

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Emotional Disclosure and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms: Veteran and Spouse Reports

Hoyt, T., & Renshaw, K. D. (2014). Emotional disclosure and posttraumatic stress symptoms: Veteran and spouse reports. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 21(2), 186-206. doi:10.1037/a0035162

SUMMARY: The amount of positive and negative emotions that Service members share with others following deployment may impact later adjustment and well-being. Associations between factors of emotional disclosure (e.g., amount, valence, listener) and posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) were examined among Service members deployed in OEF/OIF and their spouses. Service members were more likely to disclose positive emotions, and while greater disclosure of positive emotions to civilians predicted lower PTSS four to six months later, greater disclosure of positive emotions to other Veterans predicted higher PTSS.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Veterans were significantly more likely to disclose positive emotions than negative emotions.
- Veterans were more likely to disclose negative emotions to others with a shared experience of combat exposure (i.e., other Veterans) than those without shared experiences, but they disclosed positive emotions equally to both groups.
- Greater disclosure of positive emotion to civilians predicted lower PTSS levels four to six months later; however, greater disclosure of positive emotions to other Veterans predicted higher PTSS levels four to six months later.
- Disclosure of negative emotions was not related to later PTSS levels.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide information about the potential benefits (for Service members and their partners) of sharing positive aspects of deployment
- Offer workshops for Service members' partners about how to respond in a supportive manner to disclosures about combat or deployment
- Provide education to military couples about how to communicate positively with one another post-deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend continued support for programs that promote communication within military couples
- Encourage the development and continuation of support group programs that provide Service members a chance to discuss combat experiences with other Veterans
- Promote professional development for providers working with Service members about how to encourage and manage emotional disclosures

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

- Participants were drawn from a larger study of Utah National Guard or Reserve members who deployed to OEF/OIF and their spouses and were recruited at post-deployment workshops.
- Participants completed assessments at both three months post-deployment (Time 1) and four to six months after Time 1 (Time 2).
- The study examined whether emotional disclosure and factors related to that disclosure (e.g., amount, listener, emotional valence) were predictive of later PTSS levels.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 80 male Service members and their female spouses; Service members had an average age of 36.3 years (SD = 8.4) and were primarily White (89%).
- Spouses had an average age of 32.9 years (SD = 7.8) and were primarily White (40%).
- Service members had either been deployed as part of OIF (68%) or OEF (32%).
- On average, couples had been married 11.75 years (SD = 8.55) and had 2.1 children (SD = 1.6).

LIMITATIONS

- Since the sample was made up of primarily White, married couples in which the Service member was a male National Guard or Reserves member, results may not generalize to samples with other military or demographic characteristics.
- All measures were self-report, and participants may have tried to respond in the most socially desirable ways, particularly regarding disclosure.
- Unmeasured variables (e.g., pre-deployment mental health) may have impacted Service members' PTSS levels at follow-up.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine how Service members' emotional disclosure may change over time following deployment
- Explore how early responses to Service member disclosure post-deployment may influence later decisions regarding whether and what to disclose
- Assess whether levels and emotional valence of disclosure differ between Service members with and without clinical PTSS levels

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