

The Importance of the Emotional Support for the Families of a Child with an Autism Diagnosis

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Received: August 11, 2018; **Published:** September 25, 2018

Much is spoken of the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in these days. People can feel identify with the celebration of the official autism awareness day. We even wear blue clothing and make allusive publications allusive to the theme "Light it up blue for autism". It's wonderful to support a cause and even better, fight for their rights. But what happens for those parents whose child has given an ASD diagnosis. Do you take a minute to think about the feelings and emotions they experience?

The mere suspicion of a diagnosis of autism puts families in a great challenge where skepticism prevails. When finally, the diagnosis is validated, a daily struggle against assimilation of the condition begins. A flight of thoughts begins to occur also. Parents start questioning themselves, about what their child's future will be.

Autism definition

First let's define what autism spectrum disorder means. The term "autism" was first used by Leo Kanner to refer specifically to children with classic, or Kanner's autism, which is recognized in infancy and characterized by the full expression of what is known as AD [1,2].

Autism is a disorder of neuro-biological development. Most of them will have difficult in processing the sensorial information and motor issues. In addition, in some cases they will have difficult on self- regulation, organizing complex material and planification. That is because they have problems with their executive functions of the brain. It is known as a spectrum, because two kids with the disorder, will not present the same symptoms. There is no known cause for ASD but is generally accepted that is caused by abnormalities in brain structure and function. The parts of the brain affected by ASD are: cerebellum, hippocampus, amygdala, lobes of the cerebellum, ventricles and caudate nucleus. These deficiencies will impact their learning process and daily living in so many ways.

According to DSM 5 [3] the essential features of autism spectrum disorder are persistent impairment in reciprocal social communication and social interaction, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. These symptoms are present from early childhood and limit or impair everyday functioning. The stage at which functional impairment becomes obvious will vary according to characteristics of the individual and his or her environment.

For a parent or a care giver, it's not easy to handle this diagnosis. Some studies indicate that during the first diagnosis of ASD, parents tend to experience a grieving process. Dr. Elizabeth Kübler Ross [4] identify the stages that people on grieving process experiences as -denial, negotiation, anger, depression and acceptance. Since the first diagnosis, the parents go through these stages back and forward. That's why is vital, our support and accompaniment within this process. And it's more important to help them to handle their feelings and emotions in an effective way.

Psychological treatment

In the beginning of the treatment, the best intervention that we can do is to be compassionate, listen carefully to their concerns, priorities and be aware of their actual emotions. They deserve our full attention and dedication not only to their child symptoms but for those feelings that arise with the diagnosis.

Emotional support involves spending time with others, feeling cared about others, feeling encouraged, and having a sense of being understood [5]. Empowering families with strategies on how to cope with the nature of their kids' condition, is another way to give them emotional support. Some parents don't know what to start with, after that first diagnosis. That's why the parental training is so important, because they need to learn about their children symptoms, services available, what to expect and what not from them.

Giving Psycho education and written materials for them to review at home, is a way of enhancing their confidence on what course of action they may take. "An excellent way to enable families to obtain emotional support is to connect them with other families who share similar experiences" [6]. This is a healthy way for the families to keep in touch with those who are experienced the same feelings as them

and feel the support from others that already pass through this process. It's imperative for the parents to know that they are not alone, and there are others coping with similar situations as them.

Parent to parent programs

There is a parent to parent program, that works with this matter and has proven to be effective. That is, because this program is run by parents to help parents. Their main concept is a one-to-one emotional support. The Clinician can look up for the nearest program to the family and refer them. As the parents participate in a support group the Psychologist should enhance their confidence through the therapy. That is making them understand that it is okay to experience anger, frustration, and other feelings that will arise in the process.

Parents self-care

What it's not okay, is that parents forget about their self-care. They should make a balance between their parenting roles versus their quality time. It's healthy for them to go alone to a spa, shopping, a party, do yoga or having dinner with friends; without having to think that they are bad parents just for taking time for themselves. Working with families of children with ASD, is a process where the future cannot be predicted. The daily challenges that families confront will change our treatment course of action continuously. That's why we must encourage them to not forget about to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

In my opinion, unconditional appreciation, passion for this population and a genuine desire to help them are essential skills that the professional should have. If you are not able to work hand in hand with these families, you should refer the case. The family will need guidance in so many ways, that's why it's not permissible for the Professional to give up easily. Our professionals' competencies need to be up to date, because that will be the success of the psychotherapeutic process. We cannot begin to build a therapeutic relationship without taken care of the family in an integral way.

Emotions determine how people perceive and confront their life situations. Autism is a condition that has no cure and will affect the family over the years. Hence the importance of not leaving them deprived in their emotional and affective dimension.

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Volume 7 Issue 10 September 2018

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