

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Role-Exit Theory and Marital Discord Following Extended Military Deployment

Gambardella, L. C. (2008). Role-exit theory and marital discord following extended military deployment. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, 44(3), 169-174. doi:10.1111/j.1744-6163.2008.00171.x

SUMMARY: Shifting roles (i.e., husband/wife, caretaker) within a couple can be difficult to adapt to, especially for married couples experiencing lengthy military deployments. This study examined military couples' roles at various stages of a deployment and assessed a counseling (intervention) approach for adapting to a shift in roles. Overall, findings revealed the intervention was successful for most couples.

KEY FINDINGS:

- At post-intervention, six out of the ten couples indicated improvement in their marriages by incorporating the counseling approach to adjust roles and maintain their relationships following deployment.
- Three couples who had a spouse deploy longer than 18 months and/or deployed frequently did not report improvement in marital relationship; these couples struggled to adapt to changing roles.
- Healthy communication, faith and religious beliefs, and maintaining a sense of self and empowerment were all key factors that contributed to the success of couples following the role intervention.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop curricula to help military families discuss individual and family roles prior to deployment to prepare them for shifting roles during deployment
- Enhance education for military families related to healthy communication and maintaining a sense of self and empowerment
- Offer workshops for military families to help them learn about personal and community resources that may help them overcome marital difficulties during a deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote programs that assist Service members and their families maintain healthy relationships
- Recommend education for service providers around the possible benefits of communication, faith, and maintaining a sense of self and empowerment for military families
- Encourage partnerships among military-based and community-based programs to help military families feel more comfortable participating in family leisure activities that are not on installations

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METHODS

- Couples who sought treatment for help with marital difficulties were randomly selected to participate.
- Husbands and wives attended a minimum of 10 sessions and met weekly for 90 minutes.
- Interviews and journaling were used to assess each individual's roles throughout the deployment cycle to examine differences in roles, marital conflict, and outcome of intervention.
- Commonalities in intervention outcomes were assessed across the 10 couples.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 10 married couples between the ages of 19-44 years (husbands M = 34 years; wives = 32 years).
- A majority (five husbands; six wives) were White, followed by Black (four husbands; three wives), and Latino/a (one husband and one wife).
- All Service members were husbands with a range of 2-18 years (M = 10 years) in the military and had deployed at least once; average deployment length was 18 months.

LIMITATIONS

- There was no clear description as to how the data were analyzed, thus it is not possible to know how the authors arrived at their conclusions or replicate the study.
- The study was not specific in reporting its findings as it was unclear when data were collected and no comparison between pre- and post-intervention was provided.
- Direct quotes or examples of participant journaling was not provided, thus it may be difficult to determine the reliability of the study's findings.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Derive a sample of military couples who were not seeking treatment for marital difficulties as a comparison group to determine how the intervention works across all types of couples
- Examine how deployed female Service members and their spouses adjust roles during deployment and how this impacts their relationships
- Identify how communication, faith and religious beliefs, and sense of self and empowerment each contribute to the success of couples maintaining relationships following deployment

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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