

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Killed in Combat: The Impact of the Military Context on the Grief Process

Faber, A. J., Minner, J., & Wadsworth, S. M. (2014). Killed in combat: The impact of the military context on the grief process. *Military Behavioral Health*, 2(1), 14-17. doi:10.1080/21635781.2013.831724

SUMMARY: Individuals grieve the death of a loved one due to military combat differently; however, social support and healthy coping are likely important to the grief process. A couple whose son died in combat with the Army Reserves was interviewed three times after their son's death about their grief processes (e.g., coping, support, stressors). Social support, honoring and remembering their son, and being able to grieve in their own ways seemed to aide these parents through the grieving process.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Both parents reported strong support from their community and their son's military unit, which shared stories and memories, provided care packages, and donated to memorials.
- The father reported coping by building a memorial, public speaking about commitment, and honoring his commitments; he did not cope through anger or other's emotional support.
- The mother reported coping through remembering her son, often with home videos or pictures, and experiencing her emotions; she did not report coping through anger
- The parents reported the homecoming of their son's unit as their largest stressor.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Coordinate groups of military families that provide both emotional and instrumental support on an ongoing basis to families dealing with the death of a Service member
- Offer support groups for military families coping with the death of their Service member
- Provide practical assistance for military families who have lost a Service member in planning funeral arrangements, managing financial changes, and finding mental health resources

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend education for all mental health professionals working with military families about the unique aspects of coping with the combat-related death of a Service member
- Continue to support the provision of meaningful military rituals at the funerals and burials of Service members who died in combat
- Encourage existing programs for grieving military families to incorporate ways for families to find meaning and memorialize their Service member

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METHODS

- This case study collected semi-structured interview data from a couple whose son died during a deployment from an improvised explosive device (IED) explosion.
- Both parents were interviewed about their grieving processes three times, at seven months, 12 months, and 15 months after their son's death.
- Interview statements were transcribed and coded into categories (i.e., coping, stressors, support), and a second coder assisted in ensuring accuracy.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were the mother and father of a deceased, male Army Reserves member.
- The parents were in their mid-fifties, and both had finished college and were employed full-time; they had three children, two adult daughters and their deceased son.
- The son had enlisted in the Army Reserves at 18 years of age and died at 21 years of age.
- Neither parent had served in the military or had any previous experience with deployment.

LIMITATIONS

- The parents may have reported their grief in the most socially desirable ways, introducing bias.
- Researchers may also have introduced bias by coding and reporting grief in ways that were socially desirable, favorable to the military or the family, or supportive of their views on grief.
- The single-case study design limits generalizability to other grieving family members and precludes making causal inferences about the effects of losing a loved one from military combat.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct a large, longitudinal study that examines the coping strategies used by parents, spouses, children, and other family members of deceased Service members dealing with grief
- Compare well-being among family members of deceased Service members who do or do not decide to include military rituals in the Service member's funeral and burial
- Investigate the effect of family members' ability to find meaning in their Service member's death on their well-being and coping strategies

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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