

Title: Program Evaluation of a Peer Counselling Program for Parents of Children with Autism in the South Asian Community

Authors: Ann Mills¹, Kiruthiha Vimalakanthan², Shivajan Sivapalan², Neshanth Shanmugalingam², & Jonathan Weiss¹

Introduction: Parents of children with autism routinely report higher levels of stress (Hayes & Watson, 2013). These experiences of stress impact parents' mental health, and their capacity to manage their children's complex needs. In addressing these mental health challenges, it is important to consider how culture influences beliefs and practices related to raising a child with autism. Peer volunteers have been found to be effective in delivering psychosocial interventions to parents when they come from the same culture and share similar experiences (Atif et al., 2016). The South Asian Autism Awareness Centre (SAAAC) in Scarborough (Canada) developed an intervention (the CARES Program) to address the need for culturally responsive care for parents in the South Asian community. The aim of the current study is to evaluate the preliminary effectiveness of this 6-week group-based peer counselling program.

Methods: Findings are based on 63 parents ($M_{age} = 43.7$ years, 68 % mothers) who participated in the group counselling program (2 - 6 parents per group). Peer facilitators were volunteers from the community who were selected based on their experience working with vulnerable populations and their shared experiences of caring for an individual with autism. The peer-facilitators were trained on site and supervised by clinicians. The six sessions addressed understanding and acceptance of their child's autism diagnosis, coping skills, and goal setting. Parents completed the following measures before and after completion of the program to assess changes in mental health and quality of life: the *Depression Anxiety Stress Scale* (DASS-21, Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), the *Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Questionnaire* (QLESQ-SF; Endicott et al., 1993), the *Parental Stress Scale* (PSS; Barry et al., 1995), and the *Brief Family Distress Scale* (BFDS; Weiss & Lunksy, 2011). Additionally, participants completed the Outcome Rating Scale (ORS; Miller & Duncan, 2000) and the Session Rating Scale (SRS; Miller & Duncan 2002) at each of the 6 sessions to evaluate changes in overall wellbeing and session satisfaction, respectively.

Results: Wilcoxon signed-rank tests and paired sample t-tests were conducted to evaluate change in parent mental health and quality of life following completion of the program. Results demonstrated significant improvements across all pre-post program measures, with parents reporting improvements on the DASS Depression Scale ($Z = -3.79, p < .001$), DASS Anxiety Scale ($Z = -3.02, p = .002$), DASS Stress Scale ($Z = -4.38, p < .001$), Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Questionnaire ($t = 2.13, p = 0.03$), Parental Stress Scale ($t = -2.80, p = 0.007$), and the Brief Family Distress Scale ($Z = -3.87, p < .001$). Multilevel modeling was used to assess change in parent report of overall wellbeing (ORS ratings) across the 6 sessions. The Session 1 program score was consistently used as the control timepoint, and was compared with each subsequent session to assess change across the program. Using methods employed by Ridderinkhof et al. (2018), data were standardized to interpret parameter estimates as Cohen's d effect sizes. The results demonstrated improved ORS scores from the initial session to each other time point (all $p < .001$), posthoc analyses indicating that significant changes occurred after the first and second session, and stable high ratings across all other sessions. There were no significant changes in parent satisfaction ratings on the SRS, with mean overall ratings remaining high across all sessions (from 8.9 to 9.2 on a scale of 0- to-10 across the 6 time points).

Discussion: These findings contribute to the growing evidence base of accessible, culturally responsive programs that support the wellbeing of South Asian families living with autism. Parents reported significant improvements in mental health and quality of life following completion of the SAAAC CARES program, improvements in overall wellbeing across sessions, and consistently high session satisfaction ratings throughout the program. Future research should evaluate the long-term mental health outcomes of participation in culturally responsive peer counselling programs.

References:

- Atif, N., Lovell, K., Husain, N., Sikander, S., Patel, V., & Rahman, A. (2016). Barefoot therapists: Barriers and facilitators to delivering maternal mental health care through peer volunteers in pakistan: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 10, 12.
- Hayes, S. A., & Watson, S. L. (2013). The impact of parenting stress: A meta-analysis of studies comparing the experience of parenting stress in parents of children with and without autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 43(3), 629–642.
- Ridderinkhof, A., de Bruin, E. I., Blom, R., & Bögels, S. M. (2018). Mindfulness-based program for children with autism spectrum disorder and their parents: direct and long-term improvements. *Mindfulness*, 9(3), 773–791.

Institutional Affiliations:

¹York University, Toronto, Canada

²South Asian Autism Awareness Centre, Scarborough, Canada