

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
National
Guard

Measuring Secondary Traumatic Stress Symptoms in Military Spouses with the Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist Military Version

Bjornestad, A. G., Schweinle, A., & Elhai, J. D. (2014). Measuring secondary traumatic stress symptoms in military spouses with the posttraumatic stress disorder checklist military version. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 202(12), 864-869. doi:10.1097/NMD.0000000000000213

SUMMARY: People who experience trauma can transmit traumatic stress symptoms to those close to them which is referred to as secondary traumatic stress. This study examined National Guard Veterans who had been deployed at least once and their spouses to determine the rate at which secondary traumatic stress might be occurring in this population, and whether traumatic stress appeared to be transmitted from Service members to their spouses.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Approximately 6% of the Veterans and approximately 5% of the spouses in this study appeared likely to have posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); however, only one of the Veteran-spouse pairs both qualified for PTSD based on the study measure.
- Approximately half of the Veterans in the study were positive for all of the hyperarousal symptoms of PTSD, including trouble falling or staying asleep (45%), feeling jumpy or easily startled (50%), difficulties concentrating (56%), feeling "super alert" (56%), feeling irritable or having angry outbursts (65%). Fifty-one percent also reported feeling distant or cut off from other people.
- More than 60% of spouses reported no symptoms. The most commonly endorsed item was feeling irritable or having angry outbursts (37%).
- As rates of Veteran posttraumatic stress increased, rates of spouse secondary stress increased.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education to military couples regarding the possibility of transmission of traumatic stress symptoms in the relationship
- Offer workshops for couples during reintegration to increase couples' resilience to PTSD symptoms
- Disseminate information regarding possible PTSD symptoms and resources for Service members and their families who are managing them

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote the incorporation of spouses in PTSD education workshops and seminars that are designed for Service members
- Recommend partnerships among DoD programs and community-based programs who serve National Guard Service members to improve access to and awareness about services for those with PTSD
- Recommend professional education for those working with military couples to assess for secondary trauma symptoms in spouses

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METHODS

- The researchers invited all Army National Guard Veterans and spouses in an undisclosed U.S. state to participate via mail, with a response rate of 15% (1,493 possible participants with 227 responding).
- The questionnaire packet was organized by the Family Readiness Program.
- Data were gathered through separate self-report questionnaires for the Veteran and spouse, with a previously validated questionnaire being modified for use by spouses.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 227 heterosexual couples with one spouse who was a Veteran of the Army National Guard (218 male and nine female Veterans). Participant ranks included 6% enlisted, 67% non-commissioned officers, 19% officers, and 5% warrant officers.
- Veterans (93% White) averaged 37 years old and spouses averaged 36 years old (8% White). No other race/ethnicity data were provided. Participants were married an average of 11 years with 11% reporting no children, 53% reporting 1-2 children, and 37% reporting three or more children.
- On average, Veterans had returned from deployment 3.5 years ago: 76% returned from Iraq, 14% from Afghanistan, and 10% from elsewhere. Number of deployments ranged from one (67%) to two (27%), to three or more (7%).

LIMITATIONS

- Inconsistent use of the terms "Veteran" and "Soldier" made it unclear whether or not the Soldiers that were surveyed were separated from the Army National Guard.
- The researchers modified a questionnaire used for Service members to measure spouse PTSD symptoms and did not provide reliability or validity data for this modified questionnaire.
- The low response rate of 15% makes it difficult to generalize this study to the larger National Guard population, as it is unclear if or how the responders and non-responders differed.
- The researchers did not control for previous trauma, so it was unclear when symptoms were reported whether they were related to military experiences or unrelated trauma.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Complete validity and reliability procedures with the PTSD questionnaire modified for use with military spouses
- Replicate the study while controlling for previous trauma through additional measures
- Examine traumatic stress in Soldiers and their spouses at an earlier time point than 3.5 years after returning from deployment

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