Caregiver Stress Theory May Explain Elder Abuse but Not Neglect in Dementia Caregiving

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Introduction

- 50% of family caregivers report using neglect, physical abuse or psychological aggression towards their care recipient with dementia
- Caregiving stress theory suggests a caregiver uses elder abuse and neglect when a stress threshold is exceeded
- No studies have assessed caregiver stress theory using a micro-longitudinal design. Benefits of this method include:
  1. Recent recollection of stressors and abuse events
  2. The ability to draw within-person comparisons on high- and low-stress days

The purpose of this micro-longitudinal study is to evaluate the caregiver stress theory as an explanation for elder abuse and neglect in dementia family caregiving.

Hypothesis 1: Days with BSD will have a higher odds of elder abuse and neglect compared to those with no BSD present.

Hypothesis 2: Days with higher-than-average perceived stress will have higher odds of elder abuse and neglect.

Methods

Self-identified family caregivers who co-reside with their care recipient with dementia were recruited through Facebook. Two-step authentication and other best practices were used to verify legitimacy of online participants.

Participants competed anonymous online surveys consisting of a baseline survey followed by 21 days of daily diary surveys which included measures of:

- Independent variables: Presence/absence of non-Aggressive BSD (3-items), Presence/absence of aggressive BSD (6-items), and perceived stress
- Outcomes: Occurrence (Y/N) of neglect (3-items), physical abuse (3-items), psychological aggression (3-items)

Analysis

- Generalized two-level mixed models were used to test the hypotheses as it accounts for clustering of diaries within caregivers
  - Random intercept was used to model variability between caregivers
  - Analysis included person-level covariates
  - Perceived stress was person mean-centered
- Separate models were used to examine effect of independent variables on elder abuse versus neglect

Results

Elder Abuse

Hypothesis 1: BSD

- On days with non-aggressive BSD behaviors compared to no BSD present, the odds of elder abuse were 2.5 times greater (CI 1.04-5.89, p = 0.03).
- On days with both non-aggressive and aggressive BSD compared to no BSD the odds of elder abuse were 26.9 times greater (CI 9.62-75.15, p < 0.001).

Neglect

- Non-aggressive BSD alone did not increase risk of neglect but when they co-occurred with aggressive BSD the odds of neglect increased by 5.3 (CI 1.7-16.71, p < 0.001).

Hypothesis 2: Perceived Stress

Elder Abuse

- For every point a caregiver scored their perceived stress above their typical stress rating on a given day, the odds of elder abuse increased by 1.9 (CI 1.37-2.55, p < 0.001).

Neglect

- Odds of neglect occurring were not significantly impacted by individual variations in perceived stress ratings.

Discussion

- Data supports caregiver stress theory as an explanation for elder abuse within dementia family caregiving
  - More research is needed on whether other types of stressors produce similar findings
  - Interventions to manage BSD may be effective in reducing risk of elder abuse
- Neglect may have a different causal mechanism
  - May be used as a coping strategy
  - More research is needed to examine role of coping styles and emotion regulation