parents. Future research should explore longitudinal effects and examine the impact of culturally specific factors on these relationships.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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