

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Army

## Couple Functioning and Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms in US Army Couples: The Role of Resilience

Melvin, K. C., Gross, D., Hayat, M. J., Jennings, B. M., & Campbell, J. C. (2012). Couple functioning and post-traumatic stress symptoms in US Army couples: The role of resilience. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 35(2), 164-177. doi:10.1002/nur.21459

**SUMMARY:** Posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) of Service members, as well as their partners' personal history of trauma or secondary trauma symptoms, may combine to decrease couples' functioning. PTSS, relationship functioning, and resilience were examined among couples with at least one member who was deployed with the Army in OEF/OIF. Higher levels of individual PTSS were associated with lower couple functioning; however, individuals with high resilience scores were less likely to have poor couple functioning, regardless of PTSS levels.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Individuals with higher levels of PTSS were more likely to be in a relationship with poorer couple functioning.
- Individuals with high resilience scores were more likely to report high couple functioning, regardless of PTSS levels.
- Coercion and violence in relationships were associated with poorer couple functioning.
- Men with high PTSS levels were more likely to have poorer couple functioning than their female counterparts with high PTSS levels.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Screen individuals in military couples for trauma exposure, posttraumatic stress or secondary trauma symptoms, and violence or coercion in their relationships to identify potential risk factors for couple functioning problems and to provide necessary resources
- Provide programs that aim to increase personal and relationship resilience among military couples
- Offer support groups for military family members who have a history of trauma and experience re-traumatization as a Service member or military spouse

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend education for professionals working with military families about the effects of previous trauma history on later relationships and later trauma experiences
- Encourage research into practical ways to promote resilience among military family members and relationships of military couples
- Support initiatives to screen military family members for violence or coercion in their relationships in order to provide early intervention

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## METHODS

- Couples, in which one or both members was an Active Duty, National Guard, Reserve, or Veteran Soldier who had been deployed in OEF/OIF and who were in a committed (one or more year) relationship.
- Both members of a couple were mailed and completed surveys regarding PTSS, resilience, couple functioning (e.g., satisfaction, communication, conflict, cohesion), relationship coercion and violence, history of trauma, and military characteristics or experiences.
- Participants were recruited using written materials (e.g., Facebook, Veteran blog websites, flyers, newspaper ads).

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 66 married U.S. Army couples (132 individuals) in which there was either a male Service member (59%) or two Service members (41%).
- On average, participants were 38.91 years old ( $SD = 9.1$ ) and were primarily White (90%).
- Individuals were civilians (31%) or enlisted (43%) or officer (26%) rank; Service members were Active Duty (41%), National Guard (11%), Reserves (9%), retired (12%), or had left the military (26%).

## LIMITATIONS

- Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, causal conclusions cannot be drawn.
- The sample consisted of all married couples and primarily White participants, and results may not generalize to other populations.
- Military families who contacted researchers to participate may have differed from those who did not (e.g., relationship functioning, individual mental health and well-being), potentially biasing results.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct a longitudinal study of PTSS and couple functioning over time (baseline, pre-deployment, deployment, post-deployment) to understand the direction of effects between variables
- Explore PTSS, couple functioning, and resilience among a sample that includes male civilian spouses, unmarried military couples, and individuals with more diverse race/ethnicity demographics
- Examine the effects of other potential post-deployment problems (e.g., depression, traumatic brain injury, parenting difficulties) on the relationships between PTSS, couple functioning, and resilience

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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