

## **Coping Strategies among Caregivers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Cluster Analysis**

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**Abstract :** Background/Significance: Caregivers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) develop coping mechanisms to overcome daily challenges to successfully parent their child. There is variability in coping strategies used among caregivers of children with ASD. Capturing homogeneity among such variable groups may help elucidate targeted intervention approaches for caregivers of children with ASD. Study Purpose: This study aimed to identify groups of caregivers of children with ASD based on coping mechanisms, and to examine whether there are differences among these groups in terms of strain level. Methods: This study utilized a secondary data analysis, and included survey responses of 273 caregivers of children with ASD. Measures consisted of the COPE Inventory and the Caregiver Strain Questionnaire. Data analyses consisted of cluster analysis to group caregiver coping strategies, and analysis of variance to compare the caregiver coping groups on strain level. Results: Cluster analysis results showed four distinct groups with different combinations of coping strategies: Social-Supported/Planning (group one), Spontaneous/Reactive (group two), Self-Supporting/Reappraisal (group three), and Religious/Expressive (group four). Caregivers in group one (Social-Supported/Planning) demonstrated significantly higher levels than the remaining three groups in the use of the following coping strategies: planning, use of instrumental social support, and use of emotional social support, relative to the other three groups. Caregivers in group two (Spontaneous/Reactive) used less restraint relative to the other three groups, and less suppression of competing activities relative to the other three groups as coping strategies. Also, group two showed significantly lower levels of religious coping as compared to the other three groups. In contrast to group one, caregivers in group three (Self-Supporting/Reappraisal) demonstrated significantly lower levels of the use of instrumental social support and the use of emotional social support relative to the other three groups. Additionally, caregivers in group three showed more acceptance, positive reinterpretation and growth coping strategies. Caregivers in group four (Religious/Expressive) demonstrated significantly higher levels of religious coping relative to the other three groups and utilized more venting of emotions strategies. Analysis of Variance results showed no significant differences between the four groups on the strain scores. Conclusions: There are four distinct groups with different combinations of coping strategies: Social-Supported/Planning, Spontaneous/Reactive, Self-Supporting/Reappraisal, and Religious/Expressive. Each caregiver group engaged in a combination of coping strategies to overcome the strain of caregiving.

**Keywords :** autism, caregivers, cluster analysis, coping strategies

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