

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Mental Health Diagnosis and Occupational Functioning in National Guard/Reserve Veterans Returning From Iraq

Erbes, C. R., Kaler, M. E., Schult, T., Polusny, M. A., & Arbisi, P. A. (2011). Mental health diagnosis and occupational functioning in National Guard/Reserve veterans returning from Iraq. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research & Development*, 48(10), 1159-1170. doi:10.1682/JRRD.2010.11.0212

SUMMARY: Two hundred sixty-two Army National Guard Service members participated in a diagnostic interview and survey within one year of return from deployment to Iraq; they completed a survey one year later to examine the role of mental health diagnosis on occupational functioning. Army National Guard Service members with psychiatric diagnosis (posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sub-threshold PTSD, major depression, or alcohol problems) are likely to struggle more with occupational functioning than service members without these diagnoses. However, these diagnoses did not affect employment status.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Service members with a diagnosis of PTSD (5%), sub-threshold PTSD (6%), a major depressive disorder (11%), or alcohol use or dependence (11%) did not differ on employment status from Service members without a diagnosis.
- Depression, PTSD, and alcohol use disorders all independently predicted lower rates of self-reported school and/or work role functioning.
- Those diagnosed with mental health disorders were not less likely to be in school than those without these conditions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Continue to offer support for transitioning Service members by working with community agencies to maintain a list of local job openings
- Offer workshops on time management and study skills to assist Service members living with depression, PTSD, and alcohol abuse to support them in their school and work functioning
- Host 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:

- Continue to support employment programs for transitioning Service members, especially for those with mental health diagnoses
- Continue to support programs that address the unique challenges faced by deployed Service members and their families
- Recommend professional education, including information on military culture and transitioning out of military service, for professionals who work with Service members and their families

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METHODS

- These data were part of prospective, longitudinal study of risk and protective factors associated with post-deployment functioning.
- Participants were recruited from a group of 355 Army NGR Service members deployed to OIF between March 2006 and July 2007.
- Participants completed structured diagnostic interviews and self-reported measures on a range of domains (PTSD, depression, alcohol use, social adjustment, employment status, and combat experiences) within 1 year of their deployment to Iraq and again 1 year later via a mailed survey

PARTICIPANTS

- Two hundred sixty-two Army National Guard Service members participated (88% male).
- Ninety-four percent of the sample identified as White, the average age was 30.47 years (SD = 8.73), and 54% were married.
- Eighty-six percent enlisted, 45% were combat arms, and 40% were combat service support.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample size is modest and was drawn from one National Guard brigade team that is mostly White, able bodied, and male; results may not generalize to other populations of Service members.
- Occupational functioning was evaluated entirely by self-report and may be subject to self-reporting bias.
- Some of the employment data could be due to its collection during a period of economic decline and could skew the findings.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine occupational functioning and mental health diagnoses over time using non-self-report measures such as employer ratings
- Gather data from those with mental health diagnoses and impaired work functioning to see what predicts impairment
- Replicate the study with a sample that has more gender and ethnic diversity

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