

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Military-Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Intimate Relationship Behaviors: A Developing Dyadic Relationship Model

Gerlock, A. A., Grimesey, J., & Sayre, G. (2014). Military-related posttraumatic stress disorder and intimate relationship behaviors: A developing dyadic relationship model. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 40 (3), 344-356.
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SUMMARY: Twenty-three couples, in which one partner was a Veteran, were selected from a larger qualitative sample to better understand the impact of war zone deployment on intimate relationships. Results found that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by war-zone deployment experiences negatively impacted current or new relationships. Six relationship themes and three relationship qualities emerged from the qualitative interviews as areas where PTSD impacted couples greatly.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Results indicated that combat-related PTSD negatively impacted existing or new intimate relationships due to unique factors it brings into the relationship (i.e. chemical dependency, trauma symptoms).
- Relationship themes (areas where PTSD impacted couple functioning) and relationship qualities (characteristics prominent in relationships with PTSD) were two categories that emerged from the data.
- Six themes (communication, caregiving, community, disability, responsibility, and trauma) and three relationship qualities (i.e. mutuality, balanced locus of control, and weakness tolerance) were shown to impact each partner's ability to resolve conflict and communicate effectively.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Enhance education, activities, and curriculum related to positive coping behaviors for military couples dealing with PTSD symptoms
- Offer workshops during reintegration to help families and Service members adjust to the Service member's return, especially when deployment included combat exposure
- Disseminate information regarding possible symptoms of mental health problems Service members may face after deployment and where individuals and families can find help for those problems

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, their partners, and children
- Promote reintegration programs that include attention to assisting Service members' families in adjusting to their return
- Recommend partnerships among military-based and community-based programs to help military families gain peer and community support during and after deployment

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METHODS

- Data were gathered from the Relationships and PTSD Study, a qualitative study examining the experiences of Intimate Partner Violence with a sample of 441 couples.
- Twenty-three couples were selected based on criteria such as, clear audio recording, appropriate length response, and detailed responses.
- Analyses used a modified grounded theory methodology, which examined the impact of Veteran's PTSD on an intimate relationship including conflict resolution and dyadic functioning.

PARTICIPANTS

- Twenty-three couples comprised of military Veterans and their female partners participated in the study.
- Thirteen couples identified as having self-reported intimate partner violence (IPV), whereas 10 reported as not engaging in IPV.
- The couples' ages ranged from 27-83 years and were comprised of the following ethnic and racial backgrounds: Black (n=7), Asian-American (n=2), White (n=27), Latino (n=2), and Multiracial/Other (n=8).
- Veterans represented the following military branches: Army (n=14), Marines (n=5), Navy (n=2), Air Force (n=1), and multiple branches (n=1).

LIMITATIONS

- Selected participants (i.e., couples) may differ from non-participants in a way that is not measured but affected the results and generalizability of findings.
- Study did not specifically explain inter-rater reliability and validity in using qualitative coding techniques among the research study team, which could influence results, such as categories and themes stemming from partner interviews.
- Other untested variables may be confounding results, such as the impact of intimate partner violence.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Focus on couples with a partner with combat-related PTSD to differentiate between behaviors of intimate partner violence and PTSD symptoms
- Examine characteristics or skills of couples who are able to effectively manage PTSD symptoms
- Execute qualitative studies on couples with a partner with war-zone related PTSD from various sites and random sampling to provide generalizable results

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