

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

An Examination of PTSD and Relationship Functioning in Soldiers of the Iraq War Over Time

Erbes, C., Meis, L., Polusny, M., Compton, J., & Wadsworth, S. M. (2012). An examination of PTSD and relationship functioning in soldiers of the Iraq war over time. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 25*(2), 187-190. doi:10.1002/jts.21689

SUMMARY: Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and severity may impact the relationship adjustment of Service members and their partners. Longitudinal methods were used to examine PTSD, PTSD symptom clusters (e.g., re-experiencing, emotional numbness), and relationship adjustment in National Guard Soldiers who were deployed to Iraq between 2006 and 2007 and their partners. Results indicated that PTSD symptom severity and emotional distress are related to relationship adjustment over time.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Higher PTSD symptom severity in Guard Soldiers at the first time point predicted lower partners' relationship adjustment at the second time point.
- Guard Soldiers who experienced high levels of emotional distress as a component of PTSD reported poorer relationship adjustment at both time points.
- Partners' relationship satisfaction was not related to the severity of any PTSD symptom cluster.
- Relationship adjustment at the first time point was not associated with PTSD symptoms at the second time point for Guard Soldiers or partners.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide workshops during reintegration to military spouses that provide information on PTSD and resources available for Service members and partners
- Offer long-term support groups for Service members with PTSD and their partners in order to facilitate healthy communication
- Enhance education efforts for Service members on PTSD and how it may impact relationship and family functioning

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs for couples that support healthy relationship functioning after deployment
- Encourage partnerships between reintegration services and programs that support military families' healthy functioning
- Recommend professional development for service providers on how PTSD symptoms and severity may impact Service members' relationships

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited from a larger study of National Guard Soldiers who were deployed to Iraq between 2006 and 2007.
- Soldiers and their partners answered self-report questionnaires about PTSD and relationship adjustment separately within a year after return from deployment.
- Follow-up surveys were collected via mail six to nine months of the first survey. Response rate for the second survey was 80%.
- Data were analyzed to determine the association between PTSD symptoms and couple adjustment over time.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 49 male Soldiers and their female spouses or cohabitating partners.
- The majority of the sample identified as White (92%). No other information on racial or ethnic breakdown was given.
- Ages ranged from 21 to 53 years old for both Soldiers and their partners. The average age of Soldiers was 34.71 years (SD = 7.39), and average age of partners was 33.61 years (SD = 8.43).

LIMITATIONS

- All couples sampled were male Soldiers with female partners, limiting the generalizability of this study to other service branches or to male partners of Service members.
- A small sample of Guard Soldiers from the same region were used, limiting the ability to generalize the results to other branches or to populations in different areas of the country.
- Results from this study were correlational, therefore causation cannot be implied.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate this study with a larger sample size and in different branches of the military
- Consider gender and military status as variables in the relationship between PTSD and relationship adjustment
- Examine other variables (e.g., depression) that could interact with PTSD symptoms in regards to relationship adjustment

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