

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Current Relationship Functioning Among World War II Ex-Prisoners of War

Cook, J. M., Riggs, D. S., Thompson, R., Coyne, J. C., & Sheikh, J. I. (2004). Posttraumatic stress disorder and current relationship functioning among World War II ex-prisoners of war. *Journal of Family Psychology, 18*(1), 36-45.
doi:10.1037/0893-3200.18.1.36

SUMMARY: World War II (WWII) ex-Prisoners of War (POW) living in California participated in this study examining the association of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with the quality of intimate relationships. Marital functioning was within a range expected for persons without traumatic exposure, however, ex-POWs with PTSD reported poorer adjustment and communication with their partners and more difficulties with intimacy compared to those without PTSD.

KEY FINDINGS:

- This sample of WWII ex-POWs had a level of relationship satisfaction comparable to the general population.
- WWII ex-POWs with PTSD were three times more likely to score in the maritally distressed range than those without PTSD, experienced more problems on every measure of intimate relationship functioning, and yet the mean relationship quality scores of those with PTSD were in the non-distressed range.
- Emotional numbing PTSD symptoms had a unique, independent deleterious effect on relationship functioning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Consider outreach efforts to Service members and their spouses who may be experiencing psychological distress or relationship difficulties
- Design activities specifically to meet the needs and challenges of older Service members and their partners
- Educate couples who have a history of trauma before deployment on positive coping skills

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, their partners, and children
- Continue to support programs for identification and prevention of domestic violence in military families
- Recommend training for community providers to educate them about unique factors that contribute to marital strain for military couples

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Members of the American Ex-Prisoner of War Association who were currently living in California were sent an initial survey in the mail; responders with a spouse or domestic partner were sent a follow-up survey.
- The initial survey included questions about demographics, military experience, physical well-being, use of mental health care, severity of POW trauma and PTSD symptoms; the follow-up survey included assessments of psychological distress, PTSD symptoms, and relationship quality.
- Only WWII ex-POWs living with partners who had completed both surveys' data were included in the outcome analyses, but sample characteristics were reported for the entire sample.
- Statistical analyses were used to compare average level of relationship satisfaction, examine the contribution of PTSD symptom clusters to difficulties in relationships, and explore the relationships between scales.

PARTICIPANTS

- Three hundred thirty-one WWII partnered military ex-POWs constitute the outcome sample (100% male); 545 WWII ex-POWs constituted the demographic sample (100% male).
- Of the 545 WWII ex-POWs, average age was 80 years (SD = 3.30), the sample was 86% White, 46% Army, 42% Air Force, 8% Navy, 4% Marines, 68% had more than high school education, 74% were married or partnered, 16% were widowed, 7% were divorced/separated, and average number of children was 2.80 (SD = 2.00).
- Fifty-eight percent were held captive in the European Theater, the remainder were in the Pacific Theater. The average length of internment was 21 months (SD = 16.40).

LIMITATIONS

- It is unknown how the sample differed from other WWII ex-POWs.
- The results may be biased by increased mortality of those with PTSD or decreased likelihood of belonging to the organization.
- All data were self-reported and may be subject to recall and/or social desirability biases.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include partners' perspectives about relationship functioning in subsequent studies
- Evaluate the most effective interventions used in this population, focusing on couples' interventions
- Conduct studies that compare relationship satisfaction among Service members and their spouses over time, especially as mental health symptoms fluctuate

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>