

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Battling on the Home Front: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Conflict Behavior Among Military Couples

Knobloch-Fedders, L. M., Caska-Wallace, C., Smith, T. W., & Renshaw, K. (2017). Battling on the home front: Posttraumatic stress disorder and conflict behavior among military couples. *Behavioral Therapy, 48*(2), 247-261.
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SUMMARY: The presence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) could negatively affect couples' level of intimacy and the way couples solve conflict. To explore the impact relationships have on conflict resolution, this study compared military couples' interpersonal conflict behavior among Service members with and without PTSD. Overall, findings revealed that presence of PTSD negatively affected couples' interpersonal behavior.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Service members with PTSD tended to exhibit more independent and solitary behavior, thus they had less interest in connecting with their spouses.
- Hostility (e.g., belittling, distancing) was greater among couples with PTSD; where both partners were equally aggressive toward one another.
- PTSD contributed to greater controlling behavior (e.g., less partner independence) and more blame, and couples with PTSD were less likely to care and understand one another during disagreements.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Host workshops for military couples with PTSD that teach interpersonal communication and conflict resolution skills
- Provide support groups for Service members and their partners to connect with others who have PTSD
- Disseminate information on PTSD symptoms and problems Service members may face after deployment and where families can find help for those problems

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend professional development courses for community providers to educate them about unique factors that contribute to marital strain for military couples
- Continue to support programs that address the unique challenges faced by couples with PTSD
- Promote the development of structured activities that focus on communication and conflict resolution for military families on and off military installations

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METHODS

- The sample was recruited from a VA hospital, post-deployment workshops, and state-sponsored programs for Service members and their families.
- Questionnaires assessed stressful military experiences (Service member only), and relationship quality, and couples also engaged in a conflict discussion task to assess their conflict behavior.
- Statistical analyses were conducted to evaluate the degree that military-related PTSD was associated with poor interpersonal behavior among military couples.

PARTICIPANTS

- In the PTSD group (n = 32), 27 were married and were on average 32 years old (SD = 7.88). In this group, 89% were White, 7% were Multiracial, and 4% were Asian American.
- Couples in the non-PTSD group (n = 32) were all married and on average 33 years old (SD = 7.83). In this group, 95% were White, 3% were Multiracial, and 2% were Asian American.
- A majority of the sample were in the National Guard (55%), followed by 31% in Active Duty, and 14% in Reserves. Service members had served in the Army (78%), Navy (2%), Air Force (10%), and Marines (10%).

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was small and homogeneous, therefore findings may not be appropriate for the larger population of military couples.
- Data were collected at one time point, thus it is difficult to determine the long-term effects of PTSD on couple's interpersonal behavior and relationship quality.
- The design of the 17-minute conflict discussion may have limited the couple's ability to truly portray emotions and feelings, therefore skewing study findings.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assess the effects of PTSD as it influences couples' interpersonal behavior and relationship quality among a larger and more heterogeneous sample of military couples
- Collect data at multiple time points, such as assessing couples' conflict behavior before, during, and after a program focused on decreasing hostility and promoting positive connection
- Examine individual perceptions of PTSD and its link to impaired intimacy among couples

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