

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Marines

## The Relationship Between Course of PTSD Symptoms in Deployed U.S. Marines and Degree of Combat Exposure

Boasso, A. M., Steenkamp, M. M., Nash, W. P., Larson, J. L., & Litz, B. T. (2015). The relationship between course of PTSD symptoms in deployed U.S. Marines and degree of combat exposure. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 28*(1), 73-78. doi:10.1002/jts.21988

**SUMMARY:** Male Marines participated in a study examining the longitudinal course of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms after combat exposure. Marines were split into three groups based on level of combat exposure (low, medium, and high). Distinct trajectories within each level of combat exposure emerged which represented fluctuations in PTSD symptoms over time.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Marines with higher levels of combat exposure experienced a temporary clinically significant increase in PTSD symptoms over the deployment cycle, followed by a gradual bounce back.
- Marines with the lowest combat exposure had consistently low PTSD symptoms over time.
- Levels of PTSD symptoms shortly after homecoming were high across all combat exposure groups; symptoms decreased considerably in the less exposed group, but less sharply in the middle and high exposure groups.
- Across groups, a small percentage of Marines experienced new-onset PTSD, meaning symptoms emerged over time after homecoming.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide classes for Service members, explaining how PTSD symptoms can fluctuate and develop over time
- Offer support groups for Service members, giving them opportunities to exchange social support
- Create classes for family members and children of Service members with PTSD, teaching how they can understand and support their Service member

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend screening all deploying Service members for PTSD prior to deployment
- Urge continued support of family members whose Service member is living with PTSD
- Recommend training for community providers to educate them about unique factors that contribute to mental health symptoms for Service members and their families

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## METHODS

- A cohort of male Marines enrolled in the Marine Resiliency Study were selected due to their deployment to Afghanistan during a time of heavy unrest and exposure to heavy combat.
- Marines were evaluated one month before deployment and one, five, and eight months post deployment; 46% completed the eight month assessment.
- Warzone exposure was assessed via questionnaire. PTSD was assessed using a structured clinical interview.
- Statistical analyses were used to test whether distinct trajectories of PTSD symptoms were presented in the groups with different levels of combat exposure.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Six hundred seventeen male Marines participated in the study.
- The average age of the sample was 23.2 years (SD = 3.8 years), and 41% were married.
- Ninety-eight percent of the sample was enlisted, and 48% had at least one prior deployment.
- Racial/ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 83% White, 25% Latino/Latina, and 6% Asian-American.

## LIMITATIONS

- The combat exposure measure assessed frequency but not severity.
- The sample consisted of male Marines, and these findings may not generalize to other groups.
- The follow-up period was relatively short; findings might change with a longer time frame.
- No information on treatment for PTSD was collected which could explain some of the changes over time.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Gather data on the type of combat exposure and its relationship with PTSD symptom trajectories among Service members
- Examine the predictors of the trajectories with larger sample sizes
- Explore the course of PTSD symptoms among female Service members

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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