

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Service Utilization in a Sample of Service Members from Iraq and Afghanistan

Erbes, C., Westermeyer, J., Engdahl, B., & Johnsen, E. (2007). Posttraumatic stress disorder and service utilization in a sample of service members from Iraq and Afghanistan. *Military Medicine*, 172(4), 359-363. doi:10.7205/MILMED.172.4.359

SUMMARY: Veterans participated in a study examining how posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and alcohol abuse impact quality of life and mental health utilization. PTSD, and to a lesser degree depression, were associated with lower quality of life in multiple domains.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The rate of PTSD (12%) was similar to other studies, and rates of risky drinking (33% classified as hazardous) were relatively high.
- Among those screening positive for PTSD, 56% reported receiving individual or group therapy and/or psychiatric medication since their return from Iraq or Afghanistan.
- Among risky drinkers, only 18% reported receiving any mental health services and only 3% reported receiving chemical dependency treatment.
- General distress and negative affect as described in the depression questionnaire, but not PTSD symptoms, were associated with seeking psychiatric services.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Host informational sessions for Service members and families about how to recognize mental and chemical health problems and to how to talk to a loved one about addiction
- Offer support groups for family members impacted by mental or chemical health problems in their Service members
- Offer workshops during reintegration to help families and Service members adjust to the Service member's return, especially when the deployment has included combat exposure

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that all returning Service members be screened for alcohol use, depression, and PTSD, both upon return from deployment and over time
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, their partners, and children
- Recommend integrating substance abuse prevention education into existing service delivery systems for military families

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METHODS

- OIF/OEF returnees who enrolled for care at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center were contacted via telephone and asked to participate; 92% of those contacted agreed to participate.
- Those who agreed to participate completed (via mail) measures of post-traumatic stress, depression, alcohol use, quality of life, use of mental health services, and psychiatric medications before, during, and after deployment; 55% returned completed surveys.
- Participants were classified into groups: PTSD-positive and negative; presence or absence of hazardous drinking.
- Statistical analyses were used to compare PTSD and hazardous drinking groups on outcome variables, and to examine the relative contributions of depression, PTSD, and alcohol use to predict service utilization.

PARTICIPANTS

- One-hundred twenty Veterans participated (86% male).
- Among the participants, 54% were single, 28% were married, and 8% were divorced.
- Participants' average age was 27.50 years, and 49% reported some college, 29% had a two or four year degree, and 10% had a graduate degree.
- In this sample, 91% were in the Army (81% were Guard or Reserves), 5% Marines, 2% Air Force, and 2% Navy.

LIMITATIONS

- There was limited demographic information presented, and the generalizability of these findings is unknown.
- Veterans who were seeing mental health providers at the time were excluded from the study which may have biased the results.
- Patients were divided into groups which diminishes the amount of information used from the data.
- Results may not pertain to OIF/OEF Veterans who did not sign up for VA medical care or participate.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Use longitudinal designs to assess multiple domains of functioning such as depression, PTSD, and alcohol use to determine how they influence each other over time
- Evaluate the effectiveness of a range of interventions for PTSD, both as a single diagnosis and when there are comorbid conditions such as alcohol abuse and mood disorders
- Collect data on cultural variables such as racial identity to explore the extent to which these variables impact psychological functioning among Service members

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