

Parenting a Child with Mental Health Problems: The Role of Self-compassion

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Abstract : Background: Parenting children with mental health problems poses multiple challenges, including coping with difficult behavior and negative child emotions. The impact on parents includes financial strain, negative social stigma, and negative feelings of guilt or blame, resulting in significant stress and lower levels of well-being. Given findings that self-compassion plays a significant role in reducing stress and improving well-being, the current study examined the role of self-compassion in the experience of parents raising a child with mental health problems. The study tested (1) whether child behavioral/emotional problem severity is associated with higher parental stress and lower parental well-being; (2) whether self-compassion is associated with lower parental stress and higher parental well-being; and (3) whether self-compassion is a stronger predictor of parental stress and well-being than child behavioral/emotional problem severity. Methods: Three hundred and six mothers and two hundred and fifty-six fathers of children attending a hospital child and adolescent psychiatric center were assessed at admission. Consenting parents completed four questionnaires: Child Strength and Difficulty - parent version, Self-compassion, Parent Feeling Inventory, and Well-Being. Results: Child behavioral/emotional problem severity was associated with higher parental stress and lower parental well-being, and self-compassion was a stronger predictor of parental stress and well-being levels than child behavioral/emotional problem severity. For children with internalizing but not externalizing behavioral/emotional problems, parental self-compassion was the only predictor of parental well-being beyond the severity of child behavioral/emotional problems. Conclusions: Cultivating self-compassion is important in reducing parental stress and increasing parental well-being, particularly with internalizing presentations, and should be considered when designing therapeutic interventions for parents.

Keywords : parenting children with mental health problems, self-compassion, parental stress, feelings, well-being

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