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PARENTING AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE DISORDER: IMPLICATIONS OF LOSSES AND ALEXITHYMIA ON MATERNAL SENSITIVITY

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Abstract

Parental Substance Use Disorder (SUD) represents a complex clinical condition associated with psychosocial and emotional risk factors that could affect parenting and child development. Individuals with SUD usually report past histories characterized by traumatic experiences and significant losses. Moreover, they often present higher rates of alexithymic traits, which could worsen their clinical condition. Despite this empirical evidence, no prior studies examined how alexithymia could moderate the link between past adverse experiences and observed parenting behaviors in the context of SUD. The present study aimed to investigate the associations between the presence of past losses, alexithymia, and observed emotional availability in the context of maternal SUD.

Thirty-two mothers (M age=29.25 yrs, SD=6.69) with Substance Use Disorder (SUD), enrolled in a residential rehabilitative community program, participate into the study with their children. Participants have been tested on clinical history of SUD, with respect to alexithymia (TAS-20). Parenting behaviors were assessed during free-play mother-child interactions (EA-Scales).

Regression analysis highlighted a significant effect of alexithymia on maternal sensitivity. More specifically, a significant interaction between early experiences of parental loss and alexithymic traits was found, showing that parental losses worsen the effect of difficulties in becoming aware of someone's own emotions on maternal sensitivity. In particular, in the presence of an history of mournful experiences, maternal sensitivity appears to be less dependent on alexithymia, while when loss is not experienced a good ability in becoming aware of own feelings enables the parents to be more sensitive.

In the context of SUD significant life events should be taken into account when considering the impact psychological variables on parenting. Clinical implications for parenting-focused interventions for SUD mothers are discussed.