

You're Not Alone: A Pilot Study of a Peer Support Program to Address Stress and Isolation Among Caregivers of Children with Eczema



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Background

Caring for a child with a chronic, unpredictable skin condition is stressful, requires a large time investment, and takes a toll on a family's finances and social networks. Our previous studies of burden among parents of children with atopic dermatitis (AD) and other research have shown high levels of exhaustion, worry, isolation and helplessness. This study assesses the impact of a psychosocial support program for parents of children with moderate to severe atopic dermatitis on measures of stress, caregiver strain, and program satisfaction.

Methods

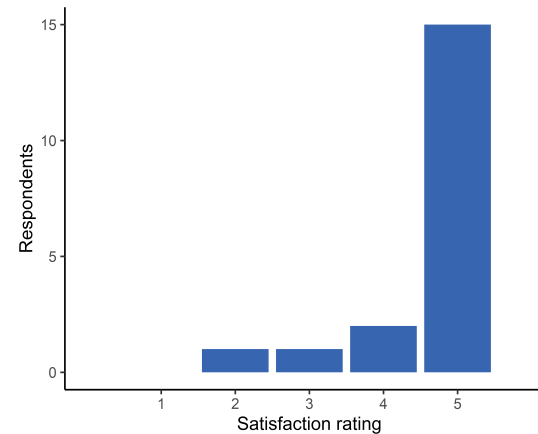
Parents of children with AD were matched in a 1:1 supportive relationship with other parents whose children also have AD. Mentors (n=12) were trained in evidence-based mentorship techniques and were instructed to interact remotely with their assigned mentee on a weekly basis for three months. Mentees completed surveys at the beginning, endpoint of the mentorship term, and at 6 months. The primary endpoint was change in measures of stress / mood, isolation, and fatigue. The secondary endpoint was satisfaction with the program assessed with a five-point rating scale.

Mentees were recruited from social media groups comprised of parents of children with AD. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained through Pepperdine University and informed consent was obtained prior to participation in the program and study.



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Results



Participants (n=28) are parents of children ages 0-13 (68% 0-2, 93% 0-8) with mild to very severe eczema (POEM M= 14, SD=8.5). At publication, 19 had completed the program and submitted a 3-month survey. Completers were similar to non-completers in child age, baseline eczema severity, baseline parental stress, but were more likely to have male children (74% among completers, 22% among non-completers, p=0.01). Participants to date reported high satisfaction with the program (M=4.6, SD=0.83 on a 1-5 scale).

Preliminary results of paired t-tests showed no change in reported global stress (p=0.40), parenting stress (p=.23) or psychosocial stress (p .90).

Limitations

The mentorship program launched at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, coinciding with one of the most stressful events in recent history. This timing created challenges for measuring change in stress during the study period.

Conclusion

Initial results suggest high program satisfaction with a peer support program for eczema caregivers. When fully completed, results will increase knowledge and address evidence gaps by assessing the efficacy and acceptability of a peer-to-peer mentor program to address the stress, isolation and mental health challenges experienced by caregivers of children with AD.