

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Walking on Eggshells: The Lived Experience of Partners of Veterans With PTSD

Beks, T. Walking on eggshells: The lived experience of partners of veterans with PTSD. *The Qualitative Report*, 21 (4), 645-660. doi:10.1037/e533652013-512

SUMMARY: Partners of Veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) frequently serve as the primary caregiver yet their experiences are not fully understood. This study examined internet discussion forum posts authored by female partners of male Veterans with PTSD. Themes raised by the primary caregiving partners included: all-consuming effects of the illness, walking on eggshells, ambiguous loss, alone, and facing PTSD as a unit.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Partners of Veterans with PTSD displayed signs of psychological distress and caregiver burden.
- Themes highlighted in the lived experiences of partners of Veterans with PTSD included: all-consuming effects of the illness, walking on eggshells, ambiguous loss, alone, and facing PTSD as a unit.
- Feelings of disconnection were expressed not only in terms of partners from their husbands, but from formal service providers as well.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Emphasize the importance of including spouses and partners in the design and delivery of care for Service members
- Promote support groups for spouses of Service members in order to reduce feelings of isolation
- Deliver toolkits and resources to Service members and their families on the impacts of PTSD

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support programs that meet the social and emotional needs of primary caregivers of Service members
- Encourage ongoing professional development of individuals who work with Service members and families impacted by PTSD
- Recommend community organizations and healthcare providers collaborate in sharing information about the unique needs of Service members and families, especially with regard to PTSD

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METHODS

- Data consisted of anonymous internet discussion forum posts by female partners of male Veterans with PTSD.
- A purposive sampling strategy was used to select the posts for analysis, which included among other criteria: the ease of access of forum posts during data collection, forum posts were from female cohabitating partners of Veterans, and the posts described the Veterans as male and having PTSD.
- Originally, 289 posts fit the criteria and the final data set was narrowed to 58 posts by 30 partners, which were selected based on their having more engaging replies by fellow forum participants.
- Data analysis by the researcher included describing rather than explaining the experiences of forum participants while also treating them of equal importance.

PARTICIPANTS

- The participants were cohabitating female partners of male Veterans with PTSD.
- No additional information was reported regarding the demographic data of the female participants.
- No additional information was presented regarding the demographic or military data of Veteran partners.

LIMITATIONS

- The study focused on female partners of male Veterans, which does not allow for an insight of male partners of female Veterans or of same-sex partnerships.
- There was a lack of demographic information regarding the participants and their partners, which can lead to challenges of interpreting whose experiences were being examined in this study.
- Other relationships were not able to be examined, such as adult-child, and these experiences may be similar to other primary caregivers who are not partners.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the experiences of male partners of female Veterans with PTSD or examine the primary caregiver experiences of same-sex partnerships of military families
- Include multiple qualitative data points—such as interviews and journals—to learn about the experiences of the whole partner unit of a primary caregiving partner and a Veteran with PTSD while also being descriptive of the participants in the study
- Study what similarities and differences exist with primary caregivers in a variety of relational roles, including spousal or parental, with Veterans with PTSD

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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