

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Influence of Spirituality on Depression, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, and Suicidality in Active Duty Military Personnel

Hourani, L. L., Williams, J., Forman-Hoffman, V., Lane, M. E., Weimer, B., & Bray, R. M. (2012). Influence of spirituality on depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and suicidality in active duty military personnel. *Depression Research and Treatment*, 2012, 1-9. doi:10.1155/2012/425463

SUMMARY: Active Duty military personnel participated in a study examining the role of spirituality in mental health problems. Researchers tested whether spirituality moderates the relationships among combat exposure, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidality. High spirituality was a significant protective factor only for depression. Medium levels of spirituality buffered each of the mental health outcomes to some degree.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Overall, spirituality had a positive influence on depression, but not suicidality when controlling for demographic variables, coping behaviors, and combat exposure.
- Spirituality buffered depression and PTSD symptoms, but only among those with low to moderate combat exposure.
- A medium level of spirituality (relative to a high level) was protective of self-reported suicidal ideation and attempts, but only among those who had never deployed.
- Thirty-one percent of the participants met screening criteria for depression, 11% met screening criteria for PTSD, and 6% reported either seriously considering or attempting suicide in the past year.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Partner with military chaplains to coordinate services and support each other's programming for Service members and families who are interested in spiritual activities
- Disseminate a list of spirituality resources available in their local area (including both chaplaincy and non-military resources)
- Enhance education, activities, and curriculum related to coping behaviors and dealing with issues related to the military lifestyle

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage family-oriented programs to provide for chaplaincy support before, during, and after deployment to ensure that Service members have resources to support their spiritual needs
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, their partners, and children
- Recommend professional education including information on military culture for professionals who work with Service members and their families

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METHODS

- Data were derived from a randomly selected group of Active Duty personnel who participated in a large Department of Defense study in 2008 with a response rate of 71%.
- Participants completed anonymous self-report questionnaires containing measures of demographic variables, spirituality, combat exposure, coping, depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideation and attempts during onsite visits to worldwide military installations.
- Participants were classified as high on spirituality if they reported strongly agree to the 2-item measure of spirituality. They were categorized as low on spirituality if they reported disagree or strongly disagree to both items.
- Statistical analyses assessed the prevalence of mental health outcomes by levels of spirituality and combat exposure, and the buffering effect of greater spirituality on the negative mental health effects of combat exposure.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 24,690 Active Duty Service members.
- Among the sample, 28% were in the Air Force, 27% were in the Navy, 24% were in the Army, and 21% were in the Marine Corps.
- Additional demographic data for the sample were not presented.

LIMITATIONS

- The measure of spirituality consisted of a 2-item measure which may be unreliable and limited in scope of spirituality beliefs and/or practices.
- All measures were self-report which may be susceptible to social desirability bias.
- The study was cross-sectional, so causal interpretations are not appropriate.
- The mental health variables used were screening measures and may not be reflective of actual diagnoses.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assess whether the non-deployed group of Service members entered military service with higher levels of suicidal ideation or whether they were deemed ineligible to deploy on mandatory pre-deployment health assessment forms
- Explore the relationship between spirituality and mental health among military spouses and other family members
- Conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate how reports of spirituality might change over time for Service members who have multiple deployments

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