

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
National
Guard

Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms Among National Guard Soldiers Deployed to Iraq: Associations With Parenting Behaviors and Couple Adjustment

Gewirtz, A. H., Polusny, M. A., DeGarmo, D. S., Khaylis, A., & Erbes, C. R. (2010). Posttraumatic stress symptoms among National Guard soldiers deployed to Iraq: associations with parenting behaviors and couple adjustment. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 78*(5), 599-610. doi:10.1037/a002571

SUMMARY: National Guard members' relationships with their partners and children can be impacted by military life. This study examined the relationship between posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, perceived parenting behaviors, and couple adjustment in the context of social support, deployment injury, and alcohol use by the Service members.

KEY FINDINGS:

- PTSD symptoms negatively impacted both self-reported couple adjustment and perceived parenting behaviors.
- Soldiers who sustained injury on deployment reported increased levels of PTSD, which negatively impacted their parenting.
- Soldiers who reported PTSD symptoms tended to endorse more problematic alcohol use.
- Higher perceived social support prior to returning home from deployment predicted more effective perceived parenting one year later; this social support also appeared to protect these Soldiers from higher rates of PTSD.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate Service members prior to deployment regarding the importance of maintaining strong support networks during deployment
- Offer workshops to help Service members and their partners learn about PTSD, known contributing factors, and how to cope with it after deployment
- Disseminate parenting tips for Service members returning from deployment, specifically with regard to parenting during reintegration and in the context of PTSD symptoms

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend the development of parenting classes on installations for Service members who are parents and returning from deployment
- Encourage collaboration between the National Guard and Military Reserve command structure to develop and support services for National Guard and Reserve Service members with PTSD symptoms
- Recommend professional education on combat-related PTSD for professionals who work with Service members and their families, especially community-based professionals working with National Guard or Reserve Service members

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METHODS

- Data were collected via self-report questionnaires that were administered to the Soldiers at two time points: Time 1 was one month prior to returning home and Time 2 was one year after returning home.
- Information gathered at Time 1 included PTSD symptoms and social support and data gathered at Time 2 included PTSD symptoms, problematic alcohol use, perceptions of parenting behaviors, couple adjustment, and physical injury sustained during deployment.
- Demographic variables that were known to impact the study variables were also measured to ensure they did not confound the outcomes: previous deployment status, race/ethnicity, and number of minor children in the home.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 468 male National Guard Soldiers from the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry, deployed to Iraq (OIF) from March 2006 to July 2007. Average deployment period was 16 months and 60% had been previously deployed at least once. No rank data were provided.
- The participants were part of a larger study of the entire brigade combat team, but only Soldiers who endorsed being a father were included in this study.
- Participants were on average 36 years old, 74% were married, and the average number of minor children in the home was 1.35. Participants were White (89%), Black (5%), and Latino (6%).

LIMITATIONS

- The study utilized one specific Army National Guard combat brigade team, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other National Guard units or other military branches.
- Self-report questionnaires were the only source of data, meaning that Soldiers' personal bias or social desirability could have impacted their answers, impacting the validity of the data.
- While some variables were measured at both Time 1 and Time 2 (i.e., PTSD symptoms), most were only measured at one time or the other, meaning causality cannot be determined.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine similar data points with female Service members who are mothers, as well as with racial/ethnic minority populations
- Investigate the relationship between combat-related PTSD, parenting behaviors, and child adjustment
- Utilize multiple methods of data gathering (e.g., observational measures of parenting, spouse and child reports) to improve validity

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