

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Family Support, Family Stress, and Suicidal Ideation in a Combat-Exposed Sample of OEF/OIF Veterans

Gradus, J. L., Smith, B. N., & Vogt, D. (2015). Family support, family stress, and suicidal ideation in a combat-exposed sample of OEF/OIF veterans. *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping: An International Journal*, 28(6), 706-715.
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SUMMARY: Iraq and Afghanistan combat-exposed Veterans completed questionnaires about family support and family stressors during deployment, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression symptoms, and suicidal ideation. In general, Veterans' reports of family support and family stress were related to mental health symptoms.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Veterans who reported higher levels of family support during deployment reported lower levels of PTSD symptoms, depression symptoms, and suicidal ideation.
- Veterans' reports of high levels of family stress during deployment were associated with greater PTSD symptoms, depression symptoms, and suicidal ideation.
- PTSD and depression symptoms mediated the relationships between family stress, family support, and suicidal ideation, suggesting that mental health impacted for the relationship between family-related factors and suicidal ideation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer courses for family members about how to provide emotional support to Service members during deployment
- Provide support groups or programs for at-home family members to help them cope effectively with stressors during deployment
- Host professional development trainings for professionals who work with military families about warning signs of suicidal ideation

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend pre-deployment family programs emphasize the importance of family support to the mission, and suggest specific ways in which families can support their Service members
- Encourage regular updates of educational materials about traumatic stress and social support for professionals who work with military families
- Support initiatives to develop more workshops for military families to learn about the relationships between traumatic stress, deployment, and social support

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METHODS

- Participants were randomly selected from a Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) roster of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans.
- Only Veterans with combat experience were included in the sample and they were contacted via mail to complete questionnaires at home.
- Participants completed measures of family and friend deployment support, family stressors, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, depression symptoms, and suicidal ideation.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans (n=978) who separated from service between 2008 and 2010. The sample included 58% Active Duty and 42% Reserve Components.
- Veterans represented the following service branches: 64% Army, 16% Navy, 13% Air Force, 6% Marines, less than 1% Coast Guard.
- The average age was 35 years, and 45% were male and 55% were female. The sample was predominately White (74%); Black (14%) and Latino (12%) were also represented in the sample.

LIMITATIONS

- The data were cross-sectional, and therefore, causality cannot be inferred.
- Data on suicidal ideation was recoded into a “yes or no” variable. Therefore, degree of suicidal ideation could be not examined, which limits the interpretation of results.
- The authors based conclusions on data gathered at two different time points (deployment and post-deployment), which makes it impossible to exclude bias due to time-based effects of those variables.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine differences in mental health and suicidal ideation between Active Duty and Reserve Veterans
- Explore other variables that likely contribute to suicidal ideation among combat-exposed Veterans (e.g., severity of combat experience)
- Include data from Service members and their family members’ experiences at different time intervals (e.g., one year after deployment)

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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