

# Autism Moms Have Stress Similar To Combat Soldiers

by Michelle Diamant | November 10, 2009

Mothers of adolescents and adults with autism experience chronic stress comparable to combat soldiers and struggle with frequent fatigue and work interruptions, new research finds. These moms also spend significantly more time caregiving than moms of those without disabilities.

Researchers followed a group of moms of adolescents and adults with autism for eight days in a row. Moms were interviewed at the end of each day about their experiences and on four of the days researchers measured the moms' hormone levels to assess their stress.

They found that a hormone associated with stress was extremely low, consistent with people experiencing chronic stress such as soldiers in combat, the researchers report in one of two studies published in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

“This is the physiological residue of daily stress,” says Marsha Mailick Seltzer, a researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who authored the studies. “The mothers of children with high levels of behavior problems have the most pronounced physiological profile of chronic stress, but the long-term effect on their physical health is not yet known.”

Such hormone levels have been associated with chronic health problems and can affect glucose regulation, immune functioning and mental activity, researchers say.

In a companion study, the researchers followed up with the same group of mothers daily to interview them about how they used their time, their level of fatigue, what leisure activities they participated in and whether or not stressful events occurred. This information was then compared with data from a national sample of mothers whose children do not have disabilities.

Mothers of those with autism reported spending at least two hours more each day caregiving than mothers of children without disabilities. On any given day these moms

were also twice as likely to be tired and three times as likely to have experienced a stressful event.

What's more, these moms were interrupted at work on one out of every four days compared to less than one in 10 days for other moms.

Despite all of this, mothers of an individual with autism were just as likely to have positive experiences each day, volunteer or support their peers as those whose children have no developmental disability, researchers found.

“On a day-to-day basis, the mothers in our study experience more stressful events and have less time for themselves compared to the average American mother,” says Leann Smith, a developmental psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who worked on the studies. “We need to find more ways to be supportive of these families.”

In particular, the researchers say that parents need better respite options and flexibility from their employers. Further, they say, programs to help manage behavior problems can go a long way toward improving the situation for mothers and their kids alike.

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