

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Are Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Using Mental Health Services?

Elbogen, E. B., Wagner, H. R., Johnson, S. C., Kinneer, P., Kang, H., Vasterling, J. J., ... Beckham, J. C. (2013). Are Iraq and Afghanistan veterans using mental health services? *Psychiatric Services*, 64(2), 134-142. doi:10.1176/appi.ps.004792011

SUMMARY: As part of the National Post-Deployment Adjustment Study, 1,388 Veterans completed a survey to improve the understanding of mental health services use and perceived barriers to use in Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans. 43% of participants screened positive for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, or alcohol abuse. Veterans with more severe PTSD and depression symptoms reported greater treatment utilization.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Forty-three percent screened positive for PTSD, major depression or alcohol abuse.
- Veterans with more severe PTSD or depressive symptoms were significantly more likely to enter treatment; 69% of Veterans with probable PTSD and 67% with major depression reported accessing treatment in the past year, primarily through Veterans Affairs facilities.
- Beliefs about the stigma of receiving treatment were more likely to be endorsed by Veterans who used treatment than by those who did not.
- Veterans who did not access care, but screened positive for PTSD, depression, or alcohol misuse, were more likely to endorse the beliefs that individuals need to solve their own mental health problems and that taking medications will not help.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes that teach skills in managing common mental health symptoms after deployment (e.g., sleep problems, low motivation)
- Provide modules in their curricula about the courage involved in asking for help for mental health problems; such programming could focus on decreasing stigma surrounding mental health treatment
- Disseminate information regarding the mental health services available to Service members and their families

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support a range of effective mental health services and programs aimed at reducing stigma
- Continue to support pastoral care programs as well as the evaluation of such programs
- Recommend education for service providers regarding the possible effects of deployment on Service member's mental health

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METHODS

- This study was part of the National Post-Deployment Adjustment Survey using a random sample of Veterans who served on or after September 11, 2001 and were separated from Active Duty or served in the Reserves or National Guard.
- Participants completed a paper survey or an online survey that asked questions about mental health utilization, perceived treatment effectiveness, demographics, depression, alcohol abuse, and PTSD.
- Surveys were sent to 2,499 Service members.

PARTICIPANTS

- One thousand three hundred eighty-eight Veterans completed the survey (67% male).
- A weight-adjusted sample of 1,102 Veterans was used to make the proportion of women (16%) comparable to U.S. Military.
- The majority of participants were White (71%), married (61%), employed (78%), had some education beyond high school (81%), and were on average 36 years old.
- Fifty-four percent were in the Army, 19% in the Air Force, 16% in the Navy, and 11% in the Marines; 52% were Active Duty, 26% had multiple deployments, and were deployed for an average of 9 months (SD = 8.90).

LIMITATIONS

- All measures were self-report and may result in over or underreporting of symptoms or arrest history.
- Participants were asked to recall service utilization for the past year and therefore, actual service utilization may not be accurately reflected.
- It is unknown how non-responders differed from responders, therefore data could be biased.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine treatment use prospectively
- Investigate the effectiveness of programs designed to reduce stigma and decrease barriers to care
- Continue to examine barriers to care for Service members coping with mental health issues and ways reduce stigma within the military

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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