

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Does Reintegration Stress Contribute to Suicidal Ideation Among Returning Veterans Seeking PTSD Treatment?

Haller, M., Angkaw, A. C., Hendricks, B. A., & Norman, S. B. (2016). Does reintegration stress contribute to suicidal ideation among returning veterans seeking PTSD treatment?. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 46(2), 160-171. doi:10.1111/sltb.12181

SUMMARY: High rates of suicide during reintegration to civilian life among OEF/OIF/OND Veterans suggest that this is a time of particularly high stress. Associations between reintegration difficulties, suicidal ideation, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and substance misuse were examined. Findings suggest that difficulty reintegrating to civilian life puts Veterans at risk for suicidal ideation above and beyond the risk of mental health symptoms.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Suicidal ideation was related to greater symptoms of PTSD, depression, and reintegration stress.
- Difficulty reintegrating to civilian life significantly predicted greater suicidal ideation after controlling for PTSD and was marginally associated after controlling for depression.
- Suicidal ideation was related to substance misuse only at high levels of reintegration stress.
- Stressors that increased risk for suicidal ideation included difficulty maintaining military friendships, relationships with relatives, belonging in civilian society, and finding meaning in life.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military families about signs and symptoms of suicidal ideation
- Provide training for military families on available resources and preventative action for individuals at risk for suicide
- Offer workshops to help Service members manage stressors related to reintegrating to civilian life

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote reintegration programs that attend to Service members' potential suicidal ideation
- Recommend partnerships among military-based programs and community help hotlines for the prevention of suicide among Service members, particularly during reintegration to civilian life
- Recommend training of service providers on the unique stressors for military families during the Service member's reintegration to civilian life

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METHODS

- All OEF/OIF/OND Veterans presenting to the San Diego Veterans Affairs (VA) department for assessment or treatment were recruited for the current study.
- All data were collected via self-report questionnaires completed by participating Veterans.
- Associations between difficulties reintegrating to civilian life, suicidal ideation, and mental health symptoms were examined.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 232 OEF/OIF/OND Veterans who were primarily male (95%), had an average age of 33.63 (SD = 8.34) years, and had complete questionnaire data.
- Veterans identified as primarily White (38%), Latino (21%), Black (20%), or Asian-American (11%).
- The sample included Veterans from the Navy (35%), Marines (32%), Army (30%), Air Force (2%), and National Guard (1%).

LIMITATIONS

- The cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for examining the direction of effects of difficulty reintegrating into civilian life, suicidal ideation, and mental health symptoms.
- The measure of suicidal ideation used did not distinguish between passive and potentially imminent suicidal ideation symptoms.
- Participants included only Veterans seeking treatment in the VA and may not generalize to Veterans who do not seek treatment or who seek treatment outside the VA.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct a longitudinal study to assess the effects of stressors related to reintegrating to civilian life, suicidal ideation, and mental health symptoms on one another across time
- Examine which factors, especially reintegration stressors, are strongly related to potentially imminent suicidal ideation or suicide attempts as compared to passive suicidal ideation
- Investigate the effect of family social support on suicidal ideation during reintegration to civilian life

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