Relationships Between Soldiers' PTSD Symptoms and Spousal Communication During Deployment


**SUMMARY:** The frequency of communication between male Army Soldiers and their at-home spouses during a recent deployment was examined to consider the relationship between communication and post-deployment posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. Among Soldiers with high levels of marital satisfaction, more frequent communication predicted lower levels of PTSD after homecoming.

**KEY FINDINGS:**
- Most Soldiers reported using phone calls, instant messaging, and emails with their spouses daily. They received letters and care packages on average 1-2 times a month.
- More frequent communication predicted lower PTSD symptoms, but only among Soldiers with higher levels of marital satisfaction.
- For Soldiers reporting high levels of marital satisfaction, having more frequent delayed communication with spouses during deployment (e.g., letters, care packages, email) was related to higher marital satisfaction.
- Regarding Soldiers with lower levels of marital satisfaction, more delayed communication during deployment was associated with more PTSD symptoms.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:**
Programs could:
- Publicize the availability of resources for couples managing PTSD, including support groups, behavioral health programs, and couple/family activities
- Offer support groups for military spouses to allow for the exchange of peer support during deployment and reintegration
- Create classes for military spouses, offering them information and skills about how to be supportive to their deployed Service member

**IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:**
Policies could:
- Encourage public awareness campaigns like the National PTSD Awareness Day
- Support marriage enrichment programs that bolster couples' relationship satisfaction and communication
- Ensure that military installations offer information technology support to at-home spouses during deployments, such as maintaining secure phone and computer connections
METHODS
- Soldiers were recruited from a previous randomized clinical trial studying a marriage education program.
- Participants completed self-report surveys regarding PTSD, combat exposure, and marital satisfaction.
- In addition, participants indicated how often they used six communication modalities with their spouses while deployed (email, letters, phone calls, care packages, instant messaging, and instant messaging with video).

PARTICIPANTS
- Active Duty male, married Army Soldiers (N = 193) who had returned from a combat deployment within the last year participated.
- Most participants were either White (76%), Latino/Latina (12%), or Black (7%). Age of participants was not reported.
- Among participants, the average marriage length was 5.83 years (SD = 4.59).

LIMITATIONS
- Data are cross sectional which prohibits the ability to make causal conclusions.
- Communication reports may have been affected by retrospective biases.
- Some relevant variables were not assessed, such as who initiated the communication, content of the communication, and duration of the interactions.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
Future research could:
- Follow couples over time to examine the relationship between marital communication and PTSD symptomatology
- Examine how the communication with at-home spouses was helpful to the deployed Service member qualitatively
- Elicit the at-home spouses’ perspectives on the frequency, quality, and impacts of communication during deployment

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