

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Stressful Life Events, Anxiety Sensitivity, and Internalizing Symptoms in Adolescents

McLaughlin, K. A., & Hatzenbuehler, M. L. (2009). Stressful life events, anxiety sensitivity, and internalizing symptoms in adolescents. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 118*(3), 659-669. doi:10.1037/a0016499

SUMMARY: Middle school children were assessed at three time points over a school year (7 month period) to examine the role of stressful life events as a risk factor for elevated anxiety sensitivity. Stressful life events were associated with later increases in anxiety sensitivity. Events related to health and family discord predicted increases in anxiety sensitivity over time.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The experience of stressful life events was longitudinally associated with increases in anxiety sensitivity.
- Physical health and family discord events were differentially associated with certain facets of anxiety sensitivity.
- Health-related stressors were predictive of fears of disease and mental incapacitation. Stressors associated with family discord predicted fears of unsteadiness, mental incapacitation, and social concerns.
- Anxiety sensitivity mediated the longitudinal relationship between stressful life events and anxiety symptoms.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Attend trainings regarding anxiety sensitivity among adolescents to enhance their ability to work with military children struggling with anxiety issues
- Facilitate support groups for military adolescents identified as being at-risk for anxiety sensitivity and anxiety disorders

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military parents regarding possible sources of anxiety for adolescents and ways to cope effectively with these stressors to reduce anxiety symptoms
- Teach youth strategies for managing negative beliefs and emotions after a stressful life event

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend professional development for military family service workers to educate them about coping methods for stress
- Advocate that military youth be routinely assessed for stressful life events and any associated mental health difficulties

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METHODS

- Students from two middle schools in central Connecticut were recruited to participate.
- Participants were recruited via flyers and calls to parents; 72% of eligible students participated initially.
- Students completed measures of life events, anxiety sensitivity, anxiety, and depressive symptoms at three time points over the course of a school year; 81% of the baseline sample participated at the two later time points.

PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 1,065 students participated (51% boys).
- Participants were between 11-14 years old; 34% were in 7th and 8th grade and 32% were in 6th grade.
- The majority of students were Latino (57%), followed by White (13%) and Black (12%).

LIMITATIONS

- All measures were self-reported which may bias results.
- The assessment intervals were short; it may be more helpful to assess these changes over a longer time period.
- Results only included civilian youth and results may not be generalizable to military youth who experience unique stressors.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the relationships among type of life stress, the meaning of stress, and the development of anxiety sensitivity in military adolescence
- Use non-self-report measures, including structured interviews, to replicate these results
- Explore whether military programs working with adolescence effectively address anxiety issues among this sample

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