

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Gender Differences in the Expression of PTSD Symptoms Among Active Duty Military Personnel

Hourani, L., Williams, J., Bray, R., & Kandel, D. (2015). Gender differences in the expression of PTSD symptoms among active duty military personnel. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 29, 101-108. doi:10.1016/j.janxdis.2014.11.007

SUMMARY: Active Duty U.S. Military Service members participated in a study examining gender differences in individual posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and symptom clusters after controlling for several covariates. Women expressed more distress across all of the individual PTSD symptoms (except for hyper-vigilance) and symptom clusters compared to men.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Women were more likely than men to meet screening criteria for depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and prescription drug misuse; women were more apt to report a history of sexual abuse and to not have been previously deployed than men.
- Men were more likely than women to meet screening criteria for problem alcohol use, smoking, and illicit drug use; men were also more likely to report high combat exposure.
- Women expressed more distress than men across all of the individual PTSD symptoms except for hyper-vigilance.
- Controlling for trauma type, men and women had similar PTSD rates. Women were more distressed than men by the most violent aspects of warfare specific to wounds and death.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop specific classes for female Service members who are managing PTSD, to address their unique experiences and needs
- Offer classes for Service members and their families about the symptoms and signs of PTSD
- Provide support groups for women as a means of bolstering peer support

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Screen Service members for these chemical and mental health concerns prior to deployment
- Recommend continued support for the care of mental health conditions before, during, and after deployment
- Encourage educational services to family members of Service members managing mental health concerns

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.



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METHODS

- Data were drawn from the 2008 Department of Defense Survey of Health Related Behaviors among Active Duty Military Personnel via random selection and stratification (70% response rate).
- Participants complete a 32-page anonymous survey, which were completed during on-site visits to a military installation.
- Participants completed measures of PTSD symptoms, depression, generalized anxiety disorder, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, combat exposure, demographics, and an item assessing history of sexual abuse.

PARTICIPANTS

- Twenty-four thousand six hundred ninety individuals participated (73% male).
- The average age for women was 27.60 years and 28.60 years for men.
- No additional demographic variables were reported, but participants came from all military branches and results were weighted to reflect the Active Duty military population.

LIMITATIONS

- Many of the measures were screening instruments instead of a standardized assessment or preferred clinical interview which could influence the results of the study.
- The study was cross-sectional and causal conclusions are inappropriate.
- Few demographic variables were presented in this paper; therefore, generalizability of the results is unknown.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate the biological processes underlying gender differences in the manifestation of specific PTSD symptoms
- Examine Service member functioning when exposed to multiple stressful events
- Broaden the focus of inquiry beyond PTSD and also consider comorbid conditions (e.g., depression)

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