

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Stress and Coping on the Home Front: Guard and Reserve Spouses Searching for a New Normal

Lapp, C., Taft, L., Tollefson, T., Hoepner, A., Moore, K., & Divyak, K. (2010). Stress and coping on the home front: Guard and reserve spouses searching for a new normal. *Journal of Family Nursing*, 16(1), 45-67. doi:10.1177/1074840709357347

SUMMARY: Interview data from National Guard and Reserve spouses were utilized to identify sources of stress throughout the deployment cycle and explore spouses' coping strategies. Stressors varied from pre-deployment through post-deployment, as did coping responses. Spouses also expressed the need for a connection to individuals currently in the same position.

KEY FINDINGS:

- During pre-deployment, the major source of stress for spouses was a feeling of putting their lives on hold.
- During deployment, five major stressors were reported: (1), worrying (danger, changes in the relationship), (2) waiting (phone calls, emails, etc.), (3) going it alone (taking over previously shared responsibilities), (4) pulling double duty (childcare and home care) and (5) loneliness.
- The primary stressor during post-deployment was arriving at a new normal relationship and household functioning when the member returns home.
- During pre-deployment, spouses primarily used social support and preparing for the separation as coping mechanisms. During deployment, keeping busy, staying connected to the Service member, managing personal needs (e.g. "me-time"), and seeking support primarily from other home-front spouses were used. During post-deployment, family briefing sessions were reported as helpful as well as maintaining patience and space for the Service member when they returned.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups to military spouses throughout the deployment cycle
- Continue to offer childcare and other services to military spouses throughout the deployment cycle to reduce the burden of increased responsibilities
- Educate military couples about expectations and ways to stay connected with each other during deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend training for service providers working with military spouses regarding common stressors experienced by spouses during deployment
- Encourage collaboration among DoD and community-based programs serving military families to provide better comprehensive care to military families throughout the deployment cycle
- Continue to provide support for programs that work to increase family readiness

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METHODS

- This was a qualitative study using open-ended, semi-structured interviews that lasted an average of 60 minutes.
- Participants were military spouses of National Guard and Reserve members (branches not specified) who were currently deployed or in the post-deployment phase.
- Participants were recruited via publicized TV and newspaper announcements.

PARTICIPANTS

- Eighteen National Guard and Reserve spouses from rural Wisconsin participated.
- Sixteen (89%) of spouses were female and the mean age of participants was 39 years.
- Data regarding race/ethnicity were not provided.

LIMITATIONS

- This was a small convenience sample of spouses living in rural Wisconsin; therefore, there is a selection bias and the findings may not be generalizable to other military spouses.
- The authors did not specify their qualitative analysis strategies, thus it is unclear how themes were selected, which could bias the results.
- The constructs of stress and coping were confounded by the fact that some of the participants had children and some did not. Stressors and coping strategies are likely to be different for those spouses with children versus those without.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore the stressors and coping mechanisms of male at-home spouses
- Examine how previous exposure to military experiences prior to deployment assists with the coping of impending deployments and post-deployments for at-home spouses
- Utilize a larger, more representative sample of spouses from different service branches and components

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