

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

With or Without You: Preliminary Evidence That Attachment Avoidance Predicts Nondeployed Spouses' Reactions to Relationship Challenges During Deployment

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SUMMARY: Attachment avoidance, or having a relationship schema that involves avoiding thoughts or feelings about a threatened relationship, may influence military spouses adjustment during the deployment cycle. This study examined the effects of military wives levels of attachment avoidance on their relationship emotions and thoughts. Data suggested that greater attachment avoidance was related to more negative emotions about the relationship during deployment.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Spouses with greater pre-deployment attachment avoidance endorsed more anxiety when talking about the anticipated post-deployment reunion with their husband.
- Spouses reported less anxiety overall when discussing reunion than deployment, but spouses low in attachment avoidance reported greater relief from anxiety when discussing reunion.
- During deployment, high attachment avoidance spouses reported more negative emotions than low attachment avoidance spouses while thinking of a memory of the couple.
- Spouses with high and low attachment avoidance reported no difference in relationship satisfaction post - deployment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military families on potential stressors and ways to cope during deployment
- Offer post-deployment workshops for military families to help adjust to changes, including changes in communication and intimacy
- Disseminate information regarding attachment styles and difficulties military family members may experience during post-deployment reintegration

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs and technological innovations that facilitate communication between military families and deployed Service members
- Encourage additional research on the effects of attachment styles for military family adjustment during the deployment cycle
- Recommend professional education on attachment styles for military family professionals

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METHODS

- Military wives were recruited via social media, online advertising, and word-of-mouth to provide data regarding relationships during pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment.
- Wives completed relationship surveys during all deployment stages and rated their emotional response during deployment to both an open-ended speech task discussing deployment and reunion and a task remembering either a couple or individual memory.
- The study examined whether wives' attachment style at pre-deployment was associated with emotional responses to surveys and tasks during deployment and post-deployment.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 45 military wives with an average age of 30.96 years (SD = 7.51).
- Of the 45 wives who completed pre-deployment measures, only a fraction completed deployment (n = 32) and post-deployment (n = 23) measures and tasks.
- Participants identified as 80% White, 9% Latina, 4% Asian-American, and 2% Black.
- Wives reported that their husbands were Service members from the Army (54%), Navy (21%), Air Force (21%), and Marines (5%), and most were Active Duty (91%).

LIMITATIONS

- With the small sample size, results may not generalize to other military spouses.
- The study had high attrition rates, and participants completing measures during all deployment phases may have differed from those who did not complete the study.
- Conclusions discussed were somewhat broader than was appropriate given the study methods and collected data.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the impact of military spouses' attachment styles on long-term divorce rates
- Conduct a similar study investigating the effects of both military spouses' and Service members' attachment styles, as well as interactions between styles within couples, during deployment
- Explore factors that may protect insecurely attached spouses from marital difficulties during deployment

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