



Post-9/11 Veterans and Their Partners Improve Mental Health Outcomes With a Self-Directed Mobile and Web-Based Wellness Training Program: A Randomized Controlled Trial

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SUMMARY: The experience of deployment is often associated with mental, physical, and relationship challenges for Veterans. Veterans' and their partners' mental health and pain levels were compared before and after a wellness training program called Mission Reconnect, which integrated stress-release strategies and couples' massages. Results suggested that the program improved Veterans' and partners' well-being.

KEY FINDINGS

- Veterans of the Mission Reconnect group showed more improvements in mental health measures at week 8 and week 16 than any other groups.
- The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement program group showed modest gain in mental health, and adding the Mission Reconnect program to it resulted in more improvements.
- Weekly couples' massages led to significant reductions in pain, stress, anxiety, and depression.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

Programs could:

- Distribute informational booklets about existing mental health support that is available for military families
- Provide classes for military couples about activities (e.g., massage) that they can enjoy together
- Offer support groups for military partners to discuss their experience of spouse deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES

Policies could:

- Continue to promote research on brief and affordable mental health programs for military couples
- Encourage collaboration between military and civilian mental health organizations to guarantee a wide range of support and resources are available for military families
- Recommend military programs for Service members experiencing physical or mental health symptoms to include their spouses in program activities

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Participants were recruited through the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America website, emails, and social media channels from four different regions of the U.S.
- The couples were evenly and randomly assigned to four conditions: Mission Reconnect only, Mission Reconnect plus the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program only, and wait list.
- The Mission Reconnect program provided couples with stress-release techniques and required each couple to exchange massages weekly, whereas the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement program offered a weekend retreat focused on relationship building.
- Participants' mental health and pain level were assessed at baseline, week eight, and week 16 (end of study) and compared across the four experimental conditions.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 160 Veteran-partner dyads; 21 of the couples were both Veterans, and all the Veterans had a history of deployment since the start of the current conflicts.
- The average ages of the Veterans and partners were 33.4 years (N = 181, SD = 6.6, 81% male) and 32.4 years (N = 139, SD = 7.0, 7% male), respectively, and the majority of the participants were White (53%), followed by Latino (25%), Black (12%), Asian American (5%), Native American (4%), and other (1%).
- The Veterans served in the following branches: Army (56%), Marine (24%), Navy (13%), and Air Force (7%).

LIMITATIONS

- The participants' pre-existing mental and physical health symptoms were not assessed, which may confound the study results.
- The study only lasted for 16 weeks, therefore the long-term effect of the program is unknown.
- Participants were required to physically attend a meeting at the beginning of the study and people who could not attend were excluded, therefore, the findings may have been different if these people were included.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Design a similar wellness training program for Veterans who are single
- Examine the long-term effects of the program on Veterans and their partners' well-being
- Study the effectiveness of the program on Active Duty Service members' and their partners' mental health

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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