

Title: Commonalities in Coping: Reports from Parents of Transition Age Youth Across Diagnostic Groups

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Introduction: There is vast literature on the coping experiences of parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, but there is limited research on the coping experiences of parents of young adults. Parents have played a major role in their child's life, but as their children become young adults these parents are faced with a new phase of their child's life—the transition period. Research has shown that parents use a range of different coping strategies throughout their child's life (Hall & Graff, 2011; Hastings et al., 2005; Lai, Goh, & Oei, 2015), and the way parents cope changes over time (Gray, 2006). This study aims to shed light on parent coping experiences, specifically highlighting the importance of voicing the positive experiences of parents coping with the transition period of their young adults. The purpose of this study is to understand the parent coping experience of parents of young adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and/or intellectual disability (ID), as compared to parents of typically developing (TD) young adults.

Method: Participants include parents from the Collaborative Family Study (CFS), a 17-year longitudinal study investigating the developmental trajectories of youth with ID, ASD, or TD. This new phase of the CFS is focused on the family experience during the transition into adulthood. 74 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with both young adults and parents, and more interviews are underway. In a preliminary analysis, 20 parent interviews (mothers=17, fathers=3) of 17 young adults ages 20-22 (males=9, females=8; ASD=6, ID=3, TD=8) were randomly selected and qualitatively analyzed for themes related to parents' coping experiences during their young adults' transition out of high school. Specifically, parents were asked about what has helped them cope during the transition period. The themes in this study arose from common subjects parents mentioned throughout the interviews. The research coders examined each interview code to compare responses until there was a consensus agreement with the code chosen.

Results: The preliminary analysis revealed that the most common ways parents coped with the challenges of the transition period were: social support (85%), maintaining identity (50%), optimistic/positive view of their young adult (25%), mental health resources (20%), and inner strength/motivation (20%). Social support was further categorized into support from partner (35%), community (20%), family (15%), and friends (15%). Maintaining identity included hobbies/leisure/recreational activities (20%), work (15%), and general identity (e.g., "I guess a lot of parents' lives revolve around their child, but my life really wasn't that way. It was to a certain point, but I have my own life too"; 15%). Other factors that helped parents cope included faith (10%), humor (5%), external support resources for young adult (5%), previous parental experience (5%), desire to help others (5%), young adult still lives at home (10%), and sleep (5%). There were no differences in coping types between status groups, most likely due to the small sample size utilized for this in-depth study.

Discussion: The transition to adulthood can be a rocky or an exciting time for all families, regardless of the young adult's diagnostic status. The top three coping mechanisms reported by parents were social support, maintaining identity, and an optimistic/positive view of their young adult. These positive coping experiences serve as protective factors for parents during the transition period, and the parents' reflections provide insight into ways that more stressed parents might be better prepared for this stage of the lifespan.

References:

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