

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Air Force

Intimate Partner Communication From the War Zone: A Prospective Study of Relationship Functioning, Communication Frequency, and Combat Effectiveness

Cigrang, J. A., Wayne Talcott, G., Tatum, J., Baker, M., Cassidy, D., Sonnek, S., ... Smith Slep, A. M. (2014). Intimate partner communication from the war zone: A prospective study of relationship functioning, communication frequency, and combat effectiveness. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 40(3), 332–343. doi:10.1111/jmft.12043

SUMMARY: Deployment can be a significant stressor for Service members' romantic relationships. In this study, researchers utilized a prospective longitudinal design to follow Airmen's relationship functioning, communication, depression, and perception of their duty performance over the course of a deployment cycle. Results indicated that relationship functioning changed during deployment for many Airmen and was a significant predictor of frequency of communication and self-reported duty performance during deployment.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Higher levels of relationship distress pre-deployment and increases in relationship distress during deployment were associated with lower frequency of communication during deployment.
- More relationship distress and higher levels of depression were related to lower self-rated duty performance among the deployed Airmen.
- Relationship distress increased significantly during deployment for many Service members (34%), but decreased for others (14%).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Help couples in the pre-deployment phase to create a reasonable plan for communication during deployment
- Provide workshops aimed at enhancing relationship quality and communication skills in order to help couples navigate the various stressors and demands throughout the deployment cycle
- Host support groups for spouses of Service members during deployment so that spouses who have been through the deployment cycle can help those for whom it is a new experience

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support the development of programs that aim to increase Service members' relationship quality
- Encourage training for professionals who work with military families about stressors that may come with different phases of the deployment cycle so that they can best support families during those times
- Recommend Service members have as much access as possible to various methods of communication with their families during deployment

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METHODS

- Participants were part of two detachments of Airmen who were deployed to Iraq.
- Airmen were surveyed at three time points in the deployment cycle: pre-deployment, in-theater, and post-deployment. These surveys included questions about relationship functioning, depression, communication with romantic partners, and the impact of relationship concerns on duty performance.
- Data were analyzed to determine the association between relationship functioning and frequency of communication as well as the association between relationship functioning and depression and their combined influence on Service members' perceptions of their own duty performance.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 144 Airmen in significant romantic relationships.
- Of the Airmen, the majority (89%) were male with an average age of 26.8 years (SD = 6.3).
- In the sample, 63% were White, 18% were Black, 8% were Latino, 6% were Asian American, 1% was Native American, and 4% were other races.

LIMITATIONS

- All participants were part of two very similar deployments, therefore these results may not be generalizable to Service members experiencing different types of deployments.
- This study relied upon self-reports of duty performance, which may not be an accurate measurement as problems in this area may have been under-reported.
- The sample was limited to Airmen, so it is unknown whether similar associations exist for members of other military branches.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore factors that distinguish couples who experience an increase in relationship distress during deployment from those who experience decreased distress
- Gather information from partners as well as Service members during the deployment cycle
- Incorporate objective measures of duty performance

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