Title: The Role of the Therapeutic Relationship in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Parents of Children with Developmental Delays

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Introduction: Parents of children with developmental delays (DD) are a high-risk group. They have been shown to have higher levels of stress than parents of typically developing children (Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012), with many reporting clinical levels of stress (Davis & Carter, 2008). Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) has been shown to be effective at reducing stress in this population (Dykens et al., 2014; Neece, 2014), but little is known regarding how or why it works. Factors such as the therapeutic alliance and group cohesion have shown a clear, consistent association to patient outcomes (Johnson, Burlingame, Olsen, Davies, & Gleave, 2005), and may explain outcomes in our population of interest. The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of the positive bonding, positive working, and negative relationship therapeutic factors (Johnson et al., 2005) in predicting outcomes within a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction intervention for parents of children with developmental delays.

Method: The current study included 64 parents who participated in the Mindful Awareness for Parenting Stress (MAPS) project at Loma Linda University, which provided MBSR for parents of children with DD, ages 2.5 to 5. Eligible parents were scheduled for a baseline assessment, then randomly assigned to either an immediate or waitlist-control intervention group. Participants were contacted retrospectively to obtain measurements of the following therapeutic factors 1) positive bonding, which refers to a sense of belonging or attraction in the relationships that creates a positive atmosphere where the individual feels genuinely understood and appreciated; 2) positive working, which refers to the effectiveness of the relationship to achieve agreed upon goals and conduct cooperative work; and 3) negative relationship, which refers to a lack of trust, genuineness, and understanding as well as friction and distance that exists in the relationship. These factors were measured within member, leader, and group levels, and collapsed to produce global factor scores.

Results: A series of hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted to test the ability of several therapeutic factors (i.e. positive bonding, positive working, and negative relationship) to predict changes in mindfulness, parent stress, and child behavior. In each regression analysis, initial levels of the outcome variable were entered into the regression equation first, to control for baseline participant variability. Results indicated that, after controlling for baseline levels of participant outcome variables, we found that negative relationship significantly predicted changes in the describing facet of mindfulness ($\beta = -0.35$, $p < 0.05$) and trended towards significance in predicting total child behavior problems ($\beta = 0.22$, $p = 0.07$). Positive bonding trended towards significance in predicting externalizing child behavior problems ($\beta = 0.30$, $p = 0.06$). Positive working was not a significant predictor of any outcome variables ($p > 0.05$)

Discussion: Results indicate that ruptures within group relationships appear to be a powerful therapeutic factor for determining outcomes, leading to decreases in mindfulness and increases in child behavior problems. Because we measured the therapeutic factors across three levels (i.e. leader-to-member, member-to-member, and group-to-member) cumulatively, effects at a single level may have been washed out by the inclusion of other levels within the analyses. Additionally, the negative relationship therapeutic factor may have been predictive of changes in several outcome variables by causing additional stress for participants in their daily lives, as the negative relationship therapeutic factor indicates conflict and distrust within the therapeutic setting.
References/Citations:


