

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Generalized Anxiety and Relational Uncertainty as Predictors of Topic Avoidance During Reintegration Following Military Deployment

Knobloch, L. K., Ebata, A. T., McGlaughlin, P. C., & Theiss, J. A. (2013). Generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty as predictors of topic avoidance during reintegration following military deployment. *Communication Monographs*, 80(4), 452-477. doi:10.1080/03637751.2013.828159

SUMMARY: Service members and their romantic partners often encounter communication problems after deployment. In one study, 220 returning Service members talked about their topic avoidance (i.e., topics that they avoided talking about) with their partner after deployment. In a second study, 118 military couples answered questions regarding their symptoms of generalized anxiety, relational uncertainty (i.e., having questions about the status of a relationship), and topic avoidance. Results revealed eight avoided topics and indicated an association between anxiety, relational uncertainty, and topic avoidance.

KEY FINDINGS:

- About half (51%) of Service members in study one reported being reluctant to discuss certain topics with their partner after reunion; commonly avoided topics were dangers and experiences during deployment, household stressors, etc.
- Couples in study two reported topic avoidance in the first 30 days after returning from deployment.
- Generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty of Service members, but not their partners, were associated with topic avoidance.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Disseminate information regarding common topics that military couples avoid during the reintegration stage, and ways to talk about these topics safely
- Encourage military couples to participate in workshops that focus on developing communication skills and healthy relationships
- Offer workshops to Service members to decrease their relational uncertainty

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support reintegration programs that assist military families to readjust to Service members' return
- Promote the development of marriage education programs that focus on improving military couples' communication skills
- Recommend the use of marriage and relationship handbooks as an integral part of family readiness programs

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited by advertising at reintegration workshops and online forums. Service members who were in a romantic relationship and returned from a deployment in the last six months were qualified for study one. In study two, one or both partners had to recently return from deployment to be eligible to participate.
- In study one, Service members answered an open-ended question "Now that you are reunited, what topics ... do you avoid talking about with your partner?". In study two, participants' generalized anxiety, relational uncertainty, and topic avoidance were assessed three times (30 days apart).
- Data were analyzed to extract common avoided topics in study one and the associations between generalized anxiety, relational uncertainty, and topic avoidance in study two.

PARTICIPANTS

- In study one, participants were 220 Service members (185 males) with an average age of 32.69 years (age range = 18-57 years, SD = 8.45); most of them were White (80%), followed by Black (6%), Latino (5%), and other (9%).
- In study two, participants were 118 heterosexual military couples with an average age of 33.03 years (age range = 21-63 years, SD = 6.84); most of them were White (84%), followed by Black (4%), Latino (6%), and other (6%).
- The military branches that study one participants served in were: National Guard (64%), Army (28%), Navy (3%), Air Force (3%), and Marines (2%). The military branches that Service members in study two served in were: Army (57%), Army National Guard (21%), Air National Guard (13%), Air Force (6%), and Marines (3%).

LIMITATIONS

- Most participants were affiliated with the Army and the National Guard, so caution must be taken to generalize the results to other military branches.
- Topic avoidance was measured by an open-ended question in study one but several closed-ended questions in study; therefore, it was hard to directly compare topic avoidance in the two studies.
- Only heterosexual couples were included in study two, so findings cannot be generalized to same-sex couples.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Recruit participants from all military branches so that the findings can be better generalized
- Explore other factors (e.g., depression) that may cause topic avoidance in the reintegration period
- Conduct longitudinal studies to examine the causal relationship between generalized anxiety, relational uncertainty, and topic avoidance

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