

Positive Psychology (PERMA) Themes in Interviews of Children with Atopic Dermatitis

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Introduction

Atopic dermatitis (AD) is a pruritic chronic condition associated with significant sleep disturbance, inattention, and sometimes behavioral problems. Enhancing resiliency in children with AD may promote coping strategies to improve quality of life. One strategy for strengthening resiliency is via positive psychology. Using qualitative research, we identified positive psychology concepts mentioned by children with AD and their parent to inform strategies to strengthen resiliency in children with AD.

Methods

Twenty patient-parent dyads were interviewed to provide feedback on a novel brief Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) intervention for itch rumination. Patients were 8-17 years-old and diagnosed with AD. Trained coders analyzed transcripts using a coding dictionary developed based on Seligman’s PERMA (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Achievement) model of positive psychology. The frequency of unprompted mentions of PERMA themes and relevant quotations were captured. Transcripts were also separately coded for resiliency, the ultimate goal of PERMA.

Results

Positive psychology concepts were mentioned by 100% of children and 95% of parents. Engagement and relationships, both negative and positive aspects, were the most common unprompted PERMA themes mentioned by children (70%) and parents (65%). Emotion elicited the most negative comments from children (95%) and parents (85%).

PERMA category	Number of participants that mention the concept: n(%)		Example
	Parent	Child	
Positive emotion	3 (15%)	9 (45%)	“So it’s actually comforting...to be at home.”
Negative emotion	17 (85%)	19 (95%)	“[The itching] is frustrating for him that he can’t stop.”

Engagement	10 (50%)	18 (90%)	"I don't want to let [the itch] keep me from the stuff so I keep doing the things."
Lack of engagement	9 (45%)	17 (85%)	"If I'm trying to do something and I feel itchy, it's hard to do that thing 'cause it's distracting."
Unhindered relationships	11 (55%)	15 (75%)	
Adults	9 (45%)	12 (60%)	"Interviewer: How do you talk about [your eczema] with adults? Participant: As if I'm talking to my friends, it's not that big of a deal."
Peers	5 (25%)	13 (65%)	"If somebody new that doesn't know her would ask her about her eczema 'what is that?'... her friends will say something 'it's eczema.' So she's got a good support group."
Other	2 (10%)	11 (55%)	"Most people aren't going to say anything [about your eczema] but if they do, just ignore them. It doesn't matter what they say."
Hindered relationships	11 (55%)	16 (80%)	
Adults	5 (25%)	8 (40%)	"Interviewer: Do you ever avoid meeting new adults because of your itching? Participant: If they ask too many questions, then yeah."
Peers	5 (25%)	10 (50%)	"She's gotten made fun of [because of her eczema]."
Other	3 (15%)	7 (35%)	"I just try to avoid the subject [of my eczema]...I don't think they understand."
Meaning	4 (20%)	6 (30%)	"I'm not really scared of having to itch...it doesn't matter whether it's here or not."
Lack of meaning	4 (20%)	2 (10%)	"She'll scream and say why do I have to be born this way, I hate my skin."
Accomplishment	8 (40%)	7 (35%)	"He handles [the itch] all by himself. I actually didn't realize it gave him a lot of trouble...[he takes] care of it himself."

Lack of accomplishment	4 (20%)	5 (25%)	"I can't really do anything about [my frustration due to eczema]."
General positive psychology	17 (85%)	20 (100%)	
General lack of positive psychology	19 (95%)	20 (100%)	

When analyzed for resiliency, 8 participants were identified with at least one resiliency code. On average, participants with a resiliency code versus none mentioned PERMA concepts 9.1 ± 4.7 times versus 5.9 ± 4.6 ($p = 0.14$). When participants were stratified by disease severity, positive psychology concepts were mentioned more by mild patients vs moderate patients vs severe patients, 13 ± 3.0 vs 6.2 ± 4.9 vs 6.13 ± 4.0 , respectively ($p = 0.034$).

Conclusion

Among PERMA themes, engagement and relationships are the two most commonly mentioned categories for children with AD. Strategies targeting PERMA such as affirmations and positive reframing may improve psychosocial wellbeing and resiliency in pediatric AD. Future directions will look at incorporating "positive medicine" in AD treatment to not only relieve symptoms but also strengthen positive aspects of life.