Risk factors for distress during online health information seeking behavior in parents

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Background:
Parents use the Internet commonly for themselves and to search for information about their children’s health. However, health-related information from the web has the potential to trigger anxiety and stress. The understanding of contributing factors for distress during health-related information search processes and which factors could be targeted for prevention is still limited.

Methods:
Parents living in Austria with a child between 0 and 6 years were randomly assigned to search the web for current somatic health issues related to self- or child-symptoms. The task was performed on a desktop computer with a timeframe of 15 minutes. The stress level was assessed immediately before and after the search task with the State-Trait Anxiety-Inventory (STAI). Recruitment was terminated early due to the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic outbreak (sample size prior to COVID-19, N=53).

Results:
Multiple linear regression was used to predict parents’ stress change during the search task based on health anxiety, attitude towards online health information, eHealth literacy, couple satisfaction and parental burden. Health anxiety, attitude towards online health information and eHealth literacy did not significantly contribute to predict parents’ stress change (STAI state anxiety change), however couple satisfaction (β = -.393, t = -2.46, p = .018) and parental burden (β = -.388, t = -2.30, p = .026) did. Higher parents’ baseline level of stress immediately before the search task was only associated with higher levels of parental burden (β = .882, t= 4.00, p < .001).

Conclusions:
The results of this study indicate the importance of the relational level, rather than the individual level, in
understanding stress during online health information seeking among parents. Future research should incorporate relational variables like parental burden and couple satisfaction into theoretical models and test their influence on online health distress in larger samples.

**Key messages:**
- Family and relational variables should be considered in future research investigating distress during online health information seeking for oneself or by proxy.
- Fostering parents’ couple satisfaction and reducing parental burden may can contribute to lower stress levels after symptom-related online searches.