

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Insomnia is the Most Commonly Reported Symptom and Predicts Other Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in U.S. Service Members Returning From Military Deployments

McLay, R. N., Klam, W. P., & Volkert, S. L. (2010). Insomnia is the most commonly reported symptom and predicts other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in U.S. service members returning from military deployments. *Military Medicine*, 175(10), 759-762. doi:10.7205/milmed-d-10-00193

SUMMARY: Service members who had recently returned from deployment were screened at the Naval Medical Center in San Diego over a two year period. This study focused on rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms upon initial return and 3 months later. Insomnia was the most common PTSD symptom reported and had the highest average severity score of any PTSD symptom.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Insomnia was the most common symptom of PTSD reported by Service members returning from military deployments. Specifically, 33% of Service members reported some degree of insomnia upon returning, and 37% reported some insomnia three months after homecoming.
- Insomnia was often reported as mild, and individuals with complaints of insomnia had higher scores of PTSD at follow-up.
- Regarding symptom severity, insomnia was the highest of any PTSD symptom reported.
- Insomnia complaints and overall PTSD scores were higher in Service members deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan (41%) than those deployed elsewhere (25%).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes to Service members about sleep hygiene, both during and after deployment
- Create opportunities for support groups for partners of Service members with PTSD wherein they could exchange social support, information, and resources
- Disseminate information regarding possible symptoms of mental health problems Service members may face after deployment and where individuals and families can find help for those problems

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend screening returning Service members for sleep problems and the provision of appropriate referrals in current programs
- Promote reintegration programs that include attention to assisting Service members' family in adjusting to the Service member's return
- Recommend professional education including information on insomnia and mental health for professionals who work with Service members and their families

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METHODS

- Service members were screened upon returning home from deployment with the Postdeployment Health Assessment Test at the Naval Medical Center in San Diego between January 2005 and October 2007.
- The screening contained demographic items and questions about risk exposures and PTSD symptoms.
- Some participants completed an initial screening (77%), some completed only a follow-up assessment (23%), and others completed both (18%).
- Statistical analyses was used to compare the 17 PTSD symptoms in terms of their severity and frequency, as well as differences between PTSD scores between initial and follow-up screenings.

PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 1,887 individuals were included (76% male) in this study.
- Of the participants, the average age was 29.10 years, ranging between 18-57 years with an average of 7.2 years of service. The average number of previous deployments was 2.6 and average number of months deployed was 5.40 months.
- Eighty-four percent of the sample were in the Navy, 15% were in the Marines, and 2% were other service branches. No racial/ethnic data were presented.

LIMITATIONS

- The population consisted primarily of Sailors, a high percentage of female Service members, and a larger proportion of medical personnel and injured Service members than is representative of the military as a whole; therefore, the extent to which these results apply to other groups is unknown.
- All measures were self-reported instead of a clinical interview or observation, increasing the risk of social desirability biases.
- No measure of sleep concerns was used which limits the ability to confidently conclude accuracy of participants' responses were reflective of insomnia.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate the study using validated measures of sleep problems with returning Service members
- Gather longitudinal data on sleep concerns to explore if Service members' sleep problems persist or resolve over time
- Obtain spousal or parental report of Service members' sleep concerns to collect more comprehensive data on their sleep habits

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