

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Improvements in Closeness, Communication, and Psychological Distress Mediate Effects of Couple Therapy of Veterans

Doss, B. D., Mitchell, A., Georgia, E. J., Biesen, J. M., & Rowe, L. S. (2015). Improvements in closeness, communication, and psychological distress mediate effects of couple therapy of veterans. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 83*(2), 405-415. doi:10.1037/a0038541

SUMMARY: This study follows 161 heterosexual couples in 13-week couples' therapy program. Couples were assessed prior to each session to determine whether observed improvements in couple functioning were due to improvements in communication, emotional connectedness, behavioral intervention, or psychological functioning.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Before beginning treatment, data indicated that 76% of women and 61% of men showed relationship distress.
- Improved communication and emotional closeness predicted improvements in relationship satisfaction for both men and women.
- Improvements in men's psychological distress improved subsequent relationship satisfaction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide classes to improve communication within romantic and family relationships
- Develop educational resources to help couples identify relationship distress
- Collaborate with family outreach services, to help military families identify symptoms of psychological distress

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend screening for psychological distress among Service members and their partners who are seeking treatment
- Providing screening for couples exhibiting symptoms of relationship distress
- Support the development of protocols that encourage couples counselors to focus on emotional development, rather than exclusively behavioral intervention

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METHODS

- Couples were referred for treatment by mental health (49%) or physical health (47%) providers, or were self-referred (4%).
- Both partners completed an intake survey that included demographics, problematic behavior in the relationship, and psychological distress.
- Prior to each therapy session, partners reported on relationship satisfaction, communication, emotional closeness, and psychological distress.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 161 heterosexual couples (322 individuals) seeking therapy at Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Centers in Charleston, SC and San Diego, CA. Participants were generally either Vietnam-era or OEF/OIF Veterans.
- Age and relationship duration were bimodal: men's modal ages were 32 and 59 years, women's modal ages were 30 and 55 years, and relationship modes were 5 and 30 years.
- The majority of couples were White (69%) and most couples were married (85%) or cohabiting (11%), with only 2% in dating relationships.

LIMITATIONS

- Given co-occurring conditions common among Veterans, results may not be generalizable to non-Veteran (e.g., Active Duty) couples.
- Information on the treatment provided for the study is limited and therefore difficult to compare to standardized couples therapies for military couples.
- Mediators were measured using truncated subscales, which may fail to measure important dimensions of each mediator.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore within-session experiences, and intervention techniques used by therapists
- Examine more nuanced measures of potential mediators like emotional closeness and communication
- Assess how improvements in one partner's emotional functioning impacts relationship satisfaction

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