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ELECTRODERMAL ACTIVITY IN RESPONSE TO A SET OF MENTAL TASKS IN CAREGIVERS OF PERSONS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

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Introduction: Analysing reactivity to laboratory stressor in lab is a valid model for understanding how people act in real-life situations. Electrodermal activity is a good index of emotionality, which has not been analysed in caregivers of persons with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs).

Objectives and aims: This work aims to compare the response of electrodermal activity to mental stress between caregivers of ASDs people and controls, as the former could show a different response due to their particular situation characterised by a state of continuous alert.

Methods: Parents of both genders of people with (n=44) or without (n=42) ASDs carried out a set of different mental tasks. Skin Conductance Level (SCL) was continuously registered before, during, and after the tasks. Skin Conductance Responses (SCR) were obtained from SCL levels using Acqknowledge software.

Results: For SCL, a significant effect of "gender" and of "period x group" and "period x group x gender" interactions was observed. SCL was higher in men than in women and in controls when compared to caregivers. Controls presented more SCL Reactivity than caregivers, being these results were replicated in men (who also showed worse recovery in controls) but not in women. In caregivers, men showed lower SCR Reactivity than women.

Conclusions: Caregivers of ASDs showed a lower electrodermal reactivity to mental stress than controls, and this effect was stronger in men. These results could reflect a lower reactivity to stressful situations in caregivers and, consequently, a loss of the adaptative potential of the stress response in this population.