

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Multiple  
Branches

## Observed Relationship Behaviors and Sleep in Military Veterans and Their Partners

Fillo, J., Holliday, S. B., DeSantis, A., Germain, A., Buysse, D. J., Matthews, K. A., & Troxel, W. M. (2017). Observed relationship behaviors and sleep in military Veterans and their partners. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 51, 879–889. doi:10.1007/s12160-017-9911-3

**SUMMARY:** Relationship functioning is associated with various aspects of individuals' lives, including sleep quality. This study examined relationship functioning and sleep quality of 35 Veteran couples, a sample which is at risk of relationship and sleep issues. Results indicated that individuals' hostility (e.g., criticism, hostile voice tone) and relationship-enhancing attributions (e.g., attributing negative events to external factors rather than to the partner) were associated with the sleep quality of both themselves and partners.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Participants (both Veterans and civilians)' hostility toward their partner was negatively associated with their sleep efficiency (the efficiency of falling asleep); on the contrary, participants' relationship-enhancing attributions were positively associated with their percentage of Stage N3 sleep (deep sleep).
- The more hostility participants perceived from partner, the less Stage N3 sleep they would have.
- Hostility and relationship-enhancing attributions were not associated with self-reported sleep quality, total sleep time, or percentage of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop workshops for military couples on effective ways to increase their relationship harmony and reduce conflicts
- Disseminate information to Service members regarding ways to increase their sleep quality
- Offer support groups for military couples who are experiencing marital problems so that they can learn from and support each other

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Raise awareness on military bases regarding the importance of marital functioning on Service members' and military spouses' health
- Recommend education of professionals working with military couples on the associations between relationship functioning and sleep quality
- Encourage marriage education programs that promote relationship-enhancing attributions and reduce hostility in marriage

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## METHODS

- Participants were eligible for the study if they were married, between the age of 18 and 45 years old, and shared a bed regularly; the method of recruitment was not indicated.
- Each couple's interactions were observed in the laboratory for 15 minutes and coded as hostility or relationship-enhancing attributions, and each individual's sleep quality was monitored at home for two nights; in addition, participants reported subjective sleep quality by completing a questionnaire.
- Data were analyzed to examine the associations between relationship interaction patterns and sleep quality.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 35 heterosexual couples; at least one partner of each couple was a Veteran, and individuals with psychiatric or medical conditions were included in the study.
- The average age of participants was 30.88 years (SD = 5.38), and the race/ethnicity of the participants was not reported.
- The majority of Veterans served in the Army (62%); the military branches of the rest of the Veterans were not reported.

## LIMITATIONS

- Participants were all Veteran couples, so caution must be taken to generalize the findings to Active Duty and NGR military families.
- The cross-sectional design of the study made it impossible to understand the causal relationship between relationship functioning and sleep quality.
- Only heterosexual couples were included in the study, so results of the study may not apply to homosexual couples.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Recruit Active Duty Service members and their spouses to examine the association between relationship functioning and sleep quality in military families
- Conduct longitudinal studies to examine the causal relationship between sleep quality and marital quality
- Examine other factors that are associated with Veteran couples' sleep quality

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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