

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Optimism, Self-Differentiation, and Perceived Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms: Predictors of Satisfaction in Female Military Partners

Cabrera-Sanchez, P., & Friedlander, M. L. (2017). Optimism, self-differentiation, and perceived posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms: Predictors of satisfaction in female military partners. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, 6(4), 235–246. doi:10.1037/cfp0000090

SUMMARY: Combat deployment is stressful for military spouses, so it is important to examine factors that can improve their relationship satisfaction. This study recruited 235 female partners of Service members or Veterans who had at least one combat deployment; each woman completed an online survey regarding their level of optimism, self-differentiation (i.e., being able to function autonomously when necessary), and perceived posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms (PTSD). Results revealed that the three factors all played a role in female military partners' relationship satisfaction.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Partner-perceived PTSD symptoms were negatively associated with female military spouses' relationship satisfaction.
- Female military spouses' optimism was positively associated with their relationship satisfaction when the level of PTSD symptoms was controlled.
- Self-differentiation was negatively associated with female military spouses' relationship satisfaction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for military spouses whose partners were diagnosed with PTSD
- Develop workshops for military spouses to enhance their skills of positive thinking and optimism
- Provide outreach services that increase awareness of available supports to families and Service members with PTSD

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Raise awareness on military bases regarding the importance of taking care of military spouses' needs
- Promote the development of programs that support military spouses during and after their partners' combat deployment
- Recommend training of professionals working with military spouses regarding the factors that can improve military spouses' relationship satisfaction

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited via social media, online military partners' support groups, and a website of events for Service members and their families. They had to be married to or in a romantic relationship with an Active Duty Service member or a Veteran to qualify for the study.
- Participants completed an online questionnaire regarding their perception of partner's PTSD symptoms, dispositional optimism, self-differentiation, and relationship satisfaction.
- Data were analyzed to examine the relationship between optimism, self-differentiation, perceived PTSD symptoms, and relationship satisfaction.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 235 women with an average age of 32 years ($SD = 7.38$).
- Most women were White (84%), followed by Latina (8%) and other (8%).
- Most women's partners were Active Duty Service members (63%) or Veterans (33%); the time between the partners' deployment and data collection ranged from three months to 24 years, and the military branches of the partners were not specified.

LIMITATIONS

- The cross-sectional design of the study made it impossible to examine the causal relationships between the study variables.
- The study was based on self-report data, so the results may be subject to social desirability bias.
- The time between last deployment and data collection varied greatly (three months to 24 years), which may confound the results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct longitudinal studies to examine the causal relationship between optimism, self-differentiation, perceived PTSD symptoms, and relationship satisfaction
- Recruit both male and female military partners so that the results can be better generalized
- Collect both subjective (self-report) and objective (medical records) data so that the results are more reliable

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