

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Marines

Longitudinal Study of Resilience and Mental Health in Marines Leaving Military Service

Hourani, L., Bender, R. H., Weimer, B., Peeler, R., Bradshaw, M., Lane, M., & Larson, G. (2012). Longitudinal study of resilience and mental health in marines leaving military service. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 139(2), 154-165. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2012.01.008

SUMMARY: Marines with combat exposure who took part in mandatory, pre-separation Transition Assistance Programs (TAP) participated in a longitudinal study of the impacts of risk and protective factors on their mental health following separation from the military. Risk factors for increased mental health problems and functional impairment include higher levels of combat exposure, post-separation civilian life stress, and experiencing multiple areas of physical pain post-separation. Protective factors include higher scores on pre-separation resilience measures and perceived social support.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Combat exposure was related to increased posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, continued mental health problems, and functional impairment after separation.
- Resilience was associated with mental health problems only when measures of functional impairment were included, indicating that the effect of resilience may be in its ability to maintain an individual's functioning despite mental health problems.
- Pre-separation resilience increased the likelihood of improvements for those with mental health problems and functional impairment; higher self-reported resilience was associated with increased age, increased social support, and decreased stress.
- Stress occurring after separation was a strong predictor of new and chronic mental health problems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops for Service members pre-separation regarding stress management that include resilience building activities and strategy development sessions
- Offer transition support services to Service members who are anticipating discharge from the military
- Distribute information to Service members and their families regarding common mental health issues associated with combat exposure and ways to cope with these issues

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support programs that provide services prior to separation, particularly those that focus on increasing resilience among Service personnel, potentially alleviating the demand for post-separation services
- Continue to support post-deployment reintegration workshops to address combat exposure and mental health issues following deployment
- Recommend training for service providers working with military families regarding the impact of deployment, combat exposure, and military separation on mental health outcomes

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METHODS

- Baseline data were collected from a group of active duty Marines at six randomly selected Marine Corps installations who attended mandatory TAP pre-separation briefings.
- Follow-up web or mail surveys occurred post-separation, on average six months after completion of military service.
- Data were collected between January and April 2010.

PARTICIPANTS

- Four hundred seventy-four Marines who completed both the baseline and follow-up surveys were included.
- Age, gender, and ethnicity data for the whole sample were not provided; rather, these data were presented separately for each outcome variable.
- The prevalence of depression at baseline was 50% and 43% at follow-up and PTSD was 28% at baseline and 23% at follow-up.

LIMITATIONS

- Marines who provided follow-up data were significantly more likely to meet criteria for mental health problems, report more life event stress at baseline, were younger, less resilient, and reported fewer combat deployments; therefore, follow-up data may be biased.
- Only Marines were sampled for study, other branches were not represented.
- Low follow-up response rate (19%) limits the generalizability of these findings.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore resilience models that work specifically with military populations that have been exposed to combat
- Examine the impact on mental health outcomes of varying length of time in civilian life with larger and more representative samples of various military branches
- Investigate possible mechanisms to improve the functioning of impacted Service members with combat exposure

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