

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Awareness of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Veterans: A Female Spouse/Intimate Partner Perspective

Buchanan, C., Kemppainen, J., Smith, S., MacKain, S., & Cox, C. W. (2011). Awareness of posttraumatic stress disorder in veterans: A female spouse/intimate partner perspective. *Military Medicine*, 176(7), 743-751. doi:10.7205/MILMED-D-10-00378

SUMMARY: Spouses or intimate partners may be an important resource in early identification of concerns related to trauma or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among Service members. Partners of Service members completed questionnaires regarding knowledge of PTSD and treatment. A large majority of the partners had not received education about PTSD; however, many partners reported that they would look for changes in Service members' behaviors and emotions and would encourage treatment for PTSD.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Two-thirds of the military spouses and partners reported that they had not received any formal education about PTSD.
- Participants perceived several barriers to their Veterans seeking help for PTSD, including denial about symptoms, fear of hurting their military career, and stigma surrounding PTSD.
- Partners indicated that, in order to identify PTSD, many looked for changes in everyday habits (43%), physical changes (26%), and changes in mental state (22%); however, some partners stated that they did not know what to look for (5%) or that they would wait for their partner to tell them they had PTSD (3%).
- If Service members resisted seeking PTSD treatment, participants most common responses included suggesting the need for treatment (22%), forcing treatment or issuing an ultimatum (21%), taking action to find treatment or persuade the Service member to go to treatment (21%), offering support without taking action (21%), and providing proof to the Service member that they need treatment (9%).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes for spouses and partners of Service members to educate them about PTSD symptoms and treatments
- Provide information to Service members and families to decrease the stigma regarding talking about PTSD and to increase awareness about the availability of treatments and resources
- Offer workshops for military couples struggling with PTSD to teach them communication and problem-solving skills

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote the integration of education about PTSD symptoms and treatment for all Service members and partners into pre- and post-deployment trainings
- Continue to support programs for Service members and their families managing trauma-related symptoms
- Continue to support marital enrichment programs that include a focus on supporting couples dealing with PTSD and other mental health problems

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited via a social group and a Veteran's organization for military families in North Carolina.
- Questionnaires about demographic information and knowledge of PTSD as it related to participants' Service members were mailed to partners; there was a 34% response rate.
- Participant responses were analyzed for themes, and categories of statements were identified.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 34 female spouses and partners of OEF/OIF Veterans with an average age of 35.7 years (SD = 7.6).
- The average length of the military couple's relationship or marriage was 12.8 years (SD = 8.4).
- Approximately 53% of Service members had been deployed, and on average, the couples had spent 30.8 (SD = 23.5) months apart due to deployment and the Service members had been deployed 1.7 times (SD = 0.77).

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was small, self-selected, and drawn from one geographic region, which may limit generalizability.
- Service members' trauma symptom levels or PTSD diagnosis were not assessed, and these variables may have influenced the findings.
- Partners who chose to participate may differ in important ways from those who did not participate, including differing levels of involvement.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate this study with a larger, more diverse sample, including with partners of female Service members
- Examine the effect of military education programs about PTSD symptoms and treatment on military partner's responses to Service member's trauma symptoms
- Compare the perspectives and experiences of both Service members and spouses as they relate to PTSD symptoms and treatment

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