

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Relationship of Service Members' Deployment Trauma, PTSD Symptoms, and Experiential Avoidance to Postdeployment Family Reengagement

Brockman, C., Snyder, J., Gewirtz, A., Gird, S. R., Quattlebaum, N. S., Schmidt, N., ... DeGarmo, D. (2015). Relationship of service members' deployment trauma, PTSD symptoms, and experiential avoidance to postdeployment family reengagement *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30(1), 52-62. doi:10.1037/fam0000152

**SUMMARY:** Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can have an impact on an individual's close relationships. Using data from Service members, their partners, and their children, researchers examined the relationship between PTSD symptoms among Service members and the interactions they had with their families post-deployment. PTSD was found to have an impact on the interactions Service members had with their families through reduced social interactions, responsiveness, and cooperation.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Service members' avoidance of negative experiences was associated with less positive engagement and more withdrawal during interactions with their spouses.
- Those Service members who experienced more PTSD symptoms also exhibited less positive engagement with and responsiveness to their children.
- Service members with lower avoidance of negative experiences were able to engage with their spouses and children in more constructive and supportive ways than those with higher avoidance.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes for Service members that teach skills for how to positively engage with their children in ways that strengthen parent-child relationships
- Sponsor support groups for partners of Service members to discuss issues that arise pre- and postdeployment in order to increase social support
- Organize meetings for Service members to discuss difficulties engaging at home or in the community after deployment with other Service members

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend development of programs that help Service members and their spouses discuss deployment with their children
- Continue to support events for Service members and their families throughout the deployment cycle
- Encourage collaboration among professionals who provide health care to Service members and their families to establish partnerships to care for returning Service members

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



## METHODS

- Participants were recruited at mandatory pre-deployment and reintegration events in Minnesota.
- Data were collected from consenting participants and their partners through separate online assessments and in-home assessments. The online assessments measured combat-related trauma, and PTSD symptoms, while the in-home assessments measured the Service member's positive engagement, social withdrawal, and distress avoidance, as well as partner and child behavior.
- Analysis of online and in-home assessments were used to examine factors such as Service members' involvement, social responsiveness, and cooperation with others.

## PARTICIPANTS

- The participants were 184 Service members, their spouses, and one of their children between the ages of 4 and 13 years. Men had a mean age of 37 years old (SD = 6.5 years). Spouses had a mean age of 36 years old (SD = 6 years). Children had a mean age of 8 years old (SD = 2.4 years).
- The men primarily served in the Army National Guard or Army Reserves (73%), with the remainder serving in the Reserve Component of other branches.
- The Service members were primarily White (85%). Information regarding other races was not included.

## LIMITATIONS

- Data were correlational, so conclusions cannot be made about causation.
- Conclusions are based on a sample composed of Service members from the Reserve Component, so results cannot be extended to Active Duty Service members.
- The measure of PTSD was a self-report of symptoms, so it is unclear how results extend to those with a clinical PTSD diagnosis.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Follow families over time, examining changes in relationships and child functioning after time has passed since deployment or over multiple deployments
- Include Active Duty Service members in the sample to determine how PTSD symptoms are associated with changes in interpersonal interactions
- ? Investigate this relationship in a clinical population with diagnosed PTSD to determine whether a similar relationship exists in that population

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:  
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>