

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Multiple  
Branches

## Predictors of Emotional Distress Reported by Soldiers in the Combat Zone

Ferrier-Auerbach, A. G., Erbes, C. R., Polusny, M. A., Rath, M., & Sponheim, S. R. (2010). Predictors of emotional distress reported by soldiers in the combat zone. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 44(7), 470-476.  
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**SUMMARY:** National Guard Soldiers were given self-report questionnaires while deployed in a war-zone to determine their levels of PTSD and depressive symptoms, and to identify behaviors associated with emotional distress. The findings indicate that female gender and prior deployment influence more aspects of emotional distress than do blast exposure or combat injury. Not feeling supported by the unit and ones family was associated with many different aspects of emotional distress.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Five factors contributed to Service members emotional distress: negative affect/cognitions, trauma-specific experiences, vegetative symptoms (e.g., energy level, fatigue, and appetite), loss of interest/numbing, and hyper-arousal.
- Negative affect/cognitions was predicted by previous deployment, direct combat experience, and low support from unit and family members.
- Seven percent of participants reported PTSD symptoms and 9% of the sample reported symptoms of depression.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops which emphasize the importance of unit support prior to deployment
- Continue to offer reintegration programs that include specific components that address the emotional distress experienced by female Service members
- Educate Soldiers and family members about the importance of consistent communication during deployment for optimal mental health

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend policies that consider prior deployment, combat experience, and the gender when determining deployment schedules
- Support programs that allow for increased contact with family members at home while deployed
- Continue to support post-deployment reintegration workshops for Service members and their families

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## METHODS

- Two thousand six hundred seventy-seven National Guard Soldiers were given surveys in-person at a redeployment transition briefing that was scheduled one month before being redeployed home.
- Survey questionnaires focused on PTSD symptomology, depressive symptomology, injury and traumatic brain injury screening, attitudes and experiences during deployment, combat exposure, and demographics.
- Participants were invited to participate in the current study during a redeployment transition briefing.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 2,677 Minnesota Army National Guard Soldiers.
- Most participants were male (92%) and White (83%). Age of participants was not reported.
- The majority of participants were enlisted (89%), with just over half serving as Combat Arms (51%), followed by Combat Service Support (35%), and Combat Support (15%).

## LIMITATIONS

- Surveys were distributed one month prior to returning home, potentially skewing results.
- Data were only collected at one site, which may limit generalizability.
- Self-report measures may be vulnerable to bias.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct a similar study in the early and middle period of deployment to compare mental health at different phases of deployment
- Explore rates of deployment distress with other branches of the Military to determine whether results generalize to different branches
- Examine ways to reduce emotional distress among Service members during deployment

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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