

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

The Cycle of Trauma: Relationship Aggression in Male Vietnam Veterans With Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Byrne, C. A., & Riggs, D. S. (1996). The cycle of trauma: Relationship aggression in male Vietnam veterans with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. *Violence and Victims, 11*(3), 213-225.

SUMMARY: Vietnam Veterans and their female cohabitating partners participated in a study examining the associations between posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and perpetration of aggressive behavior toward their female partners. Increased PTSD symptoms were associated with increased levels of physically violent behavior as reported by the Veteran, but not by their partners.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Male Vietnam Veterans with increased PTSD symptoms reported more perpetration of physically violent behavior toward their intimate female partners. Higher levels of PTSD were also associated with more frequent and severe use of verbally and psychologically abusive behavior.
- These associations were not accounted for by Veterans' level of combat exposure.
- Veterans with higher levels of PTSD symptoms experience more frequent and severe relationship problems. Greater levels of problems in the relationship increased the likelihood that Veterans would engage in relationship aggression against their intimate partners.
- Although female partners reported higher levels of verbal and psychological victimization as Veterans' PTSD symptoms increased, there was no relationship between Veterans' PTSD symptoms and partner reports of physical violence.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer conflict resolution and problem solving classes for military couples
- Provide workshops for military spouses on how to recognize mental health problems in their loved ones
- Distribute information regarding common mental health concerns Service members may experience following deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that all mental health treatment for Service members and Veterans include family members/partners as part of services
- Encourage routine screening of Service members for violence against family members
- Recommend training for Service providers working with military families regarding reporting intimate partner violence

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited via newspaper advertisements and flyers at a VA.
- All men had served in Vietnam and had been married or living with their partner for at least one year prior to participation.
- Veterans completed measures of combat exposure, conflict resolution, PTSD symptoms, psychological maltreatment of their partner, and a relationship problems scale.
- Partners completed measures of conflict resolution, their own psychological maltreatment by the Veteran, and a relationship problems scale.

PARTICIPANTS

- Fifty male Vietnam Veterans and their female partners participated.
- The majority of participants were White (90%); the average Veteran age was 48.76 (SD = 4.96) years, while the average partner age was 44.06 (SD = 5.86) years.
- Average length of couple living together was 13.17 (SD = 8.97) years.
- Ninety-eight percent of Veterans reported direct combat exposure; no additional military variables were reported.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was small and thus its ability to detect relationships and generalizability may be limited.
- Because the sample was self-selected and reported low levels of physical aggressiveness overall, Veterans with very distressed relationships and those who are very physically violent are not likely represented.
- The study was correlational and any causal conclusions are not warranted.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Use a prospective, longitudinal design to test a model where combat exposure leads to PTSD which then leads to increased relationship conflict and aggression
- Replicate the current study with Veterans of the current conflict
- Explore how other factors, such as substance use, influence rates of PTSD and aggressive behaviors among military Service members

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