GESTIONE DELLO STRESS E MISURE DI PERSONALITA’ NELLE
MADRI DI BAMBINI A SVILUPPO TIPICO E CON DISTURBO DELLO
SPETTRO DELL’AUTISMO O SORDITA’:
uno studio esplorativo

Stress management and personality measures in mothers of typical development children and
children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or hearing impairment:
an exploratory study

Relatori:
Chiar.ma Prof.ssa Dolores ROLLO
Chiar.ma Dott.ssa Elena PATTINI

Candidato:
Giulia FAZZI

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Parenting a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder or hearing impairment/loss can cause in a family system significant difficulties and marked psychological distress that could naturally be hard to cope. Researches demonstrated for example that raising a child with ASD can generate high levels of distress in parents (Glasberg, Martins, & Harris, 2007; Hastings, 2008), who frequently feel overwhelmed by all the responsibilities linked to their role of caregivers and of course reserve less attention to their own well-being and health (Dardas & Ahmad, 2014). It is also known that parents of children with ASD are generally predisposed to higher levels of anxiety, depression, somatic symptoms and more relational difficulties than the general population (Lee J., 2013; Khanna, et al., 2011). Based on the literature, parents of children with ASD are also less able to correctly manage stress and largely use disfunctional coping strategies such as avoidance, and show particular personality profiles, which are somehow similar to those of their autistic children, without being clinically relevant anyway (Szatmari et al., 2000).

These features are partially shared by parents of children with a similar but actually so different developmental disability: hearing impairment. Researches agree in describing critical parenting stress conditions, personal hardship and disfunctional coping strategies in these parents (Quittner et al., 2010; Lederberg e Golbach, 2002; Pipp-Siegel et al., 2002; Hintermair, 2006). Parents’ difficulties in being in a relationship and in interacting with their deaf children, who are also often unable to correctly manage their own social and emotional skills, are some of the main reasons of parenting stress. There are nevertheless a wide range of causes of parental distress, as a matter of fact they are also found in some inadequate individual personality dispositions (Plotkin et al., 2013).

This study, which has an exploratory aim, therefore verified in a sample of n. 15 mothers of children with ASD, n. 13 mothers of children with hearing loss and n. 15 mothers of typical development children, that stress management, levels of anxiety and parenting distress are effectively more critical in mothers of atypical development children, but with some interesting differences.
As a matter of fact, based on the comparison of the two “clinical” groups (mothers of children with ASD and mothers of deaf children), mothers of children with ASD showed relevant results: I) higher levels of trait anxiety and parenting distress, II) larger use of avoidance and problems oriented coping strategies and less religion oriented coping strategies, III) personality profiles characterized by less agreeableness/sociality.

These results can be interpreted once it’s clear the different nature of the two pathologies and once we analyse relevant relations between variables. Hearing impairment is known to be an enervating pathology but it’s also opened to concrete possibilities of improvement, on the other hand ASD is by definition a chronic pathology, with a large variety of clinical manifestations and with a strong impact on parents’ psychology due to its social implications. The gravity of symptoms, the parents’ discomfort that these symptoms cause in normal social contexts and its long-term improvements are supposed to explain a large part of the critical conditions in which mothers demonstrated to be. This information should therefore be used in order to propose personalized therapies focused on supporting parents in their role of caregivers and improving functional and powerful personal resources.