

SELF-ACCEPTANCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BURDEN IN AUTISM: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Fathers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often commonly experience psychological burdens that are less frequently explored compared to mothers. This narrative review aims to synthesize existing evidence regarding the psychological burden, self-acceptance, and psychological adaptation of fathers who have children with autism. This study used a narrative review design. Articles published between 2019 and 2025 were systematically retrieved from databases including PubMed, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and Garuda. To make sure the chosen studies were timely and relevant, a manual screening process based on predetermined inclusion criteria was carried out. A total of 11 studies were reviewed and synthesized narratively. The findings indicate that fathers of children with autism experience various psychological burdens, including stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, stigma, identity conflict, and social withdrawal. However, self-acceptance are associated with better psychological well-being, parenting quality, and family functioning. The development of self-acceptance is essential to enhancing the psychological well-being and caregiving ability of fathers of autistic children, despite the various psychological burdens they confront. Interventions focusing on psychological support and paternal involvement are essential to strengthen family resilience.

Keywords: Autism, Fathers, Self-acceptance, Psychological Burden, Well-being.

INTRODUCTION

A child is often regarded as a source of joy, hope, and continuity within a family. However, for some families, the arrival of a child also brings unexpected challenges, particularly when the child is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder marked by recurrent behaviors that greatly impair day-to-day functioning, limited interests, and ongoing challenges with social communication (Hodges et al.,

2020). The prevalence of ASD has significantly increased worldwide over the last 20 years, resulting in growing attention to the long-term impact of ASD not only on affected children but also on their families, especially parents who assume lifelong caregiving responsibilities (Cleary et al., 2024).

Numerous studies have shown that parenting a child with ASD is linked to significant psychological, emotional, and social challenges. Parents must deal with behavioral

issues, rigorous therapy regimens, financial hardship, and worries about the child's future, all of which may likelihood of psychological distress (Alibekova et al., 2022). To date, however, the majority of ASD caregiving research has focused predominantly on mothers, positioning them as primary caregivers and central figures in family adaptation processes.

In contrast, fathers' psychological experiences have received relatively limited scholarly attention, despite their increasingly active involvement in parenting and family functioning. Fathers of children with ASD are often expected to fulfill multiple roles simultaneously, including being financial providers, decision-makers, and emotional support for family (Rudelli et al., 2021). These overlapping responsibilities may lead to role conflict, emotional exhaustion, and heightened stress levels (Zhao et al., 2024). Empirical studies indicate that fathers of children with ASD experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced quality of life compared to fathers of typically developing children (Seymour et al., 2025).

Although several individual studies have examined paternal stress, coping, and mental health outcomes in families of children with ASD, the existing literature remains fragmented and lacks a comprehensive synthesis, particularly regarding the role of self-acceptance in fathers' psychological well-being. To date, no narrative review has systematically summarized current evidence on self-acceptance and its psychological implications among fathers raising children with ASD.

Therefore, this Review Article aims to synthesize existing literature related to the psychological

experiences of fathers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The general objective of this review is to explore the role of self-acceptance in fathers of children with ASD and its impact on psychological well-being. Specifically, this review seeks to: (1) identify common psychological challenges experienced by fathers of children with ASD; (2) examine factors influencing paternal psychological distress, including stigma and cultural expectations; and (3) analyze the contribution of self-acceptance to paternal adaptation and caregiving involvement. The findings of this review are expected to provide theoretical insights and inform the development of more inclusive, father-sensitive, and family-centered interventions in ASD care, particularly within nursing and mental health practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fathers of children with ASD frequently encounter substantial psychological burdens. Research consistently reports elevated levels of stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced quality of life compared to fathers of typically developing children (Seymour et al., 2025). These psychological challenges are often intensified by caregiving demands, social stigma, financial responsibilities, and uncertainty about the child's developmental trajectory.

Cultural expectations may further exacerbate paternal distress. In many societies, fathers are traditionally expected to demonstrate emotional strength while simultaneously acting as primary financial providers. Such expectations can limit emotional expression and reduce help-seeking behaviors, potentially worsening

psychological strain (Zhao et al., 2024).

Self-acceptance is recognized as a crucial psychological construct in facilitating adaptation to challenging life circumstances. It refers to an individual's ability to acknowledge and integrate both personal strengths and limitations without excessive self-blame or denial (Tibubos et al., 2019). Self-acceptance enables individuals to reinterpret adverse experiences in a more balanced and constructive manner.

Within the context of caregiving for children with ASD, self-acceptance may function as a protective factor that mitigates emotional distress. Fathers who demonstrate higher levels of self-acceptance tend to exhibit better psychological well-being, improved coping strategies, and greater involvement in caregiving roles (Higgins et al., 2023). By accepting both their child's condition and their own emotional responses, fathers may reduce internal conflict and foster more adaptive psychological functioning.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a narrative review design to synthesize existing literature related to self-acceptance and psychological burden among fathers raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). A narrative approach was selected to allow a comprehensive and flexible exploration of empirical findings and theoretical perspectives concerning fathers' psychological experiences.

The literature search was conducted using electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and Garuda. Articles were identified using combinations of the

following keywords: "self-acceptance", AND ("psychological burden" OR "stress" OR "stigma"), AND "fathers", AND ("autism spectrum disorder" OR "ASD").

The inclusion criteria were: articles published between 2019 and 2025, studies focusing on fathers of children with ASD, publish in English or Indonesian, and open-access availability. The initial search result were screened based on titles and abstracts to assess relevance. Full-text articles that met the inclusion criteria were subsequently reviewed in detail. A total of 11 articles were included in the final analysis.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The initial literature search yielded 97 articles. After the removal of duplicates and records that did not meet the inclusion criteria, 48 records were screened based on their titles and abstracts. Of these, 25 articles were excluded due to irrelevance to the review focus. Subsequently, a full-text analysis was conducted, in the resulting in the inclusion of 11 studies that met the pre-defined inclusion criteria.

The synthesis of the 11 selected studies identified several recurring themes concerning the psychological experiences of fathers raising children with ASD. Overall, the findings indicate that fathers experience varying levels of psychological burden, shaped by stress, social stigma, and coping processes. Across the reviewed literature, self-acceptance consistently emerged as a salient factor associated with psychological adjustment and paternal involvement in caregiving. Table 1 provides an overview of the included studies, including publication year, country, study design, sample, and key findings

Tabel 1. Summary of Included Studies

Authors	Sample	Key Findings
Abd Latif et al. (2025)	111 parents of children with ASD	Levels of acceptance were influenced by health status, ethnicity, marital status, and child-related factors; higher acceptance was linked to better psychological adaptation.
Alareeki et al. (2019)	16 fathers of children with ASD	Fathers experienced courtesy stigma, shame, social withdrawal, and self-censorship related to societal expectations.
Alibekova et al. (2022)	146 parents of children with ASD	High prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression among parents; unmet social acceptance increased psychological burden, while peer support and employment acted as protective factors.
Cameron and Cooper (2021)	4 fathers of children with ASD	Father experienced identity conflict between caregiving roles and traditional masculine expectations.
Higgins et al. (2023)	136 parents (20 fathers) of children with ASD	Positive perceptions, adaptive coping, self-efficacy, and social support enhanced parental adaptation, though they did not moderate child behavior effects.
Li et al. (2022)	638 parent couples of children with ASD	A proportion of fathers experienced moderate to severe anxiety and depression, indicating significant psychological vulnerability.
Mansur et al. (2022)	Fathers of children with ASD	Fathers' self-acceptance was positively associated with psychological well-being and parenting quality.
Marcinechová et al. (2023)	143 parents of children with ASD; 135 parents of neurotypical children	Self-forgiveness significantly reduced parenting stress; shame mediated the relationship between self-forgiveness and stress among parents of children with ASD.
Seymour et al. (2025)	281 fathers of children with ASD	Most fathers reported low stress; however, a subgroup experienced persistent high stress, indicating risk of psychological distress.

Authors	Sample	Key Findings
Wisnugroho and Amaliyah (2024)	3 parents of children with ASD	Parents underwent a gradual emotional process toward self-acceptance, which was associated with increased involvement in therapy and caregiving.
Yaacob et al. (2021)	21 parents of children with ASD	Parents experienced psychological stress, stigma, limited support, and barriers to services, contributing to emotional burden.

Psychological Burden Among Fathers of Children with ASD

Evidence from both quantitative and qualitative studies indicates that fathers of children with ASD experience considerable psychological burden, although its severity varies across individuals. Seymour et al. (2025) reported that while the majority of fathers experienced minimal levels of stress, a distinct subgroup demonstrated high and persistent stress, suggesting heightened vulnerability to psychological distress. Similarly, Li et al. (2022) found that a proportion of fathers reported moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety and depression, underscoring the presence of significant emotional challenges even when fathers are not the primary focus of caregiving research.

Studies examining parental populations more broadly further revealed elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms associated with raising a child with ASD (Alibekova et al., 2022). These findings suggest that fathers, alongside mothers, are exposed to substantial emotional demands related to ongoing caregiving responsibilities, uncertainly regarding the child's developmental trajectory, and long-term parental commitment.

Social Stigma and Masculinity-Related Challenges

Several studies emphasized the influence of social stigma in intensifying fathers' psychological burden. Qualitative evidence indicated that fathers frequently experienced courtesy stigma, which manifested as feelings of shame, social withdrawal, and avoidance of public situations involving their child (Alareeki et al., 2019). Fathers often engaged in self-censorship and refrained from discussing their child's condition due to concerns about negative social judgement and prevailing societal stereotypes.

Moreover, sociocultural expectations related to masculinity further compounded these challenges. Cameron and Cooper (2021) reported that fathers experienced identity conflict when caregiving responsibilities conflicted with traditional masculine roles, particularly expectations related to financial provision and emotional restraint. This role conflict was associated with emotional suppression and reluctance to seek psychological support, thereby exacerbating internal distress.

Self-Acceptance and Adaptive Psychological Processes

Self-acceptance emerged as a central adaptive psychological process across the reviewed studies.

Research examining acceptance-related constructs demonstrated that higher levels of self-acceptance and self-forgiveness were associated with lower levels of parenting stress and enhanced psychological well-being (Mansur et al., 2022; Marcinechová et al., 2023). Notably, self-forgiveness was identified as a protective factors that mitigated stress by reducing feelings of guilt and shame related to their child's condition.

Qualitative findings further illustrated that parents, including fathers, typically undergo a complex emotional trajectory prior to achieving acceptance. This process often involves initial denial and emotional distress, followed by gradual adjustment (Wisnugroho & Amaliyah, 2024). Factors influencing the development of acceptance included social support, religious beliefs, educational background, and family stability. Higher levels of

acceptance were consistently associated with increased involvement in the child's therapeutic and caregiving activities.

Role of Support and Coping in Psychological Adjustment

Across the reviewed literature, social support, adaptive coping strategies, and self-acceptance were identified as critical facilitators of psychological adjustment among parents of children with ASD (Alibekova et al., 2022; Higgins et al., 2023). Although these studies included both mothers and fathers, the findings suggest that fathers who receive adequate social support and employ adaptive coping strategies are better equipped to manage psychological burden and sustain positive engagement in parenting roles.

DISCUSSION

This narrative review aimed to synthesize existing evidence on the psychological experiences of fathers raising children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), with particular attention to psychological burden, social stigma, and the role of self-acceptance. Consistent with the objectives outlined in the Introduction, the findings demonstrate that fathers experience a complex and multifaceted psychological burden influenced by caregiving demands, sociocultural expectations, and individual coping processes. Importantly, this review extends the current state of the art by highlighting self-acceptance as a central adaptive mechanism that may mitigate psychological distress and enhance paternal engagement in caregiving.

Psychological Burden and Caregiver Stress Theory

The psychological burden reported among fathers aligns closely with established caregiver stress and transactional stress-coping models, which posit that psychological distress emerges when caregiving demands exceed available coping resources and perceived support (Compas et al., 2017; Masulani-Mwale et al., 2016). The reviewed studies indicate that although some fathers report manageable stress levels, a distinct subgroup experiences persistent stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Li et al., 2022; Seymour et al., 2025). This finding supports recent literature suggesting that paternal psychological distress is frequently underestimated due to fathers' secondary positioning in

caregiving research and lower likelihood of emotional disclosure (Flippin & Crais, 2011; Rilling & Mascaro, 2017). Thus, the results reinforce the need to conceptualize fathers not merely as auxiliary caregivers but as individuals with distinct psychological vulnerabilities.

Stigma, Masculinity Norms, and Identity Conflict

The findings regarding social stigma are consistent with contemporary stigma theory, particularly the concept of courtesy stigma, which has been widely documented among families of children with developmental disabilities (Papadopoulos et al., 2019; Scavarda & Scambler, 2025). Fathers' experiences of shame, social withdrawal, and avoidance reflect the internalization of negative societal attitudes toward disability.

Furthermore, the results underscore the role of masculinity norms in shaping fathers' psychological experiences. The reviewed studies support gender role conflict theory, which suggests that psychological distress arises when social expectations of masculinity such as emotional restraint and self-reliance, conflict with caregiving realities that require emotional openness and vulnerability (Cameron & Cooper, 2021; Dermott & Miller, 2015). Compared to mothers, fathers may therefore face compounded stress due to both caregiving demands and cultural pressures to suppress emotional expression, a pattern also observed in broader men's mental health research (Seidler et al., 2016).

Self-Acceptance as an Adaptive Psychological Process

Within this challenging context, self-acceptance emerged as

a key adaptive psychological process, supporting theoretical frameworks that conceptualize acceptance as a core component of psychological well-being and resilience (Rohmah et al., 2024). The findings suggest that self-acceptance enables fathers to cognitively reframe their caregiving experiences, reducing maladaptive emotional responses such as guilt, self-blame, and perceived inadequacy.

This review is consistent with recent state-of-the-art research demonstrating that acceptance-based constructs including self-forgiveness and self-compassion are associated with reduced parenting stress and improved mental health outcomes among caregivers of children with chronic conditions (Allen & Leary, 2010; Marcinechová et al., 2023; Sirois et al., 2015). By synthesizing these findings within a paternal context, this review contributes novel insight into how self-acceptance may function as a protective factor specifically for fathers of children with ASD.

Contextual Influences on the Development of Self-Acceptance

The reviewed qualitative evidence indicates that self-acceptance is not a static trait but a gradual, dynamic process shaped by contextual and interpersonal factors. This trajectory aligns with family adaptation and resilience models, which emphasize the role of meaning-making, social support, and belief systems in facilitating psychological adjustment to chronic stressors (Pakenham & Cox, 2018). Factors such as religious beliefs, educational background, family cohesion, and social support were found to facilitate acceptance and adaptive coping (Wisnugroho & Amaliyah, 2024). Fathers who achieved higher levels of acceptance

demonstrated greater involvement in caregiving and therapeutic activities, consistent with prior findings in caregiving and family psychology literature (Higgins et al., 2023).

The integrative relationship between caregiving demands, sociocultural stressors, self-acceptance, and psychological adaptation in fathers of children with ASD is illustrated in Figure 1.

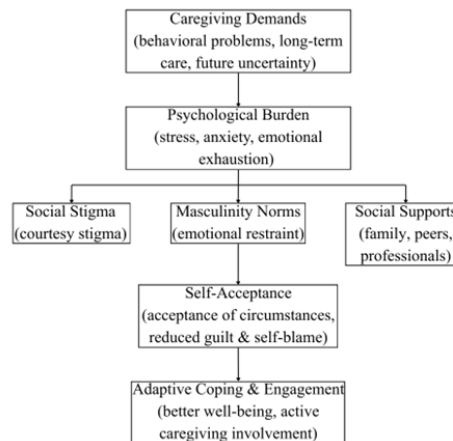


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Psychological Adaptation in Fathers of Children with ASD

Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings of this review have important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they support the integration of self-acceptance into existing caregiver stress and family adaptation models as a key mediating factor in paternal psychological well-being. This extends the current literature by positioning fathers as active psychological agents whose adaptive processes merit focused investigation.

From an applied perspective, the results highlight the need for father-sensitive, acceptance-based interventions within nursing and mental health practice. Programs that normalize paternal emotional experiences, address stigma, and promote adaptive coping strategies such as acceptance and self-compassion, may enhance psychological well-being and sustain

fathers' engagement in caregiving roles. Such interventions may be particularly relevant in cultural contexts where traditional masculinity norms inhibit emotional expression and help-seeking behaviors.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review concludes that fathers raising children with Autism Spectrum Disorder experience a distinctive and multifaceted psychological burden shaped by caregiving demands, social stigma, and sociocultural expectations related to masculinity. Consistent with the objectives of this study, the findings demonstrate that fathers' psychological distress is often underrecognized, despite its potential impact on paternal well-being, caregiving engagement, and overall family functioning. These findings reinforce the importance of

broadening the conceptualization of ASD caregiving to explicitly include fathers as active caregivers with unique psychological needs.

A central contribution of this review lies in highlighting self-acceptance as a key adaptive psychological process that supports fathers' adjustment to the challenges of raising a child with ASD. Self-acceptance appears to facilitate emotional regulation, reduce guilt and self-blame, and promote more adaptive coping strategies, thereby enabling sustained involvement in caregiving roles. In this regard, the present review advances existing caregiving and family adaptation frameworks by positioning self-acceptance as an important psychological resource in paternal caregiving contexts.

From an applied perspective, the findings suggest important implications for health and social care practices, particularly within nursing and family-centered services. Healthcare professionals should adopt father-inclusive approaches that recognize paternal psychological vulnerability and normalize emotional expression among fathers of children with ASD. Interventions that incorporate acceptance-based strategies, address stigma, and are sensitive to gender and cultural contexts may contribute to improved paternal well-being and more effective caregiving engagement. Integrating psychosocial screening and supportive counseling for fathers into routine ASD services may further strengthen holistic family care.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. As a narrative review, this study does not provide the methodological rigor of a systematic review and may be subject to selection bias. Additionally, the limited number of

father-focused studies and the predominance of research conducted in Western or high-income settings constrain the generalizability of the findings. Variations in study design and conceptual definitions may also have influenced the consistency of reported outcomes. These limitations underscore the need for future research employing longitudinal and intervention-based designs, with greater emphasis on fathers' perspectives across diverse cultural contexts.

In conclusion, this review emphasizes the critical role of self-acceptance in shaping fathers' psychological adaptation to ASD caregiving. Advancing research and practice that recognize fathers as integral caregivers and address their psychological needs may contribute to more inclusive, effective, and sustainable family-centered ASD care.

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