

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Do Religious Beliefs Barrier the Coping Mechanisms for parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

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I read with great interest the paper titled “pilgrimage for an autism diagnosis: a study of Venezuelan parents’ experiences” by Montiel-Nava et al¹. The authors reported that Venezuelan parents mentioned a generalized lack of autism awareness, an unsupportive school system, and judgment from their extended family. Most of the parents understandably attached spiritual meaning to having an autistic child and used their spiritual and religious beliefs to deal with negative emotions. The parents also thought that praying to Allah would help their child could overcome their problem. The authors suggested that cultural values and spiritual and religious beliefs will serve as both coping mechanisms and barriers to accessing services for Venezuelan parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). However, there are several studies performed in different societies in the literature showing parents’ religious beliefs helped them to overcome difficulties at the time of diagnosis and during therapy of autism².

Recently, Zakirova-Engstrand et al³ reported that several mothers of children with ASD in the multicultural context of Sweden interpreted their child’s condition as a blessing or a gift from Allah. Several parents, irrespective of their religious affiliation, said that they prayed to Allah to help their child. Many parents who described themselves as religious or spiritual reported that their faith helped them cope and gave them strength to proceed in their difficult life situations³. Prayers were perceived by Kenyan parents of children with ASD as a powerful tool in enhancing their relationship with Allah. Parents believed that spiritual healing is possible through the upholding of strong faith in prayers. This phenomenon seems to play a specific role in the adaptation of parents of children with autism in this region. Some parents found solace in the belief that the presence of a child with autism in the family was planned by Allah. In a way, parents are pacified by the belief that Allah wanted the child to have autism. Parents utilized this strategy after their efforts and consultations to get treatment for their child were unsuccessful⁴. Shyu et al⁵ reported that most Taiwanese parents attributed their child’s autism to both biomedical and supernatural etiologies without apparent conflicts and that parental explanatory models about autism positively influenced the type of therapy a child receives, the child’s well-being, and the parents’ own psychological adaptation. Lastly, some immigrant parents including Southeast Asian, Somali, South Korean, and Pakistani identified religion, prayer, and spirituality as a coping mechanism that provided them with comfort or hope⁶.

In conclusion, contrary to the suggestion of Montiel-Nava et

al¹ several studies showed that religious beliefs, worships, and behaviors helped coping mechanisms and accessing services for parents of children with ASD. Furthermore, regardless of their religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds, parents of children with ASD in many societies around the world find relief, comfort, peace, and hope through religious practices because religion is the very life of life, its light, and its basis⁷. Lastly, we think that randomized and controlled studies should be conducted about the psychospiritual and socioemotional effects of religious coping among Venezuelan parents of children with ASD.

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