

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Multiple  
Branches

## Reintegration Stress and Family Mental Health: Implications for Therapists Working With Reintegrating Military Families

Marek, L. I., & D'Aniello, C. (2014). Reintegration stress and family mental health: Implications for therapists working with reintegrating military families. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 36 (4), 443-451. doi:10.1007/s10591-014-9316-4

**SUMMARY:** Families experience stress during the deployment cycle, including the reintegration stage. This study examined factors that impact reintegration stress levels by collecting survey data from Service members and their partners regarding posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnoses or related symptoms, mental health, and reintegration stress. Results indicated that partners who perceived the Service member as having PTSD-related symptoms, low mental health, and rate their own mental health as low tend to face more reintegration stress.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Over a quarter (27%) of Service members reported having experienced PTSD symptoms without a diagnosis while 32% partners believed the Service member had PTSD symptoms.
- Service members and partners both perceived the partners as more mentally healthy than Service members based on self-reported scores and perceptions of partner's mental health.
- Analysis found partners reporting the Service member having PTSD symptoms and low mental health, while rating their own mental health as low, were likely to experience more reintegration stress.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide materials that illustrate how distress—actual or perceived—in one partner may impact the other partner
- Incorporate lessons for couples to learn coping behaviors together and independently
- Facilitate social activities to bring together families and couples going through reintegration

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Emphasize the importance of Service members and families engaging in regular self-care together
- Recommend professional development for community providers to enhance their ability to work with couples as well as individuals
- Encourage programs to offer stress management skills and techniques on an on-going, consistent basis throughout the deployment cycle

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## METHODS

- Participants were 380 Service members and 295 partners, and were recruited to complete a survey while attending military family events (e.g., Operation Military Kids) across the country; an option for an electronic survey was also made available for interested participants.
- Measures for PTSD diagnosis, belief of exhibiting PTSD-related symptoms, mental health, and reintegration stress were examined based on self-report data.
- PTSD diagnosis and related symptoms, mental health, rank, branch, and time in the military were analyzed for their association with reintegration stress for both the Service members and partners.

## PARTICIPANTS

- To be included in the study, Service members needed to have at least one minor child and one or more deployments; partners had to be in a relationship with a Service member who met inclusion criteria.
- Service members demographics consisted of 92% male with a mean age of 35.5 years and partner demographics consisted of 4% male with a mean age of 35 years.
- For Service members, 80% were enlisted and 20% were officers, with the mean number of years in the military at 13.3 years (range of 2-26 years) and deployments at 2.4 (range 1-6 deployments).

## LIMITATIONS

- The Service members and partners were not linked as couples, so the findings do not show ties between specific couples but only reveal how reintegration stress generally has a relational element.
- Using partner perceptions of PTSD-related symptoms may not be accurate for measuring how PTSD symptoms are associated with reintegration stress.
- The study did not explicitly state how long after post-deployment data were collected, nor did the study collect data on whether participants were already engaged in help-seeking activities.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct analysis in which data from couples could be treated as linked in order to understand the specific relationships and reintegration stress, not just the broad relational aspect
- Include a more objective measure of PTSD-related symptoms that a Service member or partner could use
- Include additional variables, such as length of time in post-deployment and whether help-seeking activities were tried, to gain a better grasp of what influences levels of reintegration stress

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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