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Telehealth Mindfulness-Based Songwriting Intervention for Parents of Children with Developmental Disabilities

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Introduction: Parents of children with developmental disabilities experience significantly higher levels of stress and mental health issues than their peers. Novel and accessible interventions are needed to teach coping strategies for managing stress and promoting well-being in this population. Recent studies suggest that mindfulness practices can reduce stress in this population, and research from the field of music therapy suggests potential positive impacts of therapeutic songwriting, especially when combined with psychoeducation. The current study evaluates preliminary outcomes of a novel mindfulness-based songwriting telehealth intervention on parent mental health, and identifies possible processes of change.

Methods: Twelve parents of children with developmental disabilities participated in a 7-week mindfulness-based songwriting program via telehealth. In individual sessions with a music therapist, parents learned and applied mindfulness strategies through music-based meditations and songwriting. Parents reported their affect and social connection immediately before and after each session using standardized surveys. At the start and end of the 7-week program and at a 4-week follow-up, parents completed the Beck Depression Inventory, the Beck Anxiety Inventory, the Perceived Stress Scale, and Ryff's Well-being Scale. Parents also completed an exit interview about their experience, which was coded via thematic analysis. Mixed models and repeated measures ANOVAs were used to analyze parent surveys.

Results: In response to mindfulness-based songwriting sessions, parents reported immediate decreases in negative affect and increases in positive affect and sense of connection to the music therapist ($p's < 0.001$). Negative affect scores also decreased across the program as a whole ($p < 0.001$). Across the program, parents reported reduction in depression and perceived stress, and increases in well-being ($p's < 0.05$) with effects maintained at follow-up. There was no change in parents' anxiety, potentially due to generally low scores at baseline. Parent interviews revealed that parents found the program to be a positive experience, that they learned specific mindfulness skills, and they used and planned to continue using their original song as part of their mindfulness practice.

Discussion: This initial mixed-methods study suggests promising results of this novel mindfulness-based songwriting telehealth intervention, including reductions in parent depression, perceived stress, and increases in well-being. Mindfulness-based songwriting may support parents' mental health through impacting affect regulation and sense of social connection and by teaching and motivating the use of mindfulness practices through songwriting. In follow-up work, we will compare mindfulness-based songwriting to a non-treatment control group to further assess potential program efficacy and underlying processes. Mindfulness-based songwriting appears to be a positive and meaningful experience for parents of children with developmental disabilities.

Keywords:

Caregiver, Mindfulness, Music