

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

A Dyadic Perspective on PTSD Symptoms' Associations With Couple Functioning and Parenting Stress in First-Time Parents

Fredman, S. J., Le, Y., Marshall, A. D., Brick, T. R., & Feinberg, M. E. (2017). A dyadic perspective on PTSD symptoms' associations with couple functioning and parenting stress in first-time parents. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, 6(2), 117-132. doi:10.1037/cfp0000079

SUMMARY: Family functioning may be negatively influenced by mental health problems including Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A total of 250 couples who just had their first child together completed questionnaires regarding PTSD severity, couple functioning, and parenting stress, and at least one person in each couple had experienced traumatic life events. Results revealed that PTSD symptoms were negatively associated with couple functioning and parenting stress from both husbands' and wives' perspectives.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Participants' own PTSD symptoms were negatively associated with their self-perceived couple functioning.
- Participants who perceived their partners as having more PTSD symptoms were more likely to report worse couple functioning, and this was particularly true for husbands.
- PTSD symptoms were positively associated with parenting stress for both mothers and fathers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Participate in professional trainings to learn more about the associations between PTSD symptoms and family functioning
- Help Service members with PTSD and their families develop strategies to cope with stress caused by PTSD symptoms

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer marriage education workshops to help Service members and their spouses learn ways to improve communication and problem-solving in relationships
- Provide support groups for Service members who experienced PTSD symptoms so that they can help each other

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Raise awareness regarding the associations between Service members' PTSD symptoms and military family well-being
- Encourage training for professionals who work with military families about the potential detrimental effects of PTSD on parenting and couple relationship

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited through OB/GYN clinics and childbirth education programs and they were part of a large transition-to-parenthood program.
- Measures included questions related to trauma exposure, PTSD symptom severity, perceived couple functioning, and parenting stress.
- Data were analyzed to examine husbands' and wives' perceptions of the associations between PTSD symptoms, couple functioning, and parenting stress.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 250 cohabiting heterosexual couples who just had their first child together; at least one person in each couple had experienced a traumatic event (e.g., natural disasters, sexual assault).
- The average ages of mothers and fathers were 30.92 years (SD = 4.27) and 32.81 years (SD = 5.24), respectively.
- Participants were mostly White and well-educated; the race/ethnicity and education level breakdown of participants was not reported.

LIMITATIONS

- The PTSD symptoms were self-reported and may not represent an actual diagnosis.
- Participants in the study were all heterosexual couples and were predominantly White; therefore, the sample may not represent the general population.
- The cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for drawing causal conclusions, therefore it is not clear whether PTSD symptoms caused couple functioning and parenting stress.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Measure PTSD symptoms using clinical interviews to obtain accurate data concerning participants' PTSD severity
- Recruit participants that represent a diverse sample with respect to race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status
- Conduct longitudinal studies to explore the causal relationships between PTSD symptoms and family functioning

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