

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
National
Guard

Characterizing Spouse/Partner Depression and Alcohol Problems Over the Course of Military Deployment

Erbes, C. R., Kramer, M., Arbisi, P. A., DeGarmo, D., & Polusny, M. A. (2017). Characterizing spouse/partner depression and alcohol problems over the course of military deployment. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 85*(4), 297-308. doi:10.1037/ccp0000190

SUMMARY: Military couples may face greater distress over the course of a deployment, thus impacting mental health and use of alcohol. This study of 1,973 Army National Guard Soldiers and 1,020 partners examined potential factors contributing to depression and alcohol misuse trajectories over the deployment cycle. Overall, findings revealed that Guard Soldiers and partners had relatively low depression and alcohol misuse; however, factors of partners stress and social support tended to play a significant role in these trajectories over time.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Increased depression experienced by both Guard Soldiers and their partners throughout the deployment was positively related to stressors and anxiety experienced by the partner.
- Partners' stress and Soldiers' perceptions of social support at pre-deployment were related to greater depression at post-deployment.
- Couples that perceived lower family readiness and greater constraints than resources were more likely to indicate less alcohol misuse at pre-deployment, but an increase of misuse at post-deployment.
- Partners who showed higher depression at pre-deployment were more likely to engage in impulsive behavior, including alcohol misuse throughout the deployment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Engage Service members and their partners in classes that address how to effectively cope with family stress throughout the deployment cycle
- Provide workshops to help military families learn about available supportive services to manage depression and related mental health concerns
- Offer in-person and online deployment support groups for deployed Service members and their families

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members and their families
- Promote continual distribution of information regarding mental health and substance abuse symptoms at all phases of deployment
- Recommend education about how well-being can change throughout the deployment cycle for professionals who work with Service members and their families

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Participants were recruited from pre-deployment training events where Guard Soldiers completed surveys two to five months before deployment (Time 1).
- While Guard Soldiers were deployed, partners were mailed follow-up surveys at four months (Time 2) and eight months (Time 3), and both Guard Soldiers and partners completed surveys two to three months post-deployment (Time 4).
- Statistical analyses were conducted to examine Guard Soldiers' and partners' mental health and individual and family functioning across the deployment cycle.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included Army National Guard Soldiers (N=1,973) and their partners (N=1,020) where a majority were married or cohabiting (N=824, 81%).
- A majority of the Guard Soldiers were men (92%) and White (88%), with a mean age of 28 years (SD=7.8). Most partners were female (97%) and White (90%), with a mean age of 30 years (SD=8.2).
- Most Guard Soldiers were enlisted rank (90%) and 30% previously deployed to OEF/OIF/OND. All Guard Soldiers in the sample were preparing to deploy at Time 1.

LIMITATIONS

- Study findings cannot be generalized to all Service members across military branches as this study's sample consisted only of National Guard Soldiers and their partners.
- Participants that remained in the study for the post-deployment survey (Time 4) were different from those who withdrew; those that remained in the study had higher and more positive family bonding, for example.
- There was no comparison group in the study, thus there may be pre-existing mental health differences between the those who deploy and those who do not that were not considered in the analyses.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Collect a random sample of military couples from multiple military branches to assess depression and alcohol misuse across the deployment cycle
- Assess whether there are mental health differences among Soldiers who deploy and those who do not
- Examine military couples' perspectives on how deployment may have affected their mental health and well-being

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>