

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Depressive Symptoms Among US Military Spouses During Deployment: The Protective Effect of Positive Emotions

Faulk, K. E., Gloria, C. T., Cance, J. D., & Steinhardt, M. A. (2012). Depressive symptoms among US Military spouses during deployment: The protective effect of positive emotions. *Armed Forces & Society*, 38(3), 373-390.
doi:10.1177/0095327X11428785

SUMMARY: Researchers examined the relationship between stress and depressive symptoms in military spouses during deployment and how that relationship varied based on levels of positivity. More perceived stress was associated with higher levels of reported depressive symptoms, but for spouses who exhibited high levels of positivity, that relationship was weaker than for those with low levels of positivity.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The presence of high positivity in wives of deployed Soldiers minimized the influence of stress on depressive symptoms.
- Elevated levels of positivity protected spouses from developing depressive symptoms when the spouse was experiencing high or low levels of stress.
- These spouses were more likely to be in the very high range of positivity or the very low range of positivity than was seen in studies with civilian samples.
- A significant portion of the spouses (39%) reported moderately severe levels of depression.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop curricula to include in workshops, such as tools for developing gratitude or optimism, to increase the positivity of military spouses
- Focus on prevention opportunities for education and growth that serve to buffer families against the effect of stressors
- Teach families to utilize strategies from positive psychology such as gratitude, finding positive meaning, and connecting with others as a way to increase resilience

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support programs that encourage building protective factors for families before deployment
- Encourage training for professionals who work with families that highlights the importance of increasing positive emotions in addition to decreasing negative emotions
- Continue to recommend extra support for spouses during deployment, given the high number of spouses reporting moderately severe levels of depression

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 voluntarily completed surveys during Spouse Appreciation Day or obtained access to an online version of the survey through advertisements on a website for spouses of deployed Soldiers.
- The surveys included questions to measure characteristics of deployment, perceived stress, positivity, and depressive symptoms.
- Data were analyzed to determine the relationship between stress and depressive symptoms and to see if that relationship differed between women with high and low positivity.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 367 wives of deployed Soldiers stationed at Fort Hood in Texas, with an average age of 27 years old (SD=5.75).
- The women were White (66%), Latina (18%), Black (11%), Asian (3%), Native American (1%), and other races (1%).
- They had been married 5 years on average, 83% had children, and 22% were employed outside the home.
- Husbands were junior enlisted Soldiers (53%), non-commissioned officers (34%), and commissioned officers (13%) with an average length of deployment of 11 months.

LIMITATIONS

- Participants were gathered through a convenience sample and thus may not be representative of the population as a whole.
- Only spouses of Service members stationed at Fort Hood participated, which may limit generalizability.
- Surveys relied upon self-report, which may create biases within the responses.
- Data collected do not allow for conclusions about causality.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Determine whether the finding that military spouses were more likely to score in the very high or very low ranges of positivity is specific to deployments or can be generalized to the population as a whole
- Evaluate efficacy of programs that aim to increase positivity or other protective factors
- Follow participants over time to determine the trajectories of spouses' depressive symptoms beyond the deployment period

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>