

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

A Postdeployment Expressive Writing Intervention for Military Couples: A Randomized Controlled Trial

Baddeley, J. L., & Pennebaker, J. W. (2011). A postdeployment expressive writing intervention for military couples: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 24*(5), 581-585. doi:10.1002/jts.20679

SUMMARY: A sample of 102 couples recruited from Fort Hood, Texas, participated in a study examining the impact of expressive writing (writing thoughts and feelings about Soldiers' transition from deployment to being reunited with family at home) on marital satisfaction, rates of yelling, and physical health symptoms. Participants were randomly assigned to write about this emotionally-laden topic or to a neutral comparison topic (physical health), and were tracked at two time periods (1- and 6-months later). In the conditions in which Soldiers did expressive writing, the couple's marital satisfaction improved over the course of the first month.

KEY FINDINGS:

- When the Soldier participated in expressive writing, the couple's marital satisfaction increased at the one-month follow-up. This finding was especially strong for Soldiers with high levels of combat exposure.
- When spouses wrote about emotional topics, marital satisfaction did not improve.
- No differences in yelling, physical symptoms, or depression at any point emerged between the two types of writing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer a range of activities and events for the entire family to support them in the transitions associated with reintegration
- Provided classes for partners of deployed Service members regarding possible challenges their loved one may face upon homecoming
- Create workshops in which Service members are taught about expressive writing and possible benefits

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that offer a wide range of support services to Service members after deployment, giving them opportunities to process their experiences, thoughts and feelings in a manner that is most comfortable
- Continue to support family programs and activities over the course of the deployment cycle
- Encourage training for professionals who work with military families regarding the potential benefits of expressive writing during transitions

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METHODS

- Soldiers and their spouses married at least one year who had experienced a deployment in the previous 18 months were recruited from the Fort Hood, Texas, area via newspaper, internet, and radio advertisements.
- Participants were randomly assigned to expressive writing (i.e., thoughts and feelings about reintegration) or neutral writing (i.e., physical health activities). They wrote for three 15-minute sessions on one day.
- Couples completed questionnaires regarding marital satisfaction, frequency of yelling and physical violence, physical health symptoms, and demographics on the day of the writing and one and six months later.
- Data were analyzed to determine whether the type of writing they engaged in had an effect on outcomes initially and over time.

PARTICIPANTS

- One hundred two couples participated in the study. They were married on average 7.5 years (SD = 5.6 years).
- Racial distribution: 66% White, 17% Latino, and 14% Black.
- Average age of participants was 32 years, and 35% had a college degree.
- Of the couples, 94% consisted of a male Soldier and his wife.

LIMITATIONS

- This sample was limited to one branch and one geographic area, so the findings may not generalize to couples from other branches of the military or those living in different parts of the country.
- Data were based on self-report instruments, which may introduce biases.
- For individuals with significant health problems, writing about physical health activities may not have been a neutral topic, which may have skewed results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate the research using a different neutral topic that does not have as much propensity to bring forth negative associations
- Explore possible effects of couples sharing their writing about their experiences with reintegration
- Include couples in which one or both members are actively engaged in mental health treatment

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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