

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Do Combat Exposure and Post-Deployment Mental Health Influence Intent to Divorce?

Foran, H. M., Wright, K. M., & Wood, M. D. (2013). Do combat exposure and post-deployment mental health influence intent to divorce? *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 32*(9), 917-938. doi:10.1521/jscp.2013.32.9.917

SUMMARY: The associations between combat exposure, mental health symptoms, aggression and intent to divorce or separate during the four and nine month post-deployment period were examined. About a third of Service members (37%) reported marital problems at four months post-deployment. Nine month post-deployment intent to divorce or separate was associated with four month marital distress, relationship aggression, and posttraumatic stress disorder re-experiencing symptoms.

KEY FINDINGS:

- PTSD and depression symptoms were strongly related to each other at four months post-deployment.
- At four months post-deployment, Soldiers reported experiencing marital problems (38%) and psychological aggression toward their partner in the last month (44%). At nine months post-deployment, approximately 10% of Soldiers reported an intent to divorce or separate .
- Combat exposure was a significant predictor of intent to divorce or separate (even when accounting for initial marital distress and PTSD symptoms).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop interventions that consider the mutual influence of mental health symptoms and marital functioning among military couples
- Create workshops that integrate treatment for PTSD and depression, as these symptoms are highly co-occurring
- Use screening and assessment tools that allow professionals who work with military families to detect marital difficulties early (9 months) in the post-deployment period

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to provide resources that effectively disseminate evidence-based marital programs for military couples
- Continue to support programs that decrease stigma for accessing mental health and marital care
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, their partners, and children

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.



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METHODS

- Participants completed a self-report survey on base four and nine months after a 15-month deployment to Iraq in 2007-2008.
- The survey included measures of combat experiences, depression and PTSD symptoms, relationship and general aggression, and marital distress.
- Statistical analyses were utilized to understand the relationships between the variables, and if the demographic characteristics were different among those who reported intent to divorce or separate and those who did not.

PARTICIPANTS

- Active Duty Soldiers from five squadrons of a Cavalry Regiment were invited to participate, and for these analyses, only those who were in a marital relationship, had previously deployed, and completed the relationship questions were included.
- At Time 1, 851 Soldiers participated in data collection while at Time 2, there were 194 participants as many had been transferred to other locations at 9 months post-deployment.
- The sample was 98% male and 62% of participants were between 25 and 39 years; most participants (63%) had one or more child.

LIMITATIONS

- Spouses were not assessed; research suggests that understanding spouses' perspectives is important for understanding the impact of deployment on marital health.
- This study was limited to married couples who may differ from other types of couples.
- Marital distress and mental health were only assessed post-deployment, therefore, pre-deployment functioning is unknown. Couples intending to divorce at 9-month post-deployment may have been distressed prior to deployment which contributed to their intent to divorce.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore those marrying or divorcing in the same period to help illuminate issues facing a wider variety of type of couple who are experiencing deployment
- Examine the role of relationship stress throughout the deployment period
- Utilize longitudinal methods that include the pre-deployment period as well as a longer time frame post-deployment in order to provide additional insight into the interactions among these variables

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