

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Air Force

Development of a Multilevel Prevention Program for Improved Relationship Functioning in Active Duty Military Members

Heyman, R. E., Smith Slep, A. M., Sabathne, C., Eckardt Erlanger, A. C., Hsu, T. T., Snyder, D. K., ... Sonnek, S. M. (2015). Development of a multilevel prevention program for improved relationship functioning in active duty military members. *Military Medicine*, 180(6), 690-696. doi:10.7205/MILMED-D-14-00491

SUMMARY: Active Duty U.S. Air Force Security Forces completed questionnaires and participated in a focus group post-deployment. Participants reported about supports for their intimate relationships. Participants cited a wide range of relationship-oriented topics that would have been helpful to have learned about across all phases of the deployment cycle. Many Service members reported concern that their non-deployed spouse lacked sufficient access to resources.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Before deployment, participants reported that the information about the following topics would have been useful but was not received: managing relationship conflict (81%), talking with children (79%), and maintaining a strong relationship (77%).
- Participants reported that informational needs that arose during deployment but were not met included: detection of relationship problems (96%) and managing fears of infidelity (95%).
- Participants would have appreciated, but did not receive, information about the following post-deployment topics: recovering from infidelity (94%) and easing back into parenting (87%).
- In the focus groups, participants expressed fears that their at-home spouses felt alone and did not have access to resources during deployment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate deploying Service members and their partners about the range of resources/supports available to at-home family members
- Explicitly address issues related to fidelity and relationship conflict in both pre and post-deployment workshops
- Offer classes for reintegrating Service members about how to reconnect with their children after deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage free or low-cost support services for couples that give them structured opportunities to address delicate matters prior to deployment
- Continue to support an array of accessible resources for military spouses during Service members' deployment
- Recommend continued offerings of couple and family-based services during the reintegration period, helping couples and families reconnect

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- At six to nine months after the Iraq deployment, participants were invited to an Air Force base for this research study.
- Participants were in groups of 10-15 people where they completed a short questionnaire and a focus group discussion.
- Interview and self-report questions addressed the impact of deployment on their relationship, prevention services received, and desired prevention activities.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants consisted of 112 Active Duty United States Air Force Security Forces who had been deployed for one year during 2009-2010 and were in a committed relationship at pre-deployment.
- In the sample, the average age was 25.4 years (SD = 5.7) and most of the sample (93%) were male.
- Among the participants, 67% were White, 12% Latino, 11% Black, and 7% Asian-American. Sixty-four percent of the Service members were mid-level enlisted or noncommissioned officers and 24% were junior enlisted.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was limited to one Air Force unit, so findings may differ from other military branches.
- Researchers employed an invalidated measure to examine needs and preferences, so there may be some issues with how valid data from that measure are.
- Information was not provided regarding the methods used to analyze and interpret the focus group data, which limits the ability to adequately assess and replicate the study.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate this study with the same questionnaires and focus group structure with Service members of other military branches
- Gather data that measures differences between men and women in their desires for relationship programming
- Examine the needs and preferences of both Service members of their civilian partners simultaneously

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>