

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

The Development of Marital Tension: Implications for Divorce Among Married Couples

Birditt, K. S., Wan, W. H., Orbuch, T. L., & Antonucci, T. C. (2017). The development of marital tension: Implications for divorce among married couples. *Developmental Psychology*, 53(10), 1995-2006. doi:10.1037/dev0000379

SUMMARY: Married couples may experience tension over the course of marriage. By assessing 355 newlywed couples over 16 years, the study examined the change of marital tension over time and the relationship between marital tension and divorce. Results revealed that the feeling of marital tension was related to the possibility of divorce especially for wives more than husbands.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Wives reported significantly greater marital tension than husbands in each year of the assessment except for year 16.
- Marriage tension increased for both husbands and wives over time, but there was a greater increase among husbands than among wives.
- Couples were more likely to divorce when wives reported higher and increased level of marriage tension over the course of marriage.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Educate military couples about the relationship between marital tension and divorce and help them prevent the accumulation of marital tension
- Collaborate with other professionals in the field of marriage education about ways to facilitate activities that promote military family well-being

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop marriage education workshops for military couples that aim to reduce marital tension
- Offer support groups for military spouses who experience a high level of marital tension

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue support for more research on the relationship between military-related stress and marital tension
- Encourage the development of programs and services that promote marital satisfaction and reduce marital tension in military families

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METHODS

- Participants were from the Early Years of Marriage Project; they were recruited in Wayne County, Michigan, and the method of recruitment was not reported.
- Participants were interviewed in person or over telephone in the first, second, third, fourth, seventh, and 16th year of their marriages; 43% of the original sample completed the year 16 interview.
- Measures included marital tension, divorce and marital longevity, and marital happiness.
- Data were analyzed to examine the relationship between marital tension and divorce.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 355 heterosexual couples; the average age of the husbands was 25.98 years (SD = 3.95) and the average age of the wives was 23.87 years (SD = 3.76) at marriage.
- About half of the participants were Black (52%) and the other half were White (48%).
- Most couples (95%) remained married in year two whereas 59% were still married in year 16.

LIMITATIONS

- The marital tension was assessed by only two questions, which may cause low reliability of the assessment.
- There was a nine-year gap between the last two waves of assessments; therefore, some important information was missing regarding the trajectory of marital tension over these years.
- Only heterosexual couples were included in the study, so the results of the study may not generalize to non-heterosexual marriages.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Use a more comprehensive measure of marital tension to better capture the nuances of marital tension
- Recruit both heterosexual and homosexual couples so that the results can be better generalized
- Examine how child rearing may influence the trajectory of marital tension

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