

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

The Impact of Military Service and Traumatic Brain Injury on the Substance Use Norms of Army Reserve and National Guard Soldiers and Their Spouses

Devonish, J. A., Homish, D. L., Vest, B. M., Daws, R. C., Hoopsick, R. A., & Homish, G. G. (2017). The impact of military service and traumatic brain injury on the substance use norms of Army Reserve and National Guard Soldiers and their spouses *Addictive Behaviors*, 72, 51-56. doi:10.1016/j.addbeh.2017.03.012

SUMMARY: Service members with traumatic brain injuries (TBI) may be more likely to engage in problematic substance use. Greater approval of use from partners may lead to more engagement in poor substance use behavior. This study explored how TBI and military status relate to Soldiers' substance use and their partners' degree of approval in using substances. Overall, findings revealed that partners were more accepting of substance use when the Soldier had symptoms of TBI and were no longer in the military.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Male Soldiers indicated lower approval of personal tobacco, prescription drug, and illicit drug use.
- Female Soldiers with a traumatic brain injury (TBI) were less approving of personal alcohol use and also received less approval of alcohol use from their husbands.
- Husbands of female Soldiers were more likely to approve of tobacco use and illicit drug use when their wives were no longer in the military and had symptoms of a TBI.
- Wives of male Soldiers were more likely to approve of prescription drug use when their husbands were no longer in the military and had symptoms of a TBI.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide workshops to help Service members and their partners communicate effective coping strategies for dealing with symptoms of a TBI
- Disseminate information regarding TBI symptoms for Service members and where individuals and families can find related supportive services
- Offer support groups for Service members with a TBI and their partners in hopes to build a network of common others

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend education for service providers around the possible effects of a TBI on Service members' use of substances, such as alcohol and illicit drugs
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote positive coping strategies for families of Service members with a TBI
- Encourage collaboration among DoD programs and community-based organizations to support a smooth transition for departing Service members, especially those who screen positive for a TBI

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METHODS

- The sample was recruited over 15-months where the researchers attended 47 National Guard and Reserves unit events across New York.
- Participants completed questionnaires assessing acceptability of substance use (e.g., alcohol, illicit drugs), presence of TBI, and current military status.
- Statistical analyses were conducted to examine how TBI and military status related to Soldiers' own beliefs regarding substance use and partners' degree of approval regarding Soldiers' substance use.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample consisted of 248 male and 34 female U.S. Army Reserves and National Guard Soldiers and an equal amount of partners.
- The average age for male Soldiers was 33 years (SD=6.2) and 32 years (SD=6.49) for their wives, comparably female Soldiers were 33 years (SD=4.7) and their husbands were 34 years (SD=5.9).
- A majority of the sample were White (79%), followed by 10% who were Latino, 5% indicated other, and 4% were African American. Further information regarding race/ethnicity was not provided.

LIMITATIONS

- Data were collected at one time point, therefore the long-term effects of TBI and military status on substance use cannot be determined.
- The study findings are limited as there may be additional factors contributing to acceptability of substance use among Soldiers.
- The non-random sample was recruited from National Guard and Reserves events across New York state, thus study findings may be limited in generalizing to Soldiers across the U.S. and in other military branches.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Collect a random sample of military couples from multiple military branches to assess the effects of military status and TBI on substance use acceptability
- Explore additional factors that may contribute to substance use approval, such as combat exposure or deployment
- Assess the long-term effects of TBI and military status on substance use approval among military couples

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