



# PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS, PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND LIFE SATISFACTION OF FATHERS AND MOTHERS OF INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED CHILDREN

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## ABSTRACT

**OBJECTIVE:** To examine psychological distress, social support, and life satisfaction of fathers and mothers of intellectually disabled children in our local setting.

**METHODS:** This cross-sectional study was conducted from 2017 to 2019 at Department of Psychology, University of Peshawar, after approval of Advanced Studies Research Board of university. One hundred and fifty parents (75 mothers and 75 fathers) of intellectually disabled children were selected through purposive sampling technique from Peshawar, Wah Cantonment & Islamabad, Pakistan. Instruments including Depression Anxiety Stress Scale, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and Satisfaction with Life Scale were administered.

**RESULTS:** Majority (n=64/150; 42.7%) of parents were aging from 20 -35 years. Seventy eight (52%) parents were from province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 72 (48%) were from Punjab. Findings indicated that fathers' mean scores were lower on depression anxiety stress scale (M=44.78; SD=14.55) as compared to mothers (M=97.32; SD=34.14). Fathers mean scores were higher on perceived social support (M=43.15; SD=9.30) than mothers (M=25.18, SD=14.36). On life satisfaction fathers means scores (M=17.36, SD=4.42) were also higher than mothers mean scores (M=9.74, SD=6.06).

**CONCLUSION:** The study results indicated that in our cultural context fathers of the disabled children reported better perceived social support and life satisfaction while mothers experienced higher psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress). The role of parents in the children's lives is concerning area because ignoring such parents' mental health issues can triggers a lot of problems in this society.

**KEY WORDS:** Psychological Distress (MeSH); Perceived Social Support (MeSH); Life Satisfaction (MeSH); Intellectual Disability (MeSH); Disabled children (MeSH); Parents (MeSH); Fathers (MeSH); Mothers (MeSH).

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## INTRODUCTION

In every society there are some specific parental roles which are of greater concern in child rearing. In our local context, fathers are related with outgoing activities, financial support, and billing; while mothers are considered a key source of providing caring, moral and emotional support, and food.<sup>1,2</sup> Disabled children's parents have many concerns regarding routines, safety issues, communication and behavioral issues, social and economic burden; these concerns lead to depression, anxiety, lower support, and less satisfac-

tion in parents.<sup>3,4</sup> Psychological distress is related with mental illness that is a 'double-edged sword' which promotes the distress in the individuals; and labeling or stigmatization can trigger the distress level. Social support is a two-way process of helping each other in which one person give and next one take help.<sup>5-7</sup> Two dimensions of support that are perceived and received; based on these a person can easily approach formal (professionals) and informal (parents, family, and neighbors) sources. Presence of supportive networks in the environment can promote better satisfaction; life satisfaction is the cognitive dimension of well-

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being 'how individuals' so far measures up to their expectations'.<sup>8</sup>

Previous literature suggested mixed results regarding fathers and mothers of disabled children. Some of the findings indicated that mothers of special needs children experienced more distress than mothers of typically developed children. As compared to fathers of such children mothers' psychological distress (stress, depression, and anxiety) was on alarming level. Similarly, population-based studies' findings indicated the level of distress in mothers was two to three times more.<sup>9-12</sup> Findings from an Indian study conducted in 2009 on parental stressors showed that those parents received less support had experienced more distress.<sup>13</sup> Mothers easily approached the informal sources of support for handling the stressors while fathers focused on formal sources.<sup>13-15</sup>

Previous literature regarding gender differences on life satisfaction showed that men reported better satisfaction level than women.<sup>16</sup> A similar study that was conducted in 2018 used the data of 150 countries regarding gender differences on life satisfaction. Findings of the study indicated that across men and women predictors of life satisfaction were similar. The main factors suggested by the researchers such as socio-political, job, and education which were the key element in men. In women overall interpersonal relationships counts a lot regarding life satisfaction.<sup>17</sup>

The role of both parents is of paramount in children's upbringing; parents perceived the situations in a different way that's why they respond towards their children's conditions differently.<sup>18</sup> Parents of

**TABLE I: DETAILS OF DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES OF STUDY (N= 150)**

Demographics	Categories	Mothers (n=75) Frequency (%)	Fathers (n=75) Frequency (%)	Total (n= 150) Frequency (%)
Age (Years)	20 -35	34 (45.3)	30 (40)	64 (42.7)
	36-45	20 (26.7)	25 (33.3)	45 (30)
	>45	21 (28)	20 (26.7)	41 (27.3)
Education	Matric	20 (26.7)	20 (26.7)	40 (26.7)
	FA/F.Sc.	20 (26.7)	20 (26.7)	40 (26.7)
	BA/B.Sc.	15 (20)	20 (26.7)	35 (23.3)
	MA/M. Sc.	20 (26.7)	15 (20)	35 (23.3)

disabled children experienced a lot of pressures because of the children's extra needs and demands. Some of the studies focused on only the role of mothers and ignored the fathers.<sup>19</sup> Keeping in view the previous literature there is limited research work in Pakistan regarding these constructs; so, this study was planned to investigate the gender related differences on psychological distress, perceived social support, and life satisfaction of parents of intellectually disabled children in our local setting.

**METHODS**

For the current study different assumptions were formulated.

- i). Mothers will have more psychological distress as compared to fathers
- ii). Fathers will have high perceived social support as compared to mothers.
- iii). Fathers will score high on satisfaction with life scale in comparison with mothers.

Initially, Graduate Committee (GC) of Department of Psychology, University of Peshawar approved the research topic after that Advanced Studies Research Board finalized the topic after the discussion of ethical concerns. Time duration of current study was from 2017 to 2019. Initially, above 200 parents were approached for the data collection phase but included those questionnaires who were completed completely. Total sample for this study was (N=150; 75 fathers & 75 mothers) selected through purposive sampling technique from

Peshawar (Hayatabad) and Punjab (Wah Cantonment & Islamabad), Pakistan. Mild and moderate level of intellectually disabled children's parents were approached. Parents with middle class with age range between 21 to 46 years and above were included.

Questionnaires for the study used were Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-42)<sup>19</sup>; Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support<sup>20</sup>; and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)<sup>21</sup> (Demographic information sheet included name, age, gender, socioeconomic status, education, province, and job).

After the Departmental ethical committee approval, the process of research was started. At first Heads of special institutes (Principals and Directors) of Peshawar (Hayatabad) and Punjab (Wah Cantonment & Islamabad) were approached for permission. After that concerned teachers from special institutes were approached; then parents of intellectually disabled children were contacted. After taking parents' consent, they were briefed about the purpose of the study. At the end all parents were thanked for their positive response.

For the data analyses descriptive statistics were used for computing frequencies and percentages of demographic variables; for gender differences T-test was computed on SPSS (21-Version).

**RESULTS**

Total parents of intellectually disabled children were (N=150); comprised upon fathers, n=75 (50%) and mothers n=75 (50%).

Parents were ranging in age between 20-60 years and majority (n=64/150; 42.7%) of parents were aging from 20 -35 years (Table I). Data showed that parents were educated from the province of Punjab (n=72; 48%) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (n=78; 52%). Parents were from both sectors Govt. (n=73; 48.6%) and from Private (n=79; 52.6%).

Table II indicated the overall picture of data that was normally distributed across all the variables of the study. As far as Cronbach's alpha reliability estimates were concerned the values showed that all scales were highly reliable.

Table III indicated the significant mean differences on all the scales (DASS, MSPSS, and SWLS) among parents of disabled children. On DASS (t (148) = 11.41, p < .01) mothers scores were higher than fathers; on MSPSS fathers reported higher scores on social support (t (148) = 8.43, p < .01) than mothers. Overall, the fathers reported higher mean scores on total SWLS (t (148) = 8.28, p < .01) than mothers.

**DISCUSSION**

As far as the first assumption of the study was concerned the mothers reported higher psychological distress than fathers. The researcher found the similar results in this study as in line with the previous findings. Previous results indicated that fathers had lower distress because of less role at home and outside responsibilities; while mothers experienced greater level of stress in rearing because in Pakistani culture mostly mothers resided at home and housewives. Other researchers also found the same findings as the present study indicated,<sup>22-24</sup> but cultural differences can persist. In recent years with the exposure of media and advance technologies most of the mothers are opting careers along with their household burden. These factors make such mothers overburdened and cause psychological problems and poor mental health.

**TABLE II: DESCRIPTIVE DATA FOR STUDY VARIABLES AMONG DISABLED CHILDREN'S PARENTS (N = 150)**

Variables	Mean	SD	No. of Items	α	Range Potential	Actual	Skewness	Kurtosis
DASS-42	76.85	38.09	42	.90	0-3	4-109	-.02	-1.58
MSPSS	32.16	15.35	12	.79	1-7	13-83	.39	-.92
SWLS	12.71	6.62	5	.74	1-7	5-35	.53	-.77

DASS=Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale; MSPSS= Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support; SWLS =Satisfaction with Life Scale

**TABLE III: MEAN DIFFERENCES ON DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, AND STRESS SCALE, SCALE OF PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG DISABLED CHILDREN'S PARENTS (N= 150)**

Subscales	Fathers (n = 75)		Mothers (n = 75)		t (148)	p	CI 95%		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
DASS(T)	44.78	14.55	97.32	34.14	11.41	.000	-62.08	-43.65	-2.00
MSPSS	43.15	9.30	25.18	14.36	8.43	.000	13.65	22.01	1.48
SWLS	17.36	4.42	9.74	6.06	8.28	.051	-5.55	-1.81	1.43

DASS=Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale; MSPSS= Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support; SWLS =Satisfaction with Life Scale. CI = Confidence Interval; LL= Lower Limit; UL= Upper Limit

The other assumption of the study was related with that father had higher perceived support than mothers of disabled children. The results are in line with previous studies in which it is clearly depicted that fathers reported better perceived support because they had many links and social circles as compared to mothers.<sup>14,15</sup> Fathers have had a lot of opportunities in Asian cultures to move for European countries for pursuing their career. So, in that context they developed connections and fully exposed to social media forums as a result they had better supportive environment than their counterparts.

Third assumption of the study was approved that fathers scored higher satisfaction as compared to mothers. The present study's findings were in line with previous studies in which fathers had better life satisfaction than mothers.<sup>16,17,25</sup> Fathers were most of the time engaged in their works and stayed outside; fulfilled their responsibilities and achieved their desired goals regarding work. Such positive outcomes lead to better and satisfied life patterns in them as compared their partners who engaged mostly at home with children.

Findings demonstrated that parents' of intellectually disabled children had many challenges in their lives. They perceived all the situations differently based on gender. Mothers experienced a lot of psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress) that leads to less satisfaction (disappointment and less hope). Fathers had better connections and supporting networks because of this they easily overcome their stress and these supporting patterns promoted better satisfaction in them.

**Limitations**

There are various positive aspects of the study besides this holds some caveats that should be considered in coming research. This study focused on

educated parents with same socio-economic background; further studies will cater different education levels with socio-economic backgrounds for in depth information. Another key area of concern is to study other cultures for comparison because this study only focused on urban parents of Peshawar and Islamabad Pakistan only.

**CONCLUSION**

In our cultural context fathers of the disabled children reported better perceived social support and life satisfaction while mothers experienced higher psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress). The role of parents in the children's lives is concerning area because ignoring such parents' mental health issues can triggers a lot of problems in this society.

Distress is a key factor which triggers depression, anxiety, and other personality related disorders in parents. So, on individual basis there is a need to develop strategies for fathers and mothers; so that they can easily respond to such challenges. Mental health professionals can play a significant role in this regard; counseling sessions can be beneficial for the parents and can implement individualized based therapies. Seminars and workshops can be a source of gaining knowledge regarding (disability, causes, effects, and its remedies) for educated parents.

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## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Following authors have made substantial contributions to the manuscript as under:

**NA:** Conception, data collection, analysis and interpretation of data, drafting the manuscript, critical review, approval of the final version to be published.

**EI:** Study design, analysis and interpretation of data, critical review, approval of the final version to be published.

*Authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.*

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Authors declared no conflict of interest

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### DATA SHARING STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.



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