Staying Connected on the Home Front: Communication and Well-being of Civilian Spouses During Deployment


SUMMARY: Survey data were used to examine the association between the frequency of asynchronous (e.g., letters, email) and synchronous (e.g., telephone, video) communication on marital quality and psychological well-being (i.e., anxiety, depression, sleep, and loneliness) of civilian spouses during their husband’s deployment. The frequency of asynchronous and synchronous communication during deployment influenced spouses’ psychological well-being and marital quality differently.

KEY FINDINGS:
- Synchronous communication most commonly occurred via telephone, while asynchronous communication most commonly occurred via e-mail or Internet.
- Increased use of asynchronous communication during deployment was associated with increased marital quality and psychological well-being of civilian spouses.
- Increased use of synchronous communication during deployment was associated with greater marital quality if it occurred an average of once a week or less; synchronous communication at rates more than an average of once a week or less resulted in reduced marital quality.
- No association was found between synchronous communication and spouses’ psychological well-being.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:
Programs could:
- Disseminate information to Service members and their spouses regarding the potential problems associated with synchronous communication (e.g., scheduling conflicts, technological glitches) that may negatively impact communication during deployment
- Continue to offer marriage workshops to military couples to support relationship functioning throughout the deployment cycle
- Offer support groups for spouses of deployed Service members

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:
Policies could:
- Encourage the development and continuation of services that offer military families ways to communicate during deployment
- Recommend education of professionals regarding communication issues families may experience during deployment and the impact this may have on spouse well-being
- Continue to provide support for programs that work to increase family readiness

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.
METHODS
- Data from the 2006 U.S. Department of Defense Survey of Active Duty Spouses were utilized for this study.
- Spouses of Active Duty Service members who had at least six months of service at the beginning of the survey period (November 2005) were sent a paper survey in the mail, as well as instructions on how to complete the survey online.
- A total of 11,138 spouses completed the survey. A subset of this sample was utilized for the current study, which included only civilian females married to a male Service member (n = 2,230).

PARTICIPANTS
- Spouses were married to a Service member in the Army (38%), Marine Corps (30%), Navy (20%), or Air Force (12%).
- The majority of participants were White (67%) and between the ages of 21-25 years (26%) or 26-30 years (22%).
- About 48% of spouses had been married for at least one year but less than six years, and 68% had at least one child under the age of 18 years living with them during deployment.

LIMITATIONS
- The availability, quality, and platforms (e.g., video, Instant Message) used to communicate have advanced within the last 10 years; therefore, results may no longer be applicable or accurately reflect military couples use and experiences with technology.
- This study was correlational and therefore it may be possible that asynchronous communication frequency influenced marital quality or marital quality influenced asynchronous communication frequency during deployment.
- This study only included civilian spouses and may not be generalizable to spouses in dual-military marriages or male spouses married to female Service members.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
Future research could:
- Examine the type of content (e.g., conflictual, reminiscent, daily updates) that is relayed via asynchronous and synchronous communication to explore similarities and differences
- Explore how asynchronous and synchronous communication during deployment influences Service members psychological well-being
- Investigate how different types of synchronous communication during deployment (e.g., video versus telephone) influences marital quality

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design
Appropriate Research Plan and Sample

Methods
Appropriate Measurement and Analysis

Limitations
Few

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works

www.reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu