

## Understanding the Experiences of Fathers Raising Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Qualitative Study in Pakistan

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### Abstract

Fathers who are raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) face specific difficulties, yet there is still a dearth of research on their experiences, especially in Pakistan. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the complex experiences of eight Pakistani fathers who were raising children with ASD. Participants were recruited through ASD support services, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain insight into their experiences. Thematic analysis revealed several key themes. Fathers talked of their first feelings of shock and emotional difficulty after learning of the diagnosis, which was followed by a process of acceptance and adjustment. They underlined the need of family support as well as the requirement for increased comprehension from social networks and medical professionals. The study revealed a number of coping mechanisms used by fathers, such as turning to social networks for support, finding comfort in religious convictions, and making family time a priority despite job obligations. The importance of encouraging positive contacts with their children was also emphasized by fathers, who acknowledged the difficulties and benefits of doing so. It emphasizes how crucial it is to help and empathize with fathers as they travel this difficult path. We can enable fathers to carry out their responsibilities with grace and resilience by creating an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance, which will ultimately improve the wellbeing of fathers and their ASD children.

**Keywords:** Autism spectrum disorder · Qualitative · Pakistan. Fathers · Experiences

### Introduction:

Autism Spectrum illness (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental illness that affects social and communication skills throughout life. It is characterized by limited and/or repetitive interests and/or behavior (Association, 2013<sup>1</sup>) s. (Organization, 2004). The prevalence of ASD has increased over the past few decades worldwide, particularly in China, Japan, the United States, and Europe (Barnevik-Olsson, 2008), (Honda, 2005), (Kaye, 2001), (Nevison, 2014), (Wong, 2008)<sup>2</sup>. According to the recent research, In Japan, the prevalence of autism was reported to be 3.22%, while in Iran it was 0.062% (Rasool, 2023)<sup>3</sup>. A recent thorough analysis found that prevalence rates in South Asia range from 0.09% in India to 1.07% in Sri Lanka. A recent systematic review looked at the updated prevalence of nine Asian countries. The incidence in Japan was 3.22%, but it was 0.062% in Iran. Japan was determined to have the highest incidence of any nation. This could be the cause of the increase in autism spectrum disorder (ASD) prevalence in Japan from 2009 to 2023 (Malik, 2023)<sup>4</sup>. The field of autism research and support services is still in its infancy in Pakistan. In

Pakistan, there are even no trustworthy statistics on the prevalence of ASD (Akhter, 2018)<sup>5</sup>. Nonetheless, the Pakistan Autism Society estimates that 350,000 children in Pakistan suffer with ASD (Furrukh, 2020).

It has also been demonstrated that conveying the diagnosis to families might be difficult for experts. The three most difficult parts of giving an ASD diagnosis, according to a recent large-scale survey of professionals in the United Kingdom (UK), were (1) making sure caregivers understood the diagnosis and the rationale behind it; (2) communicating information that the family could understand; and (3) managing familial distress (Rogers, 2016)<sup>6</sup>. Qualitative studies involving doctors who treat children with ASD revealed similar themes. These studies highlighted obstacles to performing diagnostic assessments for ASD, such as insufficient training, difficulties in telling families about the diagnosis, and worries about how to support families in navigating a disjointed system (Jacobs, 2018), (Penner, 2017). The purpose of a diagnostic assessment is to help the family find the right resources and to help the child and caregivers understand the diagnosis. It also aims to clarify the diagnosis (Abbott, 2013)<sup>7</sup>, (Zwaigenbaum, 2018)<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, family-centered care approaches have been connected to better child outcomes, reduced parent stress, and higher levels of parent satisfaction (King, 2004)<sup>9</sup>. When a parent receives an ASD diagnosis, they are known to experience a variety of emotions, including grief and loss, anxiety about the diagnosis's long-term effects, a sense of loss for the life experiences their child would never have, and, for some, a reaction akin to a death in the family (DeGrace, 2004)<sup>10</sup>, (Gray, 2003)<sup>11</sup>, (Hock, 2012)<sup>12</sup>. Taking care of an individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can be extremely challenging because these individuals struggle to communicate their needs (Peppé, 2007)<sup>13</sup>, and can feel upset when their routines are interrupted (Werner DeGrace, 2004)<sup>14</sup>. Couple relationships are put through extreme strain when caring for a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This pressure causes spouses to make qualitative changes in their relationship (Hock, 2012). Compared to fathers of children without autism spectrum disorder (ASD), fathers of children with ASD may endure higher levels of parenting stress, lower levels of social support and family cohesion, and higher degrees of loneliness (Moorthy, 2023)<sup>15</sup> (George-Levi, 2023)<sup>16</sup>. But there hasn't been much research done in the literature on fathers' experiences attending social events and family get-togethers with their autistic children. The experiences of mothers have received most of the attention; even with coping mechanisms, they can still encounter challenges and unpleasant feelings when attending events (Wei-Chih, 2023)<sup>17</sup>. As a result, it appears that mothers of autistic children are more known than fathers (Braunstein, 2013)<sup>18</sup>, (Burrell, 2017)<sup>19</sup>, (Lashewicz, 2019)<sup>20</sup>.

Research suggests that fathers of autistic children need different kinds of supports than mothers (Meadan, 2010)<sup>21</sup>. Fathers of children with ASD were far more at risk than fathers of children without the illness, with almost 1 in 6 of them reporting high levels of psychological distress and poor overall health (Seymour M., 2017)<sup>22</sup>. Literature indicates that when it came to support, more than 70% of fathers of children with ASD said that it was unavailable, and they were much more likely to say this than fathers of children without disorder. The social support domain that was most strongly linked to fathers' perceptions of psychological distress was emotional/informational support (Seymour, 2020)<sup>23</sup>. Social support, practical support, financial support, professional support, time for self-care, and time for oneself are a few examples of these supports (Seymour M., 2022)<sup>24</sup>. To improve dads' well-being and promote stronger parent-child connections, it's critical to keep an eye on their stress levels and health and to offer them resources and assistance that are specific to their needs (Nunnally, 2023)<sup>25</sup>.

Stigmatization of parents of children with ASD frequently results in stress for the caregivers and impairs the parents' capacity for coping. Stigmatized people, according to Oren Shtayermman, are those: "who possess a quality that others perceives negative, unfavorable, or in some way unacceptable" (Shtayermman, 2009)<sup>26</sup>.

While a lot of study has been done to better understand the experiences of people with ASD and on the experiences of mothers of children with ASD, not as much has been done to address the special viewpoints and difficulties that their fathers encounter. According to a recent study, this could be because some studies only want to look at the experiences of primary caregivers, even though moms are still more likely to fill this role than men are (G, 2009). According to some studies, couples who care for their child together are getting closer (Aylaz, 2012)<sup>27</sup> (Hock R. M., 2012) (Markoulakis, 2012)<sup>28</sup>, while other studies show that moms' perceptions of not getting adequate help from their spouses cause gendered friction (Gray, 2003) (Luong, 2009)<sup>29</sup>.

In a 2003 research, for instance, one mother participant stated: "Nine times out of ten it's the mother who is [caring for the child]...because the father is working...The father essentially has...respite care five days a week" (Gray, 2003).

In the same survey, a parent described his work schedule as a way to reduce stress at home: "I was not working forty hours. Paid for forty hours a week, but I worked an average of sixty-five...I think I did it to get away from [my daughter]" (Gray, 2003).

Fathers are therefore an essential and significant component of a parenting dyad, whose experiences, actions, and decisions are significant in and of themselves and have an impact on a variety of other significant outcomes, even in their role as "secondary carers."

The body of research on fathers' experiences raising autistic children is small but rising (Seymour M., 2020). Findings from one of the first studies on fathers of autistic children, conducted with fathers in the United States by (Rodrigue, 1992)<sup>30</sup>, show that fathers tend to be more financially burdened and face more disruptions in family planning than fathers of children who are usually developing. (Meadan H., 2015)<sup>31</sup> conducted a study that demonstrated how seven American fathers used extensive self-education as a coping strategy to manage their emotions, feelings of anger, powerlessness, and fear following the children's diagnoses. (Burrell A., 2017) did another study that looked at dads' experiences raising autistic children. Eight fathers (from Birmingham and London, UK) participated in this study. They described their path as fathering a kid with autism as one in which acceptance marked a turning point and helped them feel less frustrated. In a more recent study, 63 Swiss-Italian fathers reported that the significance they placed on their paternal role had a significant and beneficial impact on their feelings of self-efficacy and their pleasure as parents (Rudelli, 2021)<sup>32</sup>.

An additional constraint on current research is that males are typically interviewed alongside moms, resulting in a combined "parent" experience (Ludlow, 2012) (Altiere, 2009)<sup>33</sup> (Ryan, 2012). Couples interviews are beneficial in and of themselves, but they are not always able to fully capture individual viewpoints and needs, nor do they always provide people the chance to bring up issues that are personal to them and that they may not have discussed with their partner. The experiences of fatherhood and motherhood may differ significantly, according to recent studies on dads and fatherhood (Doucet, 2009)<sup>34</sup>. Furthermore, a recent study by (Ives, 2014) indicates that some men may not view their own problems and concerns as significant enough or valid enough to bring up, even when they are aware of the moral discourse around parenting. Therefore this study is important because it can provide light on a crucial but little-researched area of family dynamics: fathers' experiences with raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

The acceptance and understanding of neurological disorders are greatly influenced by culture.

If the parents view their child's disorder as an acceptance of "Allah's will," they may be less inclined to spend money on interventionist techniques and may choose to simply provide for their child's needs for clothing and food (Ravindran, 2011)<sup>35</sup>. The word "disability" has distinct meanings in Pakistan (P.W., 2011). Families with disabled members often conceal them out of fear of the stigma attached to the condition because the handicap is typically interpreted as a sign of retribution. Furthermore, it is difficult for people with impairments to live independently, and they frequently pass away from neglect (New, 2011). In contrast to children with cognitive problems, another study revealed that parents were more accepting of physical disabilities (Ansari, 2002). Furthermore, compared to modern culture, conservative societies are less receptive to embracing children with cognitive problems. According to a study, in rural Pakistan, institutions misdiagnose and improperly handle diseases, which puts a great deal of stress on parents (Hamdani, 2014).

Positive father participation with their families may help to lower stress levels for both parents and foster a stronger sense of family unity, which may benefit the autistic child as well (Osborne, 2008)<sup>36</sup>. Increasing father engagement may also benefit a child's language development, social responses, and development of symbolic play (Flippin, 2011)<sup>37</sup>. Additionally, it can have a significant and favorable impact on a child's physical, mental, and social-emotional well-being. Fathers may also have an impact on the psycho-social growth of kids who are "atypically" developing as well as kids who struggle with socialization and communication (Shannon et al., 2002). This study has important ramifications for ASD-related research, practice, and policy in Pakistan.

In light of this research gap, the current study used a phenomenological lens to investigate the lived experiences of Pakistani dads of autistic children. In Pakistan, where cultural norms and gender roles may influence fathers' experiences and perceptions of their children's diagnoses, this research gap is especially noticeable. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to look at the actual experiences of Pakistani fathers of autistic children. Specifically, the study aims to identify the coping methods that these guys employ to get over the practical, social, and emotional challenges that they face.

## Methods:

**Design:** In this study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) served as the methodological framework to delve into the firsthand experiences of fathers raising children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This method examines how individuals interpret their life events by closely examining a number of situations (Holloway, 2005) (van Manen, 1990).

**Sampling and Recruitment:** Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants possessed the relevant experiences and phenomena under investigation. A total of 12 to 15 participants were carefully chosen based on predetermined criteria: they had to be fathers of children who had been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), able to offer insightful comments that were pertinent to the goals of the study, and willing to participate by giving their consent. In order to suit the comfort and fluency of the participants, interviews were done in both Urdu and English, taking into account their preferred language. Collaboration with a Lahore, Pakistan-based autism treatment center enabled the recruitment of participants. A consent document detailing the rights and obligations of each possible participant was given, along with a thorough explanation of the research study's goals. Open communication was used to assess their interest and desire to participate, ensuring that each participant gave their informed consent before being included in the study. In order to facilitate a thorough examination of the lived experiences of dads of children with ASD, a rigorous recruitment approach was implemented with the goal of securing a representative and diverse sample of fathers.

**Participants:** For this study, a total of 15 participants were chosen, representing a wide range of fathers with children who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Of these, two fathers claimed they were out of town during the recruitment time as the reason they weren't involved, whereas the other seven fathers actively participated in the study process. Furthermore, six fathers gave no explanation for their lack of communication.

The participants' ages ranged from 35 to 55, which reflects the sample's diverse demographic makeup. Interestingly, every participant had a high level of education; two worked for themselves, and five were employed full-time. The study included children with ASD who were between the ages of 4 and 8 years old, representing a crucial developmental stage in their lives.

Before beginning the study, each participant had to fill out a consent form confirming that they understood the purpose and methods of the research and that they were willing to participate. Purposive sampling was utilized to establish the recruiting procedure and sample size. Purposive sampling is a purposeful strategy that aims to capture relevant insights into the experiences

of fathers raising children with ASD. It's crucial to remember that, even while this sample offers insightful viewpoints, it might not accurately reflect the experiences of all fathers in comparable situations.

**Data Collection:** In order to achieve the main goal of the study and give participants the opportunity to offer in-depth, insightful information based on their own words and experiences, semi-structured interviews were carried out. To ensure ethical issues were satisfied, participants were required to fill out consent forms and submit demographic information prior to the interviews.

A total of four weeks were dedicated to the data collection process. Face-to-face interviews enabled participants and the researcher to have more intimate and in-depth conversations. Open-ended interview questions were used in the format to help the discussion flow naturally and to enable participants to openly share their opinions and experiences.

Basic questions on the participants' relationship with their child and their coping mechanisms for emotional stress and anxiety were asked at the start of the interviews. The conversations that followed focused on the more complex facets of their experiences, going over subjects like the father's role in providing care, coping techniques, and other relevant themes.

The researcher IK took careful notes during the data collection procedure to make sure that crucial details and insights were recorded. Furthermore, every interview was captured on audio to enable comprehensive examination and comprehension of the information.

To make sure that the questions asked of participants stayed pertinent to the overall goal and purpose of the study, an interview guide was used. The father's role, coping mechanisms, and other important facets of their experiences are just a few of the major issues that are explored in this well-crafted guide, which will increase the breadth and depth of the data gathered.

Table I

Demographic information of participants								
Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Marital status	Level of education	Employment status	Age of offspring	Gender of offspring	
Amjad	45	Asian Muslim	Married	Graduate degree	Employed full time	7	Male	
Jahan	35	Asian Muslim	Married	Graduate degree	Employed full time	6	Male	
Arslan	41	Asian Muslim	Married	Master's degree	Employed full time	6	Male	
Zeeshan	51	Asian Muslim	Married	Master's degree	Self employed	8	Male	
Alyaan	43	Asian Muslim	Married	Master's degree	Employed full time	5	Female	
Salaar	53	Asian Muslim	Married	Master's degree	Self employed	5	Male	
Tayyab	47	Asian Muslim	Married	Master's degree	Self employed	4	Female	

**Results:** Five major themes emerged from the data analysis, and each one offers insightful information on the experiences of fathers raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The emotional impact, support network, coping mechanisms, role-shifting, and communication with the child are some of these themes. The following discussion delves into each issue, illuminating the complex facets of parenting within the framework of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

**Emotional Impact:**

Fathers raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) experience an emotional journey that is a complex tapestry of obstacles and insights interspersed with pivotal moments of comprehension and acceptance. Many fathers struggle at first with the sobering possibility that their child might not develop in accordance with society's expectations of normal development. This insight, along with the general ignorance of ASD, leads to emotional anguish and annoyance. Amjad opens up about his early difficulties, describing a phase of denial during which he refused to accept his child's behavioral abnormalities.

“Back then, it was really shocking for me...I was in denial for a long time... convincing myself that this isn't true. My wife's constant urging to take action led to arguments.”

Even after acceptance sets in, a lingering sense of emotional turmoil persists. One father recalls a sleepless night following advice from a psychologist, unable to articulate the source of his stress. Zeeshan reveals:

“There were different kinds of emotions I felt...Sometimes I felt embarrassed when my child acted out in public, drawing unwanted attention.”

During the period of diagnosis, it must be very hard for some fathers to go through the phase of different emotions. Firstly, all the fathers went through the phase of acceptance, and then they needed to gain all the knowledge and awareness about it. As they went through different phases, various emotions affected them. There were some events when they could see the ray of hope during times of helplessness. One father shared his experience of finding a ray of hope, stating:

“We all want our child to have a blessed life and a good future... I was feeling very helpless... But you know, I was at ease when one of the nurses at the hospital came to us and said, 'Look at me, I'm also autistic, and now I'm working as a nurse. Don't lose hope.' Her words somehow made me feel at ease.”

As they deal with their child's diagnosis, fathers experience a wide range of complex emotions, including stress, frustration, shame, and anxiety. An additional emotional burden is the obligation to live up to society's standards of manhood and parenting.

“Of course, as a father...it was very upsetting,” acknowledges one participant, “But as a man, I had to maintain composure for the sake of my family.”

Fathers struggle at first, but they eventually adjust, taking comfort in acceptance and developing a greater awareness of their responsibilities. These fathers found it extremely difficult to accept that their child has autism at first. They experienced a range of feelings. They didn't know what to do or why their child was acting a specific way before the diagnosis. In several instances, the lack of awareness made it challenging to handle various circumstances. They characterized their experience as being emotionally conflicted. Their job life is also impacted by their domestic lives. They would not be able to function properly at work if they were experiencing emotional distress at home or if they were arguing with a family member. The accumulation of these factors has a profound emotional effect on an individual. Emotional distress can result from powerlessness, guilt, frustration, and a sense of loss. Salaar described his journey:

“At first, I felt helpless and frustrated. ....But with time, I gained control over my emotions and forged a stronger bond with my child.”

Resilience, patience, and a fresh sense of purpose in their job as caregivers gradually replace the feelings of annoyance and shame that fathers who learn to embrace their child's unique journey gradually experience. Over time, fathers' mental landscapes shift from early distress to a more balanced perspective. Fathers may confront the challenges of raising an autistic child with dignity and determination when they are accepted, as acceptance ultimately acts as a stimulant for development and adaptability.

#### Support Systems:

Fathers of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) provide insight on the variety of supports they rely on to help them overcome obstacles. These consist of their families' support, professional help, and emotional support. Availability and sufficiency of support networks differ based on the unique circumstances of every father. Interviewees were questioned concerning the assistance they were given in stressful and emotionally charged situations. Although their answers differed, they all mentioned their partners' unfailing support. Many fathers found that emotional support and stability came mostly from their spouses. As Salaar so beautifully put it:

“My family has always supported me... I mean my wife .....we are a nuclear family, therefore she is my pillar of support during good times and bad”

Parenting a child with ASD requires obtaining support from a variety of sources. Fathers described how, after learning of their child's diagnosis, they sought help from psychologists and autistic facilities. Some faced difficulties and were dissatisfied with certain services, whereas others got comfort and direction from committed experts. One parent, for example, described how he sought several opinions before finding a doctor who was supportive and recommended them to autistic facilities for additional care.

“My spouse and I saw several psychologists for our evaluations, but we weren't happy with their work. After that, our family physician gave us the name of another physician who provided us with sound advice and knowledge about other autistic centers”

The support system, however, consists of more extensive community resources in addition to professional and family networks. Fathers stressed the need for professionals to treat them with respect and empathy, underscoring the need for increased understanding and sensitivity in the healthcare industry. As one participant so movingly put it:

“Not only do regular people need to improve their behavior.... but experts also need to do so. When I took my child to see a psychologist...he acted in a very unprofessional manner. He began to make comments about why you and your child were speaking in English...I mean...That was completely out of context, to be honest... As parents of an autistic child, we were already in a very helpless situation and didn't know why our child was acting a certain way or what to do. These experts ought to handle things politely and professionally”

There are different stereotypes attached to autism, and these stereotypes obviously affect the family members of these children. The impact of these stereotypes varies depending on the region you are living in. In cities, there is some awareness spreading around, but many people, even in urban areas, remain unaware and believe in these stereotypes. In rural areas, belief in such stereotypes is more

prevalent, exacerbated by the lack of resources and services available. Many families, including these children, are affected by these stereotypes.

In this study, we only captured the experiences of a few fathers, unable to encompass the diverse experiences of other families who may have different encounters. During discussions about the support system, one father shared his encounter with stereotypes, reflecting on the challenges he faced. Amjad shared his experience with a somber tone:

“There are still people out there who believe in such things... they tie these children up and isolate them for long periods, attributing their condition to spiritual influence. I encountered this at an event when a friend's friend started talking about such things. Although I was aware of my child's situation and didn't believe in such superstitions, there are still people who do... I believe there should be better services and support systems working to spread awareness on this topic, and I had my family's support.”

Communities that raise awareness and offer advice to professionals, families, and parents are desperately needed as autism continues to grow in prevalence. All families should have access to and a strong recommendation for early diagnosis. Like many other nations, Pakistan still has to raise awareness in all spheres, especially rural ones, in order to improve the system of assistance for these families and their children. Jahan shared his opinions:

“It's 2024 now... and there are still many people out there unaware of this disorder. Fortunately, I was one of those... who received support from family and professionals. This disorder is spreading rapidly, and although there are still many who remain uninformed... there are also those who are aware. As a teacher, I once had to cancel a lecture due to my child's appointment, and... one of my students mentioned that their sibling is also autistic. That prompted me to dedicate a lecture to spread awareness, as it was the least I could do to offer... support.”

These fathers talked about the different forms of support they get as well as the instances when they don't receive any during the interviews. To some degree, they were all affected by a lack of professional support. When questioned about emotional support, a lot of people brought up the difficulty of striking a balance between expressing their emotions and their responsibilities as family leaders and caregivers. They believed they couldn't afford to show weakness or be frank about their feelings. They did, however, emphasize how their partners help them and how they look out for one another. One person explained this dynamic as follows:

“I think women are more emotional than men... they rely on us, and if we as men get emotional, then who would support the women in the family? My wife always looks after my emotions and supports me in every context... I am very thankful to Allah for giving me her as a partner. But as a man, it's my responsibility to support her emotionally and in every way... so sometimes, we do hide our feelings to protect the emotions of our other family members.”

### Coping Strategies:

Fathers of children with autism spectrum disorder were questioned throughout the interviews about how they handle the challenges they encounter and how they control their emotions. These fathers experience a spectrum of emotions as they come to grips with their child's circumstances and move through the acceptance phase, as we discussed in the section on the emotional impact. We discussed how the absence of specific professional support impacts their emotions in the section on support systems. We now get into their coping mechanisms and how they handle these circumstances.

The diverse experiences that these fathers have had shape their individual coping mechanisms. Their responses and experiences all share a belief in Allah, the conviction that all good and bad things come from Him, and the knowledge that only He can provide them comfort when things are tough. As one person put it:

“It was hard sometimes, of course... but every time I feel stressed out, I ask my Allah for help during prayer... that always puts me at ease.”

Some fathers had full-time jobs and little free time to spend with their buddies. They said that they rarely had time for friends and family, so they either didn't socialize with them or did so infrequently. Their favorite place to spend leisure time was at home. They occasionally exploited their jobs as an escape from depressing and hopeless emotions. One person shared his account of what happened, saying:

“I don't socialize that much... when I don't feel emotionally good, I just prefer to work instead of going to friends. That's kind of an escape for me... yes, you can say that.”

Salaar shared a similar sentiment about being a homebody:

“I'm a busy person because of the kind of work I do... so, I prefer to spend my time with my family whenever I'm free and even when I'm not feeling good... and Allah is always with us... as a Muslim, we do believe in that... that helps a lot.”

Adaptations to emotions and circumstances vary depending on a person's surroundings, gender, and personal characteristics. Sadly, social conventions frequently require males to exhibit stoicism and strength, which can cause them to repress their emotional feelings. Men are often expected to play the roles of guardians and providers, which creates a mindset that puts extra pressure on them to control their emotions. As one father stated in the emotional impact section: “If we as men get emotional, then who would support the women of the family?” So, they sometimes hide their true emotions and then employ various strategies to cope with those feelings and situations.

Now that we are aware of the experiences of a small number of fathers, it is critical to acknowledge that the experiences and coping mechanisms of the vast majority of fathers who are not being studied may differ. One participant spoke in a powerful voice but in a lighthearted tone:

“How do I cope with...? I never really thought about this before, honestly... but I have this habit of gaming, I play games sometimes... now that I think about it, I always prefer to play games, and sometimes I go out to refresh my mind... but it's not just that much... I mean, there's not much time for these things too.”

Some fathers prefer to spend time with their family members and take care of their kids, as they have other children too. That's kind of work for them and a way to spend quality time with their friends. As one participant described his experience:

“I take my kids and wife for outings, and those short trips also help me refresh my mind and look at the good side of being a father to three beautiful kids and having a supportive partner. I'm very thankful to Allah for everything... and namaz is the only solution for all problems.”

It's clear that not everyone finds it easy to manage stress as these fathers discuss how they have dealt with trying circumstances and surroundings. Every individual handles it in a different way. Fathers of children with autism have unique needs and difficulties. Different attitudes and techniques are needed for children with autism at different times, requiring a nuanced knowledge of their behavior. Fathers cherish their time with their children, but they also require opportunities to unwind following demanding workdays. Sometimes people just need time alone to clear their heads and find comfort when they're not feeling well emotionally. As a result, these fathers have evolved a variety of coping mechanisms. As an illustration, one participant shared how he rejuvenates himself by spending time with friends every weekend:

“Regardless of gender or responsibilities, we're all human and feel fatigued sometimes... I schedule my time to spend with my friends and family. Every weekend...I spend Sunday with my family and Saturday largely with my friends. And that's how... I handle difficult situations keeping my family's feelings safe”

Everybody handles emotional anguish and stressful events in a different way. Fathers of children with autism have a multitude of obstacles and struggles during the stages of acknowledgment, therapy, and providing care. These fathers deal with a variety of issues and feel a range of emotions; they all use different coping mechanisms. It becomes clear from their sharing of experiences that they have customized their approaches to deal with the challenges of parenting autistic children. Throughout IK's interviews, a recurring theme was the dads' mutual faith in Allah Almighty and the assistance of their partners and spouses.

### **Role Adjustment:**

The fathers who participated in this study describe how their roles have changed upon learning that their kid has autism spectrum disorder. As fathers of children diagnosed with autism spectrum condition, they must adjust to a variety of new situations, rearranging their schedules and taking on more responsibilities and tolerance. A number of fathers openly admit that they are still getting used to their new roles and are working hard to fulfill their obligations, sometimes feeling as though they are not able to devote enough time to their families. A participant considers this continuing journey:

“I feel like I'm still not giving my family enough attention... Being at home all the time with the children, my wife is taking on a large portion of the workload. However, I'm trying to learn how to be more accountable and better manage my time. For example, I prioritized going to my child's counseling appointment today. All I'm trying to do is the best I can in my duty as a father”

Some fathers were initially very frustrated, but they eventually developed patience and accepted new approaches to their child's development. They learned new techniques and put them into practice to support their child's growth. These dads struggled with a variety of issues, including helplessness and frustration, during the acceptance phase. As fathers of kids diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, they understood that their kids needed to change the way they behaved, form new routines, and learn new abilities. Even though some found this transition to be intimidating, these individuals persisted in their job as caretakers, overcoming obstacles and gradually modifying their duties. Tayyab described his experience:

“My marriage suffered at first since I was easily irritated and even avoided spending time with my family and child. ... But going to counseling with my wife made me realize that... I needed to make a change. I started spending more time with my family and researching various methods to support my child's education. ...Alhamdulillah, things are getting better.”

According to some fathers, their wives expressed worries about bonding with their child and spending quality time with the family. Due to social pressure to fit in, they were embarrassed to take their child out, which caused disputes at home. In spite of social criticism, it took them some time to find the bravery to accept their paternity responsibilities. Alyan talked about his experience adjusting:

“My wife often complained about not spending enough time with the family or taking them out. I used to be a homebody, but the counselor for our child suggested that we get out once a week. We now go out on the weekends.”

Another participant shared his journey of growth:

“When I took my child out...I used to feel ashamed because I was afraid people would judge us for his conduct. But as I've grown older...I've come to see that part of my fatherly responsibility is giving my child the life he deserves one in which he may learn and develop.”

Some fathers believed that their role had not changed significantly, despite the difficulties. In order to raise their children as a team, they stressed the value of being aware of each other's needs and feelings. Arslan thought to himself:

“I have a child with autism... so I haven't observed many differences... It all comes down to understanding our child's conduct and putting aside our own problems. It's always about sharing the load and working as a team.”

According to Salaar: parents always want the best for their kids and household... I didn't know my son had a medical illness at first... I assumed it was just a communication or connection problem. I talk to him differently now that I understand... and he's doing fantastic.

Drawing from the fathers' experiences, IK noticed a recurring theme: an unrelenting dedication to giving their kids the best life possible and acknowledging their individual circumstances. Fathers of autistic children are concerned about more than just their child's illness; they want to understand the deeper causes of their child's feelings, including helplessness, guilt, and frustration. In the face of these difficulties, they manage issues like getting expert help, making sure their child receives the best care possible, organizing their time and obligations, and overcoming these obstacles in their own unique ways. Nevertheless, in spite of these challenges, they never give up and keep learning how to improve their responsibilities as dads in light of the changing demands of their kids and the dynamics of autism spectrum disease.

#### **Interaction with the Child:**

These fathers provide insightful accounts of their interactions with their kids and their experiences with the challenging process of developing relationships with those who are autistic. Dealing with such distinctive people offers a complex web of difficulties that necessitate a thorough comprehension of their peculiarities and subtle behavioral traits. For these fathers, accepting their child's individuality, being open to learning, and maintaining an unbreakable commitment to acceptance are the first steps on the path to connection.

When asked about the type of relationship they have with their child, the dads' answers differ, reflecting the wide range of experiences among them. As one person openly stated:

“It was initially difficult for me to determine... why my child behaved the way he did, as I was still attempting to comprehend his circumstances... But as time went on, I made an effort to spend time with him after work. I spoke with him in a variety of ways...and we enjoyed playing together.”

Many fathers acknowledge that they struggled with feelings of humiliation and doubt at first and were reluctant to interact with their child. They frequently shied away from times of connection because they felt unprepared to handle the complexity of their child's behaviors. In response to questions concerning the dynamics of their relationships, these fathers describe feeling confused as they attempt to negotiate the unknown landscape of parenthood within the framework of autism spectrum disease. Some fathers find that their interactions with their child are limited due to the constraints of their job routines, and they long for more quality time spent together. For example, Amjad provides a moving analysis of his connection, stating:

“Weekends are when I make sure to spend meaningful time with my child... even if I'm busy with work most of the week. We are having a great time and creating memories... during these unique times.”

Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, some parents have managed to build strong relationships with their kids, supported by a keen awareness of their emotional needs and a steadfast dedication to open communication. These fathers have persisted in the face of early obstacles, exploring a variety of techniques to guide and control their child's actions and, in the process, creating relationships that go beyond the realm of traditional comprehension. When Salaar considers this life-changing experience, he shares:

“Through commitment and an eagerness to learn... I've developed a close bond with my child. We've made amazing progress and become closer... by trying various communication techniques and comprehending each other's emotions.”

These fathers have become pillars of steadfast support and understanding in their families and communities by embracing the challenges of dealing with their autistic children via tolerance, empathy, and perseverance.



## Discussion

In this study, fathers who have a child on the autistic spectrum shared their incredibly intimate experiences. Priceless insights into the intricate dynamics of resilience, adaptability, and caregiving were offered by this research. Fathers opened up about their experiences and offered insightful insights to illuminate the challenges, successes, and memorable moments of camaraderie that define their path. Their voices serve as a deafening cry for greater support, acceptance, and advocacy within the community of individuals with ASD, underscoring the importance of inclusive research methodologies that prioritize the perspectives of fathers. By elevating their voices and appreciating their diverse tales, this project seeks to foster meaningful conversation, foster empathy, and accelerate revolutionary change in the areas of caregiving, family dynamics, and public perceptions of autism spectrum illness. Being a father is an amazing journey filled of challenges, successes, and events that alter lives.

Fathers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have additional challenges along this route, which completely alters their identities and experiences. In this chat, we delve into the complex tales of fathers navigating the difficult terrain of raising a child with autism, including subjects like the emotional toll, support systems, role-modifying, communication with the child, and coping techniques.

Fathers who are raising children with autism spectrum disorder experience a complex emotional roller coaster that includes feelings of doubt, guilt, and frustration. According to the dads in this study, these feelings are frequently caused by a lack of professional support or a disinterest in it, and they can be significant obstacles to acceptance. These emotions could make it more difficult for them to accept their child's condition and prevent resilience from growing. Since these are natural responses to the challenges they face, it is imperative to foster an environment in which fathers feel free to voice their concerns and acknowledge their loss. Fathers who require more specific support may be able to immediately address their issues through one-on-one parenting advice sessions. It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that many fathers may be reluctant to seek professional assistance, let alone talk about these problems with friends or family.

To overcome these barriers, concerted efforts are required to de-stigmatize discussions regarding paternal feelings and to foster an atmosphere of open communication and acceptance at home and at work.

The father's experience is a complex tapestry of emotions that ranges from strong acceptance and resilience to doubt and denial. Upon discovering that their kid has autism, parents frequently experience a wave of emotions as they grapple with feelings of helplessness, shame, and confusion. Fathers, on the other hand, have an unparalleled capacity to overcome hardship, taking comfort from their religious beliefs, their familial bonds, and their networks of friends and peers. In the crucible of adversity, fathers discover the transformational power of vulnerability, fortifying their relationships with their children and finding solace in shared experiences.

Fathers' experiences of raising a child with ASD are significantly shaped by the support networks that are accessible to them. Even while expert help is essential, there are still differences in the availability and caliber of services, which makes dads' burdens worse. Family support shows up as a ray of hope, with spouses providing steadfast understanding and solidarity. However, the unequal division of caregiving duties frequently keeps gender differences alive, emphasizing the necessity for specially designed support systems that cater to dads' particular requirements.

The fathers' study narratives frequently touch on their desire for their children to succeed and blend in with society, much like their neurotypical classmates. These fathers see a moment when their children will have grown with elegance and be able to confront the world with assurance and independence. At the core of this idea is the crucial role that expert support services play in assisting fathers on this journey. It is imperative that professionals adopt a proactive and empathetic approach, engaging in active dialogue with men to understand their aspirations and concerns for their children.

By starting conversations on independence and social integration, for example, experts can provide a safe and encouraging environment where fathers feel comfortable sharing their wants and concerns. This conversation gives fathers the confidence to actively engage in their child's growth and development while also validating their experiences. In order to create an atmosphere where fathers feel appreciated, supported, and prepared to handle the challenges of raising a child with autism spectrum disorder, we must work with professionals to build a cooperative partnership that is marked by mutual respect and understanding. By elevating fathers' voices and advocating for inclusive support networks, we can help the ASD community cultivate a culture of empathy and empowerment.

Adjusting to a child's new role and responsibilities is an essential part of a father's journey with an ASD child. Fathers dispel stereotypes about males by accepting weakness as a source of strength and finding a balance between their roles as nurturer, protector, and provider. Fathers are often under pressure from social standards that demand stoicism and independence in order to hide their frailties, which perpetuates a quiet and reclusive lifestyle. Despite this, dads show a surprising degree of flexibility in the face of these complex circumstances, accepting their changing roles with courage and dignity. We can remove institutional barriers and create an inclusive culture that recognizes the diverse viewpoints and contributions of fathers in the ASD community by working together and having open discussions.

Managing an autistic child is a delicate dance that requires creativity, compassion, and understanding. Fathers navigate the subtleties of establishing enduring bonds with skill, overcoming behavioral complexity and communication barriers. While some fathers initially struggled with feelings of guilt and inadequacy, others overcame these feelings and built great bonds with their children through unwavering dedication and love. The tales they tell demonstrate how, despite daily adversity, empathy and tenacity can forge sincere friendships. Mothers may have gone through similar things, but their unique perspectives offer invaluable insights into the complexities of caring for others and family dynamics.

In the crucible of misfortune, fathers hone a coping repertoire to weather the day-to-day challenges of raising a kid with autism. Every father builds a different resilience toolkit, which may include anything from relaxing with recreational activities to seeking solace in religion. In the middle of the chaos, work usually offers a feeling of routine by serving as a refuge and a source of revenue. However, despite the chaos of responsibilities, fathers manage to find time for rest and relaxation, appreciating the joy of moments spent together and the bonds forged in the crucible of adversity. Fathers accept the complications of fatherhood with courage, compassion, and unflinching resilience through patience, understanding, and endurance.

The diverse experiences that the fathers in this study shared demonstrate how dissimilar their needs are for support. Fathers tackle the challenges of parenting a child with autism spectrum disorder from various angles, depending on their own experiences, resilience, and coping mechanisms. While some men may be proactive in seeking out more resources and professional assistance, others may feel overworked or unmotivated to do so.

The data indicates that no single tactic is effective for all fathers serving in this capacity. Rather, it is imperative to acknowledge and honor the distinct needs and inclinations of every father. Our results underscore the importance of creating flexible and inclusive support networks that consider the evolving needs of fathers and their families.

Accessibility, responsiveness, and nonjudgmental guidance should be given top priority in these systems, giving fathers the tools and resources they need to successfully traverse their particular parenting journey. In the end, we can support the holistic wellbeing of fathers and their autistic children by creating an atmosphere that values diversity and adaptability and enables fathers to carry out their roles with resilience and confidence.

### Limitations

There are certain limitations to this study that limit how far its conclusions may be applied. First off, we may not have obtained a full picture of the fathers' experiences because we only conducted one interview with each of them. They were limited to discussing their experiences in retrospect, which might not have covered all. Moreover, the lack of diversity in the sample population is one limitation. The majority of the study participants fit into a narrow range of demographic categories, such as age, employment status, level of education attained, and ethnicity. Because of this homogeneity, the findings might not hold true for a wider subset of fathers whose children have autism. Fathers who were already in contact with support services for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) were the focus of the recruitment approach for this study. As a result, the people included in this sample are people who are, at the very least, aware that these services exist. It is critical to acknowledge that men who choose not to participate in this study or who are not actively involved in these support networks may have different experiences and viewpoints that should be investigated in further studies. The majority of the ASD children in our sample are younger in age, and there are relatively few older children in the sample. The generalizability of our findings is limited by this narrow age range. The conclusions drawn from our study may not be applicable to fathers of younger children because fathers of older children on the autism spectrum may see and manage their experiences differently.

### Conclusion:

For fathers, raising children with autism spectrum disorder is a journey filled with ups and downs, particularly in Pakistan. During the acceptance phase, they experience a range of emotions, from determination to frustration, and they find comfort in their families' constant support. On the other hand, more open communication and improved assistance from networks and medical professionals are essential. Men can freely express their emotions on these sites and ask for help when needed. By creating a kind and encouraging atmosphere, we enable these fathers to carry out their responsibilities with courage, elegance, and confidence.

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