

Self Counseling for Mother of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Someone rightly said that the biggest tragedy a mother can have is diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in her child. You may not totally agree with this statement, but would not contest if I say that in spite of all supportive services we may boast of, ultimately, she is alone to 'face the music'. On one side her whole dream about her child come to a standstill; she doesn't know how to handle the erratic behaviors of the child; how to face unwanted criticism of people around; worried about the future of the child and so on

As professionals working in this field we do know that as per DSM-5 criteria ASD involves; (i) Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across contexts, not accounted for by general developmental delays and (ii) Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities(1). Doesn't it sound so simple to us?. Do we think of the implication of the same on the hapless mother, who has to face it 24 x 365 days, often without the support of the husband, in the background of needling by in-laws at least in some cases. Surely she is likely to go through the five stages of grief namely – Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and the final stage of Acceptance may be unduly delayed(2), unless she has received appropriate and timely counseling to manage her frustration, anger and helplessness.

My forty two years of counseling experience have convinced me that counseling is effective only if the counselee is an active partner in the counseling process, that has led me to consider 'Self Counselling' as more and more appropriate for the parents of ASD children. In general, the major approaches to counselling include; (i) Psychoanalytic approach, (ii) Behaviour approach, (iii) Humanistic approach(3). Self-counselling is the process of examining one's own behaviour, using psychoanalytical methods of free-thinking and free association. Self-counselling can help one take more effective control of everyday situations and enable to make continued progress (personal growth). For me self counselling involves preparing the mother/father to imbibe and assimilate the following basic principles;

Do not bluff to yourself, even though you may have to bluff to others at times, meaning that you listen to your inner soul always; Understand that we are not God and hence likely to make mistakes - take precautions at all times and appreciate the help and support of therapists/caregivers.

Try to build Self – Love and do not think that others have to like you always or appreciate your efforts or struggle managing an ASD child; You might have suspected that your partner loves you, but managing an ASD child together may bring

out the best 'Caring' from your partner, if you are fortunate.

When there is a conflict situation regarding management of your ASD child, do not blurt out your disagreement- think of what he/she has done for you always; Do not think that others are lesser than you; Think of other person's point of view and try to be a third party and then making adjustments may be easy for you.

As partners, parents should try not to hurt each other, and not to hurt yourself at all by refusing to take insult; The initial hurt feeling should not last more than 30 seconds and switch over to cognitive/thinking pathway.

Self-counselling strategies for mothers of ASD children

Self-counselling takes you on a journey of self-discovery, working at your own pace and in the directions you most feel comfortable with. Some problems may be too deep-seated for self-counselling, and these may require additional forms of Psychotherapy.

Simple techniques to initiate Self Counselling

Try to sit separate/away from the rush area. This will help you to be calm with your own thoughts. Try to ensure comfortable seating.

Just close your eyes if necessary and begin to focus to your own mind and thoughts. If you are interested you can play some melody soothing songs in the background.

Imagine that you are another person (Eg: You the real person, can be represented as 'A'; The reflection that came within you can be represented as 'B', the third person). Remember that this 'A' & 'B' have no relation to each other.

'A' (me) can try to speak about my problems or what I am suffering from to 'B' (reflection of me) without any restrictions. The 'B' should be impartial while taking decisions / giving suggestions.

After each self counseling sessions you can practice meditation to ease your mind/soul.

Partner relationship Assessment and Counselling

The travails of managing an autistic child is likely to seriously affect marital relationship, but on the other hand it may also be an opportunity to cement your marital relations, if both of you can work as a single unit. First of all, we need to understand types of love relationships in a marriage that include; (i) Liking (intimacy), (ii) Infatuation (passion), (iii) Empty love (commitment without intimacy or passion), (iv) Romantic love (passion + intimacy), (v) Fatuous love (commitment + passion), (vi) Companionate love (intimacy + commitment), (vii) Consummate love (passion + intimacy + commitment). To continue to have a successful marital relationship is possible, only if the mother/father receive timely anticipatory counselling based on items of Partner-relationship Assessment Scale Trivandrum(5) by Developmental Pediatrician/ Developmental Therapist/Developmental Nurse Counselor.

Seven domains of PAST

Reality: With all the good & bad in marriage overall real life rating

Fantasy: Whether fit in as a fantasy husband / wife.

Family Support: Whether family of both/either would come to help in crisis.

Attitude towards Marriage: Whether taking the concept of marriage seriously

Sexuality: As a satisfying sexual partner-overall assessment

Giving Type Personality: Enjoy more by giving pleasure to partner

Conflict Resolving Strategies: Problems are resolved amicably, not getting unduly upset

(Note: Scoring <50%-poor satisfaction or >50%-good satisfaction)

PAST – Reality Vs Fantasy: We need to keep on teaching ourselves that fantasy is a beautiful but eluding mirage, that keep on changing with age and maturity, whereas reality is what we have at hand and the day we learn to be satisfied with the reality, our life become beautiful in the true sense. For example, parents dreamt that they will get a healthy normal baby – indeed it was normal till 18 months, but now the reality of ASD stare at you and you tend to become helpless. If we could reduce the duration of grief stages and come to the stage of acceptance in a month's time and get on with the therapy process – self counselling is successful.

Guided Counselling for the couple

Counselling being a collaborative effort between the counselor and client, aims at identifying goals and potential solution to problems which causes emotional conflicts. A husband-wife relationship follows certain laws- 'laws of attraction, difference and self-image'. In this context, relationship counseling not only aims at identifying the problems but also provides insight into the type of relationship. Based on this knowledge, one can seek to improve communication and coping skills, strengthen self-esteem and promote behavioural changes and strong interpersonal relationships(6).

The four common factors shown to determine the effectiveness of counseling in the field of marriage and family therapy with each factor attributed to a percentage of the improvement include; (i) client and extra-therapeutic factors (40%), (ii) counsellor-client relationship factors (30%); (iii) specific techniques or model factors (15%) and (iv) expectancy, placebo, and hope factors (15%), all together contributing to the clients' (parents) feeling that there is hope and chance of improvement(7).

Understanding and optimizing parenting skills

A diagnosis of ASD is often traumatic for the parents. It dampens the physical and mental

well-being of parents, often more of mother's than fathers. During the process, parents are typically faced with myriad feelings, including anxiousness, guilt, excessive worry, hope, and fear about the future. However, often the grief associated with it is real and an understanding of the grief stages helps them adapt and adjust in a better way. Everyone reacts differently to grief, and how one reacts has a great deal to do with what happened and whether they have dealt with it appropriately, so that you can focus on home therapy options.

Psycho-education: Very often than not, mothers of children with ASD are left with a lot of questions to deal with, which includes medical interventions, therapeutic decisions, safety concerns, educational decisions and other associated co-morbidities. A prior knowledge of what to be prepared for and a confident approach often helps.

Socialisation through ASD Group therapy:

Lack of social acceptance-real or perceived, of your ASD bothers every mother. NIMS-Spectrum-CDRC model group therapy offers some solace to these parents(8). It is an opportunity for a small group of 3 or more individuals to come together and simultaneously learn social behavior. Advantages of Group therapy include; peers in close proximity, great deal of observational learning, scientifically proven approach, effective and efficient method and for assessment of school readiness. Short term ASD specific add on group based therapy program has shown post intervention efficacy with regard to parent rated social responsiveness in children with ASD(9).

Managing stress and Healing of the soul

Stress can not only just affect the management but also bring about significant derogatory changes in the health of the mother. In order to stay healthy, one needs to learn to manage stress efficiently. The daily stress of an ASD parent is tremendous and constant. Self-Counseling can

help by offering a conscious, caring, supportive, parenting effort and encourage self-care skills. Self-Counseling can help someone through a rough patch or be used on an ongoing basis throughout the parent's journey.

Spiritual psychology is concerned with the health of the individual's soul. This soul-centered approach believes that "when love is applied to hurt we heal." Practically applied, it helps a person become aware of a recent upset, ride the emotion back in time to the root of the matter (its core), communicate with that portion inside that is fixated, and apply love to it(10).

Conclusion

The mothers of ASD children can practice "self-counselling" skills by listening with an open heart, asking for clarification, and probing around options that can help most mothers to cope better. The Developmental Pediatrician/Developmental Therapist/Developmental Nurse Counselor managing the ASD child can help the parents learn how to work with emotional conflicts and master the art of healing. After all, all it takes is human compassion to heal even deeply seated wounds that may have been there for years.

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