Stress and Wellbeing in Autistic Adults: Exploring the Moderating Role of Coping

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Background

Stress, coping and wellbeing

- Research highlight the associations between high stress and poor wellbeing in the wider stress literature.
- Despite emerging evidence suggesting increased stress and burnout in autistic adults, how stress is associated with wellbeing in these adults is unknown.
- Coping strategies can promote wellbeing directly, or indirectly through moderating the stress-wellbeing relationship. Adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies may buffer or exacerbate the effects of stress on wellbeing, respectively.
- Establishing the role of coping strategies in mitigating the effects of stress on wellbeing in autistic adults would help inform support options for these adults, from a stress perspective.

Method

Participants were 86 autistic adults aged 19-74 years (66% female; M_age = 40.76, SD_age = 13.47) recruited through an online, cross-sectional study. In addition to age and gender (male/female) the following variables were measured:
- Autism traits (AQ-Short)
- Stress (composite score using Perceived Stress Scale and Daily Stress Inventory scores)
- Engagement and Disengagement coping (Brief COPE)
- Wellbeing (Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale)

Associations between stress and wellbeing were examined using correlations. Two moderation models were used to examine the moderating role of (1) engagement coping, and (2) disengagement coping in the relationship between stress and wellbeing.

Results

- Stress was negatively associated with wellbeing (p < .01).
- Engagement coping and disengagement coping had significant direct effects on wellbeing (b: 0.57, p < .01 and b: -0.76, p < .01).
- Only engagement coping played a moderating (i.e., buffering) role in the stress-wellbeing relationship (b: 0.21, p < 0.05).
- See Figures 1 and 2.

Conclusion

- Consistent with the wider literature, our findings show that stress is inversely associated with wellbeing in our sample of autistic adults.
- Engagement coping played both a promotive (direct) and buffering (indirect) role in the stress-wellbeing relationship.
- Disengagement coping played a risk (direct) role in the stress-wellbeing relationship.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of stress on wellbeing by coping

Figure 2. Interaction of engagement coping on stress-wellbeing relationship

Main findings

Engagement coping strategies moderated the stress-wellbeing relationship, whereas disengagement coping strategies did not.

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