

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Topic Avoidance, Everyday Talk, and Stress in Romantic Military and Non-Military Couples

Frisby, B.N., Byrnes, K., Mansson, D. H., Booth-Butterfield, M., & Birmingham, M.K. (2011). Topic avoidance, everyday talk, and stress in romantic military and non-military couples. *Communication Studies*, 62(3), 241-257.
doi:10.1080/10510974.2011.553982

SUMMARY: Partners of civilian and military members participated in a survey to understand communication difference among military and civilian couples. Overall, there were no differences in topic avoidance (intentionally directing conversation away from certain topics), everyday talk (ordinary conversation such as making plans), or well-being between the two types of couples.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The two types of couples (military and civilian) avoided similar topics including the current state of the relationship and moving the relationship forward (e.g., marriage, cohabitation). However, civilian couples more frequently avoided discussions about the status of the relationship, marriage, and cohabitation than military couples.
- There was no difference in frequency of everyday talk between military and non-military couples, but partners of military members reported that everyday talk was more important than those with non-military partners.
- Engaging in everyday talk and decreasing topic avoidance significantly contributed to reducing stress in both types of relationships, but especially for military couples.
- Partners in both military and non-military couples reported equal levels of emotional stress.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops for military couples that enhance positive communication skills such as addressing issues directly and how to talk about sensitive issues
- Provide childcare for military couples to offer additional opportunities to spend time together as a couple and engage in more everyday talk
- Disseminate information regarding effective communication skills in couples and ways to improve these skills

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs aimed at strengthening the romantic relationships of military couples
- Continue to support childcare services for military couples, including both during the regular daytime and on weekends
- Recommend training for professionals working with military couples about common communication issues

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

- The research team sent messages to their own social networks via Facebook and to Facebook groups developed for military partners with a link to an online survey.
- The non-military sample was recruited through students in a large lecture course at a mid-Atlantic University.
- Military participants completed an online survey and non-military participants did a paper and pencil survey; both completed measures of topic avoidance, everyday talk, and stress.

PARTICIPANTS

- One hundred eighteen military (96% female) and 94 non-military (63% female) participants.
- Military participant had an average age of 28.01 years (SD = 7.71 years) and an average relationship length of 6.01 years (SD = 5.07 years); data regarding race were not provided.
- Service members had been deployed an average of 2.0 times (SD = 2.92), 43% of partners were in the Army, 15% Air Force, 14% Navy, 11% National Guard, 11% Marine Corps, and 4% Reserves.
- Non-military participant were 29.63 years (SD = 8.88 years) old on average, and had been in their relationships for an average of 4.53 years (SD = 7.85 years); data regarding race were not provided.

LIMITATIONS

- Military couples may avoid additional topics that were not assessed here, such as deployment or safety related concerns.
- The sample was derived from snowball techniques; results may be biased.
- All measures were self-reported from one partner's perspective and therefore may not reflect the dynamic nature of the relationship.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate this study with a more dyadic sample (e.g., male and female spouses, racially diverse)
- Assess how relationship education programs impact these variables as well as broader relationship functioning and satisfaction
- Explore whether military couple avoid topics that are unique to the military context (e.g., deployment)

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>