

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Exposure, Agency, Perceived Threat, and Guilt as Predictors of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Veterans

Huang, H. H., & Kashubeck-West, S. (2015). Exposure, agency, perceived threat, and guilt as predictors of posttraumatic stress disorder in veterans. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 93*(1), 3-13. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6676.2015.00176.x

SUMMARY: Online survey data from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans was used to assess the relationship between posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and four constructs: combat exposure, perceived threat during combat, causing harm during combat, and combat-related guilt. These four constructs accounted for the majority of differences in PTSD symptoms. A variety of demographic factors were associated with with four constructs explored and PTSD symptom.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Forty-three percent of the participating Veterans had probable PTSD.
- Low rank, being Black, and serving in the Guard forces were positively related to combat exposure, perceived threat during combat, causing harm during combat, guilt, and PTSD symptoms.
- Coupled with demographic characteristics, combat exposure, perceived threat during combat, causing harm during combat, and guilt accounted for 79% of observed variance in PTSD symptoms.
- When Service members reported guilt, along with exposure, perceived threat during combat, or causing harm during combat, they were more likely to report high PTSD symptom severity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Train Service members to re-assess war-zone experiences that may give rise to feelings of guilt, considering their level of choice in the situation
- Offer classes for Veterans' friends and families to help them identify feelings of guilt in Veterans and support help-seeking
- Provide training to Service members in relaxation techniques following deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage installations to implement campaigns highlighting beneficial outcomes of United States involvement in overseas conflict
- Recommend continuing education for mental health practitioners on identifying common causes of guilt and healthy coping resources
- Suggest screenings for Service members following deployment that includes assessment of both direct combat exposure and the aftermath of conflict

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited through National Veteran Organization Facebook pages and university Student Veteran Organizations.
- Participants completed an online survey.
- The survey assessed four constructs: combat exposure (exposure to combat, aftermath of combat, and atrocity exposure), perceived threat (fear for one's own safety in the war-zone), guilt (cognitive and emotional appraisals related to traumatic war-zone events) and agency (combat participation that causes harm to others).

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 289 Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans.
- Veterans were from the Army (46%), Marines (20%), Navy (10%), and Air Force (8%).
- Respondents reported an average age of 30 years (SD = 8 years, range = 19-60), and were predominantly White (66%).
- Fifty-four percent of respondents were deployed once, 30% were deployed twice, and 14% were deployed three or more times.

LIMITATIONS

- The study excluded participants who reported suicidal ideation in the past three months which may have biased the findings.
- Participants were recruited from existing peer groups and may not be reflective of the general Veteran population.
- The survey was hosted online and may have excluded those without regular Internet access.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine both the negative and possible positive correlates of guilt in behavioral self-monitoring
- Explore the role of group cohesion in predicting guilt
- Disaggregate general guilt, guilt resulting from inaction, and guilt resulting from negative actions, and the implications of each for PTSD

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