

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Relational Turbulence Among Military Couples After Reunion Following Deployment

Knobloch, L. K., McAninch, K. G., Abendschein, B., Ebata, A. T., & McLaughlin, P. C. (2016). Relational turbulence among military couples after reunion following deployment *Personal Relationships*, 23(4), 742-748. doi:10.1111/per.12148

SUMMARY: Reintegration following deployment can be challenging for Service members and their at-home partners. This study examined how both partners' depressive symptoms, uncertainty about the relationship, and disruption of each other's routines impacted each partners' feelings of how tumultuous their relationship was (i.e., relational turbulence), and assessed how these relationship dynamics changed over the first three months of the reintegration period. While most couples reported low levels of distress during the reintegration period, a portion struggled with changing relationship dynamics.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Overall, participants reported low levels of depressive symptoms and relational turbulence.
- Depressive symptoms and feelings of relationship turmoil were similar across the three month period, while uncertainty about the relationship and disruption in routines increased from the one to two month follow-up.
- The overall measures of uncertainty about the relationship and disruption in routines remained higher from the two to three month follow-up for both men and women, which supports the theory that military couples may experience a short honeymoon phase, followed by a more challenging period.
- Depressive symptoms felt by one partner impacted both partners' feelings of relationship turmoil.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer relationship education programming to couples four to eight weeks after homecoming rather than immediately following the Service member's return
- Collaborate with community organizations that offer interventions to couples that address both mental health issues and relationship issues
- Disseminate information to returning Service members and their at-home partners regarding potential relationship challenges and where couples can find help for these problems

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote reintegration programs that address changing relationship dynamics in the post-deployment couple relationship
- Recommend integrating relationship education into existing service delivery systems for military couples
- Recommend education for service providers around the importance of helping military couples navigate relationship challenges during the reintegration period

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.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Participants included 118 heterosexual couples (236 individuals) from 20 states where one or both partners had returned from a deployment in the last 30 days.
- Participants were recruited via advertisements on social media and by emailing study information to key military personnel (e.g., family readiness officers, chaplains).
- Service members' and partners' self-reported depressive symptoms, uncertainty about the relationship, disruption of each other's routines, and relationship turmoil were assessed and compared across three time points (i.e., less than one month, 2 months, and 3 months following return from deployment).

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants ranged in age from 21-63 years (M=33.03 years, SD=6.84 years).
- Participants were White (84%), Latino (6%), Black (4%), Native American (3%), Asian (2%), and Other (1%).
- Most couples were married (98%) for an average of 9.61 years (SD=5.67 years), and 14% of the couples were both in the military.
- More than half of the Service members served in the Army (57%), 13% in the Air National Guard, 6% in the Air Force, and 3% in the Marines.

LIMITATIONS

- Due to a convenience sample that was racially homogeneous, conclusions may not generalize to the larger military population.
- An overreliance on self-report data could introduce bias, affecting the study's reliability.
- The study's descriptive findings hinted at trends that were unable to be explored with only three time points.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Expand the study to reach more racially diverse participants within a randomly selected sample in order to increase the ability to generalize the study's findings
- Incorporate multiple reporters or multiple modes of data (i.e., self-report and observational measures) to increase the study's reliability
- Collect more waves of data over a longer period of time to better understand trends in relationship dynamics

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>