

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Army

## Primary Trauma of Female Partners in a Military Sample: Individual Symptoms and Relationship Satisfaction

Hamilton, S., Nelson Goff, B. S., Crow, J. R., & Reisbig, A. M. J. (2009). Primary trauma of female partners in a military sample: Individual symptoms and relationship satisfaction. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 37(4), 336-346. doi:10.1080/01926180802529965

**SUMMARY:** Previous experiences of trauma can greatly impact an individual's quality of life and relationships with others. Trauma in female partners of Soldiers was explored in relation to the relationship quality reported by the couple. Primary trauma symptoms of female partners influenced the perceived relationship satisfaction for both partners.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- When Soldiers' female partners experienced high trauma symptoms, relationship quality decreased, both from the Soldier's perspective and the partner's perspective.
- Soldiers' relationship satisfaction decreased when their female partners reported an increase of arousal symptoms.
- High levels of trauma re-experiencing by female partners was associated with their own decreased relationship satisfaction.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer peer support programs for the Soldiers whose partners have a history of trauma
- Educate couples on how previous trauma experiences can impact relationship quality and functioning
- Interview couples to identify specific challenges that occur with partners' trauma symptoms in order to address those concerns in future support efforts

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that help Soldiers and their partners understand the impact of trauma
- Recommend education for community providers about the impact of partner's trauma and how it can affect Soldiers
- Encourage providers to incorporate the needs of the partners of Soldiers in treatment for mental health difficulties

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## METHODS

- Participants were recruited from two Midwestern towns neighboring two Army posts
- Data were collected through closed- and open-ended surveys that addressed female partners' trauma history and exposure, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other general trauma symptoms, as well as perceived relationship quality from both partners.
- The responses from the female partners were then analyzed in relation to measures of relationship quality.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 44 male Soldiers who had recently returned from Iraq or Afghanistan and their female partners.
- Male Soldiers reported an average age of 31.18 years old ( $SD = 6.90$ ) and their female partners reported an average age of 29.36 years old ( $SD = 6.27$ ).
- Most Soldiers (82.2%) and their partners (77.8%) were White.
- The majority of Soldiers served in Operation Iraqi Freedom (95.6%) and 69% were at the enlisted rank, with an average length of deployment at 10.03 months ( $SD = 3.98$ ).

## LIMITATIONS

- No females Soldiers were sampled in this study, limiting the generalizability of the findings to only male Soldiers and their female partners.
- Male Soldiers' PTSD and trauma were not explored in relation to female partner's primary trauma, which could be an important variable in perception of relationship quality in each partner.
- These data are purely correlational. Therefore it cannot support the claim that female partner's primary trauma experiences cause higher or lower relationship quality.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Use larger and more diverse sample size to allow for more generalizability
- Gather additional information on the relationship between Soldiers' PTSD and trauma as well as their partners' trauma experiences
- Conduct a longitudinal study to examine the nature of the relationship of partner's primary trauma and perceived relationship quality over time

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>