

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Spouse Psychological Well-Being: A Keystone to Military Family Health

Green, S., Nurius, P. S., & Lester, P. (2013). Spouse psychological well-being: A keystone to military family health. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 23(6), 753-768. doi:10.1080/10911359.2013.795068

SUMMARY: Female civilian spouses of Active Duty Service members were surveyed to compare distress and stressor levels to community averages. The relationships among family stress and strain, social support, demographic variables, and distress were also assessed. Spouses of Service members reported significantly higher levels of general distress compared to the community average, with family stress and strain contributing significantly to spouses' distress.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Spouses in this sample reported significantly higher levels of general psychological distress than the community average.
- Spouses who reported distress above the community average had significantly less social support and more stressors and strain compared to those below the community average.
- Spouses who have not graduated from college, reported poorer household finances, and first became a parent at age 24 or younger, reported significantly higher distress and family stress and strain as well as lower social support than spouses who had graduated college, reported higher household finances, and became parents at age 25 or older.
- Family stress and strain contributed significantly to spouses' psychological distress after accounting for other predictors.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Design a broad range of supportive resources for Service members and their families, including both in-person and online modalities, helping family members identify and cope effectively with stress pile-up
- Offer military family events to decrease feelings of isolation and increase social networks
- Disseminate information regarding resources available for military spouses who are coping with psychological issues

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Advocate for comprehensive psychological and familial supports for Service members and their families
- Recommend a systematic review of the relationship between distress/stress pile-up, family stress and strain, and social support in Service members and their families
- Encourage collaboration among DoD and community based mental health services to provide comprehensive care for military spouses

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METHODS

- Active Duty Army and Marine Corps families impacted by deployment for OIF/OEF from two West Coast military installations were recruited via mailings and flyers.
- Families with an Active Duty parent either currently deployed or returned from deployment in the previous 12 months were eligible; one parent available and at least one child 6-12 years old were invited to participate.
- Participants were interviewed in their home or another preferred location by trained interviewers.

PARTICIPANTS

- One hundred sixty-one female civilian spouses of Active Duty military Service members participated.
- The majority of participants were White (68%), had a mean age of 33.58 years (SD = 5.38 years), and an average of 2.8 children.
- Sixty-eight percent of the spouses had recently returned from deployment, 32% were currently deployed.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was restricted to Army and Marine Corps families from two military installations; the ability to generalize to other military branches and parts of the country is unknown.
- The self-selected nature of the sample may not include spouses who are struggling more or isolated.
- The small samples of ethnically non-White participants precluded analyses by racial/ethnic groups who may exhibit different patterns of relationships between the variables.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate this research in a more diverse sample would improve generalizability
- Utilize qualitative data to better understand Service members' perspectives of spouses mental health
- Conduct a longitudinal design to help illuminate how stress and strain change over time and how they contribute to pile-up and mental health difficulties

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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