

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Emotion Expression, Avoidance and Psychological Health During Reintegration: A Dyadic Analysis of Actor and Partner Associations Within a Sample of Military Couples

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SUMMARY: Whether certain coping strategies are adaptive may depend upon the context and the relationships in which they are used. The effects of Service members' and their partners' use of emotional expression and avoidance on each other's psychological well-being were examined. Generally, individuals' psychological health was better when using emotional expression and poorer when using avoidance, but partners' emotional expression was related to poorer Service members' well-being.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Soldiers and partners who used greater emotional expression and less avoidance had better individual psychological health.
- Overall, Soldiers' and partners' coping strategies did not impact one another's psychological health and coping strategies did not interact to impact either's well-being.
- Among Soldiers with high levels of combat exposure only, greater emotional expression used by partners was associated with poorer Soldier psychological health.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military couples about how coping strategies can affect relationships and about the most adaptive coping strategies post-deployment
- Offer workshops to support Service members post-deployment in adapting their coping strategies from what was useful during deployment to what is useful post-deployment
- Provide military couples with information about communicating and reconnecting post-deployment, as well as relationship resources (e.g., handouts with mental health referrals and useful books or websites with evidence-based relationship information) for distressed couples

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend education for professionals working with military couples about effective post-deployment coping and how it impacts intimate relationships
- Continue to support programs that help Service members adjust to post-deployment, particularly programs for individuals with high combat-exposure
- Recommend collaboration with community mental health services for couples to promote the utilization of relationship interventions post-deployment

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METHODS

- A team of 3,400 Army National Guard Soldiers who had been deployed within the past 18 months and had a spouse or cohabitating partner were recruited via mail and Family Readiness Groups.
- Soldiers and partners completed surveys about personal and military demographic information, resilience, social support, well-being, coping, intimate relationships, and family functioning.
- The effects of Service members' and partners' use of coping strategies and Service members' combat exposure on their own and each other's psychological well-being was examined.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 175 male National Guard Soldiers and their female partners (n = 350).
- Partners were primarily White (95%) and had an average age of 32.3 years (SD = 8.43).
- Service members were primarily White (94%); on average, they were 33.4 years (SD = 8.26) of age, had been in a relationship for 9.70 years (SD = 7.48), and had 1.95 kids (SD = 1.49).
- Service members were mostly enlisted (82%), had spent an average of 11.4 years (SD = 6.79) in the military, and had an average of 1.84 deployments (SD = 0.87) in the past five years.

LIMITATIONS

- The dependent variable was measured using a single question about psychological health and well-being, potentially decreasing validity and limiting conclusions.
- Data from only male Soldiers and female partners was used, making it difficult to generalize to couples with female Service members or to other branches of the military.
- Measures asked about stressors generally, rather than stressors related to reintegration post-deployment, so coping reported was not necessarily coping to military-related stressors.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Compare coping strategies in couples of Service members who were or were not deployed to understand how deployment may impact the use and adaptiveness of coping strategies
- Examine whether different types of partner emotional expression (e.g., empathy versus criticism for negative emotions) may have different effects on combat-exposed Service members
- Investigate whether spouses of Service members with high combat exposure express more negative emotions compared to spouses of Service members with low or no combat exposure

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