

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
National
Guard

Couple Adjustment and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms in National Guard Veterans of the Iraq War

Erbes, C. R., Meis, L. A., Polusny, M. A., & Compton, J. S. (2011). Couple adjustment and posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms in National Guard veterans of the Iraq war. *Journal of Family Psychology, 25*(4), 479-487. doi:10.1037/a0024007

SUMMARY: Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may strongly impact Service members' relationships. The associations between PTSD and relationship adjustment among Army National Guard members with romantic partners was examined at two or three months (timepoint 1) and one year (timepoint 2) post-deployment. Soldiers who screened positive for PTSD at timepoint 1 had poorer relationship adjustment (e.g., satisfaction, communication, intimacy, support) at both timepoints, with dysphoria symptoms (e.g., loss of interest, emotional numbing, irritability) having a particularly negative effect on relationship adjustment.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The 17% of Soldiers who screened positive for PTSD at timepoint 1 had poorer relationship adjustment (e.g., satisfaction, communication, intimacy, support) at both timepoints after returning from Iraq.
- The PTSD symptom cluster of dysphoria (e.g., loss of interest, emotional numbing, irritability) at timepoint 1 was most strongly related to poor relationship satisfaction at that time; it also predicted poor relationship satisfaction at timepoint 2.
- While data suggest that PTSD symptoms may be more harmful for female than male Soldiers' relationships, conclusions are limited by the small female sample.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops teaching healthy communication and conflict-resolution to military couples post-deployment
- Provide classes to educate military families about the potential symptoms of PTSD and the effects of those symptoms on relationships
- Disseminate both military and community mental health resource information to Service members and their families

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote the development of awareness campaigns to increase military families' knowledge about PTSD and their comfort in seeking mental health services for PTSD or relationship concerns
- Recommend integration of programs that provide services to help with PTSD and relationship problems in order to provide more comprehensive, holistic resources for military families
- Encourage education for professionals working with military families about the impact of PTSD on Service members' relationships and personal lives

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METHODS

- Army National Guard Veterans, who had been deployed in OIF in 2006, were mailed surveys both two or three months and one year post-deployment.
- Soldiers completed surveys regarding PTSD, relationship adjustment, and demographic information.
- The associations between PTSD and relationship adjustment at each timepoint were examined.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 313 National Guard Soldiers in relationships at timepoint 1 and 225 at timepoint 2.
- At timepoint 1, Soldiers were primarily male (89%), White (94%), employed (62%) or students (15%), enlisted (86%), and married (64%); Half of the Soldiers had children and most had been in a relationship 3 or more years (68%).
- At timepoint 1, on average, Soldiers were 31 years of age ($SD = 8.72$) and had been deployed 16 months ($SD = 2.93$).
- At timepoint 2, Soldiers were significantly older, more likely to be married or cohabitating, in longer relationships, more highly educated, and more likely to be officers.

LIMITATIONS

- Only Soldier self-report data was collected, and results may differ with partner report or objective or behavioral measures of couples' interactions.
- Participants were all Army National Guard members from a single brigade, and most were White and male, so results may not generalize to other populations.
- Differences in demographic data between participants who did and did not complete timepoint two surveys may have impacted results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate the mechanism by which dysphoria impacts relationship adjustment (e.g., more irritability and arguments, less mutual support, etc.)
- Examine the association between PTSD and relationship adjustment among a more generalizable sample of Service members (e.g., other branches, ethnic minorities, varied ranks, etc.)
- Conduct a study examining the relationships between PTSD and relationship adjustment using several sources of measurement (e.g., Service member and spouse self-report, observations of couples' interactions) and a longitudinal approach across deployment phases, including baseline, pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment

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