

Meta-Analysis of Positive Psychotherapy Interventions for Parents of Children with Special Needs in Iran

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Siadati Arani, S. H., & Ashori, M. (2024). Meta-Analysis of Positive Psychotherapy Interventions for Parents of Children with Special Needs in Iran. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 5(1), 195-201.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.5.1.21>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this research was to conduct a meta-analysis of positive psychotherapy interventions for parents of children with special needs in Iran.

Method: This study determined the effect size of positive psychotherapy interventions for these parents by synthesizing the results of various studies. The data sources included the National Publication Database, the Academic Jihad Science Information Center, and the Noor Specialized Journals Database. Out of 18 studies, 12 met the inclusion criteria and were selected, utilizing a meta-analysis checklist as the research tool. The study was based on 348 samples and 12 effect sizes.

Findings: The meta-analysis revealed that the effect size of positive psychotherapy interventions for parents of children with special needs is $d = 1.19$ ($p = 0.05$), which is considered high according to Cohen's scale. The highest effect size was reported by Rezaei Kalantari et al. (2019), with a $d = 2.31$, titled "Effect of positive psychotherapy on perceived stress and life purposes in mothers of children with autism," and the smallest effect sizes were found in the study by Nili et al. (2019), with $d = 0.2$ and $d = 0.23$, titled "Effectiveness of positive training on irrational beliefs and happiness in mothers of deaf children."

Conclusion: Overall, the results indicate that positive psychotherapy interventions are effective for parents of children with special needs, and researchers can utilize this program to enhance mental health components.

Keywords: Positive psychotherapy, children with special needs, meta-analysis.

1. Introduction

The birth of each child with special needs can bring about difficult conditions for parents and other family members, as it unexpectedly places parents in a difficult emotional challenge that, due to its unforeseen nature, causes increased distress and worry (Çolak, 2023). While the

parenting process is a delightful activity, sometimes the maintenance, care, and education of a child with special needs expose parents to problems, challenges, and strains such as health issues, feelings of severe limitation, higher levels of depression, grief, and economic difficulties (De Schauwer, 2023). Meanwhile, positive psychotherapy interventions for parents of children with special needs hold

special importance (Siadati Arani, 2021). Indeed, the birth of a disabled child and awareness of the child's disability is considered a severe and traumatic event for parents. Additionally, parents of children with special needs undergo a period of mourning that resembles bereavement, depending on the nature of their child's problem (Rennane, 2023). Studies have shown that parents of children with special needs have higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to other parents (Millaku, 2023).

It appears that parents of children with special needs experience higher levels of stress and worry, as well as lower hope, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being, thus necessitating educational and therapeutic programs. For this reason, we witness the use of various psychotherapeutic protocols aimed at improving mental health components in this group of parents. In this regard, one of the most practical psychotherapeutic programs is the model derived from the positive psychology approach, positive psychotherapy (Kachroo, 2023). This approach, introduced by Martin Seligman in 1998, extended the focus of clinical psychology beyond the unpleasant symptoms of a disorder and aided in symptom improvement, aiming psychotherapy at enhancing well-being and happiness. Based on this, Seligman and Rashid (2006) proposed a positive psychotherapy program that includes four components: pleasure, engagement, meaning, and a full life (Seligman, 2006). Positive psychotherapy effectively reduces negative emotions and through fostering positive emotions, abilities, and meaning, it alleviates problems. Individuals learn through positive psychotherapy to be happier, more diligent, vibrant, hopeful, and optimistic, thus enjoying their own lives and helping others enjoy theirs (Cooper, 2023).

Empirically, positive psychotherapy is a credible approach in the field of psychotherapy that particularly focuses on building the client's capabilities and positive emotions and enhances the client's sense of meaning in life to reduce psychological pathology and strengthen happiness (Rashid, 2015). Positive psychologists address positive emotions and memories in their discussions with clients and pay attention to them. They also deal with issues related to clients' problems with the goal of integrating positive and negative emotions, for example, in helping a client overcome a traumatic event, the therapist pays attention to capabilities that grow out of an unpleasant experience (Darbani & Parsakia, 2023). A client who has become depressed due to repressing guilt caused by harm to family members is asked to explore specific situations that help them engage in socially desirable behaviors for their loved ones (Ruini,

2022). Furthermore, Seligman and Rashid (2006) believe happiness comprises a pleasurable life, a life of commitment, and a meaningful life. Especially, a pleasurable life is achieved when individuals are able to experience positive emotions about the past, present, and future (Seligman, 2006). A committed life is felt when a person is deeply engaged in various roles of life such as loving, working, and playing. In fact, a meaningful life is defined as using one's capabilities in service to oneself and others.

Investigations indicate that the use of positive psychotherapy programs can have a positive impact on mental health and related variables for families of children with special needs. In this context, research by Rostampour Baranjastanki, Abbasi, and Mirzaeian (2022) showed significant effectiveness of positive psychotherapy on caregiver stress and self-criticism in mothers of children with mild intellectual disabilities (Rostampour Brenjestanaki, 2022); Siadatiyan Arani, Ashouri, Faramarzi, Norouzi, and Spencer (2021) on the positive impact of positive psychotherapy on forgiveness and happiness orientations in mothers of deaf teenagers (Siadati Arani, 2021); Pouriyahi, Nazarpour, Malekzadeh Turkmani, and Davarniya (2020) on the significant impact of positive psychotherapy on the happiness of mothers of children with Down syndrome (Pouryahya, 2020); Kasai and Davarniya (2019) on the effectiveness of group positive psychotherapy on parenting stress in mothers of children with Down syndrome (Kasaei Esfahani, 2019); Rezaei Kalantari, Deynavi, and Rostamian (2019) on the positive effects of positive psychotherapy on perceived stress and life purposes in mothers of children with autism (Rezai Kalantary, 2019); Alavi Herati, Niknam, and Hoseinian (2018) on the impact of positive psychology-based training on resilience and emotional balance in mothers of children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Alavi Harati, 2018); Aghajani, Mousavi, and Asadi Majareh (2018) on the impact of positive psychotherapy on psychological well-being and psychological resilience in mothers of children with special needs (Aghajani, 2018); Khanjani and Rezaei (2016) on the beneficial effects of positive psychotherapy on psychological well-being, positive emotions, and the reduction of negative emotions in mothers of children with autism (Khanjani, 2016); Khodadadi Sangdeh, Tolaian, and Belgan Abadi (2014) on the effectiveness of group positive psychotherapy in increasing happiness in mothers of children with special needs (Khodadadi Sangdeh, 2021); and Gholami Heidariabadi, Nowabi Nejad, Shafie Abadi, and Delavar (2013) on the effectiveness of reality therapy and

positivity in increasing resilience in mothers of blind children (Gholami Heidarabadi, 2013). In contrast, results from the research by Nili, Kazemi, and Amiri (2019) indicated no effectiveness of positive training on irrational beliefs and happiness in mothers of deaf children (Nili, 2019). Also, the findings from Elmy Manesh (2017) indicated the ineffectiveness of positive psychotherapy programs on stress in mothers of children with intellectual disabilities (Elmy Manesh, 2018). Findings from the studies by Kotera and Ting (2021) showed positive effects of positive psychotherapy intervention on improving self-compassion and well-being in subjects (Kotera, 2021). The results of the study by Yang and Saadmad (2021) indicated a favorable impact of positive educational interventions on learning skills and quality of life of the participants. Additionally, the research by Lai et al. (2018) showed that positive psychotherapy interventions led to improvements in life satisfaction and quality of life for participants (Lai, 2018).

Given the number of studies using the positive psychotherapy model and the results indicating either the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of this type of intervention, conducting a meta-analysis allows us to determine the extent of the effect size of the positive psychotherapy program for parents of children with special needs and to answer which variables and which groups of parents this program is most effective for. Therefore, the purpose of this research was a meta-analysis of interventions based on positive psychotherapy for parents of children with special needs in Iran.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

In this study, meta-analysis was used due to the research objective. The fundamental principle of meta-analysis involves calculating the effect size for separate studies, converting them into a common matrix, and then combining them to obtain an average effect. The statistical population included theses and articles published in scientific-research journals over the past ten years (2013-2022) concerning positive psychotherapy interventions for parents of children with special needs in Iran, which had a suitable sample size and met the necessary methodological conditions (hypothesis formation, research method, population, sample size and sampling method, measurement tools, validity and reliability of measurement tools, statistical hypotheses, statistical analysis method, and accuracy of statistical

calculations). This review was conducted for each of the 18 sources used in the meta-analysis, and 12 articles that met the inclusion criteria were utilized. The research sources included master's and doctoral theses, scientific-research journals in the fields of psychology and educational sciences, the Jihad University Information Resource Bank, and the Iran Document Center. It should be noted that due to the research objective, only Persian sources and research conducted in Iran were reviewed.

2.2. Data Collection

Initially, sources and articles were identified based on a flowchart. The inclusion criteria in the current meta-analysis were: 1- Each article must meet necessary methodological conditions (hypothesis formation, research method, population, sample size and sampling method, measurement tools, validity and reliability of measurement tools, statistical assumptions, statistical analysis method, and accuracy of statistical calculations), 2- The research topic must be on positive psychotherapy interventions for parents of children with special needs, 3- The study must have been conducted in a group research setting (not single-case), 4- The studies must have been experimental or quasi-experimental, 5- The children with special needs must include groups with intellectual, sensory, behavioral, communicative, autism, and physical-motor problems according to Samuel Kirk's classification. In addition, exclusion criteria included studies that did not meet methodological conditions or were case studies, reviews, correlational, or descriptive. Ultimately, 12 articles were analyzed based on the flowchart. At this stage, the meta-analysis checklist was used. Other necessary information has been reported in subsequent sections.

Meta-analysis checklist (methodologically) was used as a tool for selecting research articles that met the inclusion criteria and for extracting the necessary information to perform the meta-analysis. The checklist included the following components: titles of the research done on positive psychotherapy interventions for parents of children with special needs, full details of the researchers, year of research execution, appropriate tools, validity and reliability of data collection tools, statistical population, sample size, and significance level of the tests.

2.3. Data Analysis

The computational approach for the meta-analysis in this study was based on the steps of Cohen's meta-analysis. This

method requires four fundamental steps: identification, selection, abstraction, and analysis. To obtain the effect size, no software was used, and the effect sizes of each study were calculated manually. Accordingly, what is called the effect size in each study had to be calculated separately. The effect size represents the standardized difference between the means of the experimental and control groups.

The four computational steps of the meta-analysis include:

Step 1- Calculation of effect size (correlational studies) for each study

$$r = \frac{z}{\sqrt{n}}$$

Step 2- Conversion of r score (correlational studies) of each study to Cohen's d (for experimental studies)

Step 3- Combining effect sizes of experimental studies to calculate the overall effect size

$$d = \frac{\sum d}{n}$$

Step 4- Significance of the combined studies

$$z = \frac{\sum z}{\sqrt{n}}$$

The effect size indicates the presence or degree of the phenomenon in the population. The larger the effect size, the greater the presence of the phenomenon. According to Cohen's interpretation of effect size, $r=0.1$ and $d=0.2$ indicate a small effect size, $r=0.3$ and $d=0.5$ indicate a moderate effect size, and $r=0.5$ and $d=0.8$ indicate a large effect size.

3. Findings and Results

The total sample size of the studies was 348, with the largest sample size belonging to the research by Gholami Heidariabadi et al. (2013) with 45 participants, and the smallest sample size belonging to the research by Khodadadi Sangdeh et al. (2014) with 20 participants (Gholami Heidariabadi, 2013; Khodadadi Sangdeh, 2021). Geographically, the city with the most studies was Tehran, hosting 6 studies. Additionally, parents of children with intellectual disabilities were the most frequent recipients of positive psychotherapy interventions. The variable of happiness was the most frequently used among the reference variables. Table 1 presents the number of therapeutic sessions in each study and the statistical indices for the meta-analysis including Cohen's d, r, Z, and p-values.

Table 1

Effect Size Derived from Experimental Variables in Selected Studies

Research No.	Dependent Variable	N	P	Z	R	D
1	Caregiver stress	30	.001	3.090	.564	1.35
	Self-criticism		.001	3.090	.564	1.35
2	Forgiveness	30	.0001	3.719	.680	1.85
	Happiness orientations		.0001	3.719	.680	1.85
3	Parenting stress	40	.001	3.090	.490	1.12
4	Happiness	40	.001	3.090	.490	1.12
5	Perceived stress	24	.0001	3.719	.760	2.31
	Reasons for life		.0001	3.719	.760	2.31
6	Irrational beliefs	34	.028	0.583	.100	0.20
	Happiness		.023	0.739	.130	0.26
7	Resilience	28	.05	1.645	.310	0.65
	Emotional balance		.01	2.326	.440	0.98
8	Psychological well-being	30	.001	3.090	.564	1.35
	Resilience		.001	3.090	.564	1.35
9	Stress	30	.2	0.842	.150	0.30
10	Psychological well-being	24	.04	1.751	.360	0.77
	Positive emotions		.05	1.645	.340	0.72
	Negative emotions		.01	2.326	.470	1.06
11	Happiness	20	.001	3.090	.691	1.91
12	Resilience	45	.001	3.090	.460	1.04

Based on the results obtained from Table 1, the average effect size of the studies was 1.19 with a significance level of .05. The highest effect size was reported by Rezaei Kalantari et al. (2019) for the variable of perceived stress at 2.31, and the lowest effect size was related to the study by Nili et al. (2019) for the variables of irrational beliefs and happiness at 0.20 and 0.23, respectively (Nili, 2019; Rezaei Kalantary, 2019). Additionally, happiness and resilience were the variables most frequently used as dependent variables in the studies.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was a meta-analysis of positive psychotherapy interventions for parents of children with special needs in Iran. Meta-analysis, by synthesizing the results from various studies conducted on different samples, provides a more comprehensive view of the effects of various variables. In fact, by compiling results from studies conducted on a sample of a population, different individuals are examined. Such findings are more significant in societies like ours that exhibit greater diversity, as this diversity entails more significant differences. Necessarily, one must possess multiple pieces of information from different samples of this society to integrate this information, identify similarities, and appropriately address differences.

The findings from this meta-analysis indicated that positive psychotherapy interventions for parents of children with special needs have had a high impact according to Cohen's table ($d = 1.19$). This finding aligns with the prior results (Aghajani, 2018; Alavi Harati, 2018; Gholami Heidarabadi, 2013; Kasaei Esfahani, 2019; Khanjani, 2016; Pouryahya, 2020; Rostampour Brenjestanaki, 2022). Among all the research, the study by Rezaei Kalantari et al. (2019), on the effect of positive psychotherapy on perceived stress and reasons for life in mothers of children with autism, had the highest effect size (Rezaei Kalantary, 2019). The efficacy of the positive psychotherapy program can be cited in explaining this finding.

The positive psychotherapy program strives to create positive memories in discussions with clients. In other words, during educational sessions for parents of children with special needs, an effort is made to integrate positive and negative emotions, for instance, parents are asked to review positive and beneficial situations in their lives that have given them positive feelings and attempt to replace negative emotions (Walsh, 2017). Also, efforts are made for them to utilize their abilities in various life roles such as love, work,

and interpersonal relationships, move away from passivity, and strive to create positive emotions (Michalski, 2022).

Positive psychotherapy leads to an increase in positive meanings, psychological calmness, evocation of empathy, creation of positive feelings, and reduction of negative feelings (Peseschkian, 2023). According to experts, the emotions of parents of children with special needs in relation to the parenting process depend on their perception and understanding of the disability (Robledo-Ramón, 2013). While accepting a child's disability by mothers helps establish effective communication between parents and the child. Positivity helps mothers rethink their cognitions and, by strengthening mindfulness, facilitates the cessation of previous behavioral patterns and the initiation of new behaviors (Thenu, 2013). Positivity allows parents (especially mothers) of children with special needs to review their thinking and behavior towards themselves, have more flexibility towards their cognitions, emotions, and reactions, and behave more kindly towards themselves and their child (Williams, 2019). Additionally, studies by McCauley et al. (2022) show that one of the major problems of parents of children with special needs is the lack of attention to positive emotions and their high stress, while a positive psychotherapy program can lead to a reduction in ineffective attitudes, change negative beliefs, and redirect from negative and disastrous events towards positive and hopeful events (McCauley, 2022). Another strength of the study by Rezaei Kalantari et al. (2019) that led to its high effect size can be attributed to addressing all dimensions and objectives of the positive psychotherapy program. Over the course of 8 educational sessions, it covered components of happiness, recognition of capabilities, acknowledgment of positive emotions, counting blessings, creating positive connections, and striving for pleasure and satisfaction in life (Rezaei Kalantary, 2019).

5. Suggestions and Limitations

One of the limitations of the current research is that it only analyzed articles related to parents of children with special needs. These parents in statistical samples may not have the same homogeneity. Moreover, the lack of full publication of statistical and non-statistical findings of some studies related to the current meta-analysis led to their exclusion from the meta-analysis cycle. Among the recommendations of the current research is the implementation of the positive psychotherapy program for other parents of children with special needs and also its implementation in other cities in

Iran that have not yet published research. Additionally, given that the positive psychotherapy program has had a high effect size, family therapists can use this program in educational sessions for parents of children with special needs.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Ethical Considerations

Not applicable.

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