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Integrating positive psychology perspectives to support parents in their transition to parenthood: a vision for future research

Despite the anticipated joy of welcoming a child into the family, parenthood brings along several sources of stresses that can challenge parents' mental health. Sleep disturbance, acceptance of the new parental role, work-family conflict, and readjustment to a new life dynamic can cause psychological distress (Martins, 2019). New parents often describe being affected by fatigue, emotional lability, marital conflict, or even symptoms of depression and anxiety (e.g. Smythe et al., 2022). The way in which parents go through the process of becoming parents can therefore affect their personal well-being, the quality of their relationship with their partner, and their ability to provide the necessary support to their child during the critical early stages of development (Martins, 2019).

As in many areas of psychology and psychiatry, research on the transition to parenthood (i.e. the period from conception to one year postpartum) has shown a strong interest in the negative aspects of this period (such as the emergence of psychological symptoms of stress; Martins, 2019). However, prior literature suggests that the transition to parenthood involves a complex interplay between the stress of the transition to parenthood and resources, both pre-existing and newly acquired (Nelson et al., 2014). Positive psychology defines personal resources as the positive characteristics, abilities, and traits that an individual possesses, such as resilience, optimism, creativity, self-confidence, and positive emotions. According to the 'Broaden-and-Build' theory proposed by psychologist Barbara Fredrickson (2004), positive emotions such as joy, love, gratitude, interest, and hope, broaden an individual's attention, thoughts, and behaviours, thereby increasing their ability to cope with life's challenges and acquire new personal resources. Therefore, personal resources such as positive emotions are considered as crucial for promoting personal growth and well-being.

Testing this theory in the transition to parenthood, Don et al. (2022) examined the role of positive emotions in promoting relational adjustment in new parents. The research involved two dyadic and longitudinal studies of couples undergoing the transition to parenthood. Participants completed measures on various topics such as positive emotions, relationship satisfaction, perceived positive and negative social support from their partner, daily stress, and parenting efficacy during the last trimester of pregnancy and up to 24 months postpartum. The findings suggest that new parents' positive emotions predict increases in relationship satisfaction, perceived social support from the partner, and receiving more actual social support. These associations remained even after taking into account the initial level of each outcome variable. Overall, the study highlights the importance of positive emotions in the early stages of parenthood. To maintain a healthy relationship, it is not enough to avoid negative emotions, conflicts, and stress. Rather, it is equally important to actively foster

positive emotions to allow creating a virtuous circle of positivity within the relationship. Another recent study focused on one positive emotion in particular: hope (Zahavi-Lupo et al., 2022). Hope is a powerful personal resource that helps individuals cope with adversity and promotes well-being. Little is known about how hope operates in intimate relationships, especially during the transition to parenthood. To address this gap, Zahavi-Lupo et al. (2022) studied 'dyadic hope' in 100 couples during the early stages of parenthood. Over a three-week period, beginning at 15 weeks after childbirth, both partners reported daily levels of hope, stressors, and outcomes related to individual, relational, and parental functioning. The results showed that higher levels of daily hope predicted improved outcomes for both partners across all three types of functioning, and that hope also acted as a buffer against daily stressors. Thus, hope appears to be a personal and shared resource that can be targeted in prevention and intervention to support couples at this challenging time in their lives. Considering these findings, promoting positive emotions during the transition to parenthood may support couples and promote healthy family functioning. Therefore, to better support new parents during this transformative time, research and practice should be mindful to take well-being into account and incorporate elements of positive psychology.

In other contexts, positive psychology interventions (PPI), defined as 'interventions in which the goal of wellbeing enhancement was achieved through pathways consistent with positive psychology theory' (p. 749, Carr et al., 2021) are increasingly emerging and showing conclusive and promising results (Carr et al., 2021). Despite these advances, PPIs are still extremely rare in the field of the transition to parenthood. Recently, Corno et al. (2019) conducted a narrative review examining interventions for women during the perinatal period that included at least one PPI. This comprehensive review identified only two intervention programmes, both of which used gratitude as a PPI and aimed to improve mental health during the perinatal period. The preliminary results of these interventions suggest that brief positive psychology interventions during pregnancy may be useful, but further studies, including randomised controlled trials, are needed to investigate the effectiveness of each intervention component.

Given the burgeoning research on resources and positive emotions during the transition to parenthood, and the lack of PPIs to support parents during this period, positive psychology emerges as a valuable approach to understanding the challenges and opportunities of parenthood and supporting people in their transition to parenthood. Future research in this area should aim to identify specific strategies and techniques that can be used to promote positive outcomes for parents and children, such as enhancing personal resources, cultivating positive emotions, and fostering positive relationships. There is a need to develop prevention and intervention programmes that incorporate a positive psychology approach, as well as randomised controlled trials that can track the short and long-term effects of PPI on parental well-being, child development, and family functioning. In addition, future research could explore the role of positive psychology in supporting parents from diverse backgrounds and in different cultural contexts, to ensure that these prevention and intervention programmes are accessible and effective for all families. This will not only provide a more comprehensive mental health framework for this area but will also help new parents to approach this period in a more positive and constructive way, developing the skills, attitudes, and resources they need to navigate this challenging but rewarding time in their lives.

Disclosure statement

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