

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Air Force

## Combat Disclosure in Intimate Relationships: Mediating the Impact of Partner Support on Posttraumatic Stress

Balderrama-Durbin, C., Snyder, D., Cigrang, J., Talcott, G. W., Tatum, J., Baker, M., & Smith Slep, A. (2013). Combat disclosure in intimate relationships: Mediating the impact of partner support on posttraumatic stress. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 27(4), 560-568. doi:10.1037/a0033412

**SUMMARY:** Seventy-six Active Duty Airmen participated in a study that examined associations between willingness to disclose war-zone deployment experiences, severity of PTSD symptoms, and perceived partner support. Results indicated increased disclosure regarding combat experiences resulted in higher levels of partner support and decreased severity of PTSD symptoms.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Findings revealed that Airmen who shared more combat and deployment disclosure had higher levels of partner support and less relational distress.
- Analyses found that Airmen who engaged in conversation regarding combat-related experiences were negatively related to post-deployment PTSD symptoms.
- Results indicated that couples with high relational distress predicted low probability of Airmen disclosing combat experience.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education to military couples to enhance positive communication skills such as addressing issues directly and conflict resolution
- Disseminate information regarding possible symptoms of mental health problems Airmen may face after deployment and where individuals and families can find other avenues for support
- Offer pre- and post-deployment support groups for couples and their families

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote reintegration programs that include attention to assisting Service members' families in adjusting to their return from deployment
- Continue to provide support for programs that work to increase family and couple readiness
- Recommend professional development courses for community providers who work with military families to educate them about unique factors that contribute to marital strain for military couples

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## METHODS

- Participants were recruited from a larger longitudinal study which assessed risk and protective factors across year-long deployments to Iraq.
- Multiple measures were used to collect data regarding social support, PTSD diagnosis, combat disclosure, relationship distress, and combat experiences.
- Statistical analyses focused on examining associations between disclosure of combat experiences and perceived relationship distress.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Seventy-six Active Duty Airmen participated; 66% White, 14% Black, 11% Latino, 5% Asian-American, 2% Native American, and 2% Non-disclosed/Other.
- Of the 76 participants, 92% were male with an average age of 27.9 years (SD = 6.1, age range = 21-41 years).
- Over half (60%) of participants graduated from high school, earned a GED, or higher with an average of 13.7 years (SD = 1.8, range 12-20 years) of education.
- Average length of deployment was 13.1 months (SD = 7.3, range = 1-30 months), with 46% of participants deployed at least twice on an OEF/OIF mission or deployment.

## LIMITATIONS

- Partner support was gathered from the Airmen and not the partners, which could limit the ability to draw conclusions on partner support.
- Combat disclosure and partner support were assessed once, which limits the ability to determine long-term effects among these two variables.
- Conclusions based on a small or homogenous sample (i.e. Airmen) may not be appropriate for the larger population.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the benefits of other types of social support on PTSD symptoms and relational distress
- Explore the impact of combat disclosure on intimate partners' emotional and relationship functioning
- Study long-term effects of combat disclosure on relational distress on family functioning

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>