

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

An Exploration of Army Wives' Responses to Spousal Deployment: Stressors and Protective Factors

Larsen, J. L., Clauss-Ehlers, C. S., & Cosden, M. A. (2015). An exploration of army wives' responses to spousal deployment: Stressors and protective factors. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, 4(4), 212-228.
doi:10.1037/cfp0000049

SUMMARY: Researchers conducted interviews with Soldiers' wives regarding their stress and resilience across the deployment cycle. Wives cited an array of stressors that arose during the deployment cycle, including loss of control, managing perceived threats and uncertainty, and adjusting to changes. Wives also noted many protective factors that bolstered their resilience, such as having a sense of purpose, open communication with their deployed spouse, and having social and practical support.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Wives of deployed Soldiers described struggling with loss of control over decisions, fear of being alone, and lack of information about their spouses' location and exposure to danger.
- They also reported difficulties with closeness prior to deployment, noting an interplay between the desires for closeness and feeling a need for distance to prepare for deployment.
- Numerous protective factors emerged, including understanding military culture, a sense of purpose during deployment, open communication with deployed spouse, and role flexibility.
- Wives described both social and practical support and a sense of belonging as helpful during deployment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide classes for couples during the pre-deployment phase to support them in discussing and planning for upcoming changes
- Offer support programs for spouses to foster the exchange of social support during deployment
- Host workshops for couples during the reintegration phase to help them reconnect and cope with changes in the family

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to provide support for programs for spouses of deployed Service members
- Recommend education of community providers about the family challenges of deployment
- Encourage Service members and their spouses to participate in marriage enrichment programs, which may be especially beneficial after deployment

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.



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METHODS

- Participants were recruited at community meetings and via study flyers posted on bases.
- Women completed two-hour semi-structured in-person interviews regarding areas of stress and coping across the deployment cycle.
- Qualitative analyses were used to code interviews such that researchers were able to identify recurrent themes present in the interviews.

PARTICIPANTS

- The participants were 18 women from two Army bases in the southwest U.S., all of whom had a husband who was deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.
- The women were White (75%), Latina (19%), and Black (6%), and ranged in age from 22 to 40 years.
- Slightly over half of the participants had experienced two or more spousal deployments, and the women had two children on average.
- Over half (59%) of the women were married to officers, while the remaining 41% were married to enlisted Soldiers.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was limited to female spouses of Soldiers in the southwest; thus, results may not be generalizable to the broader population of military spouses.
- The study employed snowball sampling to recruit participants, so the participants may differ from non-participants in important ways.
- Spouses of officers were over-represented in the sample, limiting the generalizability of the findings.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include male spouses of deployed Service members in order to obtain a broader understanding of the experience of deployment for all spouses
- Follow spouses over a longer period of time after homecoming to examine long-term sources of stress and resilience
- Consider the sources of stress and coping resources of spouses of members of the National Guard and Reserves

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