

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the moderating role of cognitive flexibility in the relationship between the severity of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in children and the likelihood of parents developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. Thirty-nine parents, each with a child diagnosed with autism, participated in the study. The Cognitive Flexibility Paradigm, a performance-based task, was used to assess cognitive flexibility, while the Social Communication Questionnaire (SCQ) and the PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5) were administered as self-report questionnaires. Statistical analyses were conducted using the PROCESS macro, employing bootstrapped resamples. The results revealed a significant main effect between ASD severity and parents' cognitive flexibility. The interaction between ASD severity and cognitive flexibility accounted for an additional 24.26% of the variance in PTSD symptoms. In parents with poor cognitive flexibility, a negative relationship was found between ASD severity and the likelihood of developing PTSD symptoms. Specifically, in these individuals, greater exposure to traumatic incidents was associated with higher PTSD symptoms. Conversely, parents with high cognitive flexibility exhibited a positive relationship between ASD severity and PTSD symptoms. These findings highlight the differential impact of cognitive flexibility on the relationship between ASD severity and PTSD symptoms in parents. The study emphasizes the complex nature of this relationship and underscores the importance of further research to elucidate underlying mechanisms and develop interventions to support parents in managing the challenges associated with raising a child with ASD.