

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Army

## An Examination of the Broaden-and-Build Model of Positive Emotions in Military Marriages: An Actor-Partner Analysis

Baptist, J. A., & Goff, B. S. N. (2012). An examination of the Broaden-and-Build Model of positive emotions in military marriages: An actor-partner analysis *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 11(3), 205-220.  
doi:10.1080/15332691.2012.692942

**SUMMARY:** Despite the stresses military life may cause for families, many military couples are very resilient. Using the broaden-and-build model of emotions, this study examined whether positive emotions, rather than negative, allow for broader cognitive processes (e.g., increased insight or meaning-making) among resilient Service members and their spouses with low marital distress. Results suggest positive emotions, particularly those of Service members, are important for fostering resilience in military couples.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Overall, participants used more positive than negative words while discussing deployment.
- Military spouses' negative emotions were related to less broad cognitive processes, such as less insight and meaning-making, in both members of the couple.
- Service members' positive emotions were related to more broad cognitive processes, such as more insight, in both members of the couple and had a larger effect than spouses' emotions.
- Service members', rather than spouses', ability to view deployment positively was most associated with broad cognitive processes and may be important for building resilience.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military couples on broad cognitive processes, including how to re-evaluate things more positively, and how to utilize these processes to promote relationship resilience
- Offer workshops for Service members and their partners after deployment to encourage discussion of emotions, including positive emotions, about deployment experiences
- Disseminate information about resources for military couples struggling with low marital satisfaction

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage professional education for all providers working with military couples about relationship resilience and models of positive psychology, such as the broaden-and-build model
- Continue to support programs that foster resilience among military families and couples
- Recommend integrating resilience training and use of broad cognitive processes into existing programs that promote health and well-being among military families

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



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## METHODS

- Service members and their spouses, who had been in a relationship for at least one year, were recruited from two Midwest cities near Army posts via flyers, newspaper ads, and referrals.
- Service members and spouses each completed in-person interviews about the effects of deployment on their relationship and questionnaires about marital satisfaction.
- Interviews were analyzed to determine the frequency of statements related to positive emotions, negative emotions, and broad cognitive processes.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants (n = 80) included 40 male Soldiers (average age of 31.60 years) and their female spouses (average age of 30.15 years); couples had been married an average of 6.05 years.
- To examine resilience, only couples with non-distressed marital satisfaction were included.
- Participants identified as White (80%), Native American (8%), Black (5%), Latino (4%), and Asian-American (3%).
- Service members had first been deployed during OIF (95%) or OEF (5%) and had been deployed a total of 9.88 months (SD = 3.99) on average.

## LIMITATIONS

- Only examining resilient couples with high marital satisfaction does not allow conclusions to be drawn about whether the pattern of results is related to marital satisfaction and resilience; a comparison group is needed.
- Directions of effects cannot be inferred because of the cross-sectional study design.
- No female Service members participated, limiting generalizability of the study.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct a longitudinal study of resilience in military couples examining how positive emotions and broad cognitive processes impact multiple, long-term measures of relationship outcomes
- Examine the effects of gender and role (e.g., Service member, spouse) among male and female Service members and their spouses on deployment emotions and broad cognitive processes
- Investigate how level of combat exposure may impact positive emotions related to deployment

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