

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## Examining the Link Between Exercise and Marital Arguments in Clinical Couples

Johnson, L. N., Selland, B., Mennenga, K. D., Oka, M., Tambling, R. B., Anderson, S. R., & Miller, R. (2017). Examining the link between exercise and marital arguments in clinical couples. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, 6(3), 226-234. doi:10.1037/cfp0000085

**SUMMARY:** Physical exercise has the potential to alleviate marital tension; however, less is known about the relationship between exercise and marital tension in couples who are receiving relationship therapy. This study had 36 clinically-distressed couples complete online questionnaires about their hours of exercise and marriage satisfaction and stress on a daily basis. The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between exercise and marital tension. Results revealed a negative impact of exercise on marriage in clinically-distressed couples.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- The more hours that a female exercise, the more likely that both she and her male partner will report an increase of argument intensity.
- Male stress level, but not male hours of exercise, was significantly related to marital argument intensity.
- Argument intensity was not related to marital satisfaction or the topic of the argument.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Provide workshops that offer information to military couples on ways of reducing marital tension and increasing family well-being (e.g., exercising together, listening without judgement)
- Receive continuing education regarding the role of exercise on marital satisfaction

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops for military couples on how to soothe marital tension and be attentive to each other's feelings
- Provide a wide selection of child care options so that military couples have the opportunity to build cohesion through exercising together

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that aim to promote marital satisfaction in military couples through exercises
- Encourage awareness campaign on military bases regarding the detrimental effect of stress on marital satisfaction and how exercise may affect marital satisfaction in both directions

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 recruited when they requested treatment for marital problems in community clinics.
- Each day participants completed the Daily Diary of Events in Couple Therapy online. Also, they completed measures that assessed relationship satisfaction and stress, topic and intensity of arguments, and hours of exercise.
- Data were analyzed to examine the relationship between hours of exercise and marital argument.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 36 married heterosexual couples who received couple therapy.
- The average age of male participants was 30.1 years (SD = 6.7) and the average age of female participants was 28.8 years (SD = 6.0).
- All but one participants were White; the race/ethnicity of the non-White participant was not reported.

## LIMITATIONS

- The cross-sectional design of the study made it impossible to understand the causal relationship between exercise and marital tension.
- Almost all participants were White, so the results of the study cannot be generalized to couples of other races/ethnicities.
- The questionnaire was not validated; therefore, the validity and reliability of the questionnaire was unknown.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Design longitudinal studies to examine the potential causal relationship between physical exercise and marital tension
- Recruit participants from diverse race/ethnic backgrounds so that the study results can be better generalized to diverse groups
- Examine how other factors (e.g., financial stress, number of children) influence the relationship between physical exercise and marital tension

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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