

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Guard and Reserve Spouse Separation during the Persian Gulf War: Coming to Terms With Uncertainty

Messecar, D. C., & Kendall, J. (1998). Guard and Reserve spouse separation during the Persian Gulf War: Coming to terms with uncertainty. *Journal of Family Nursing*, 4(3), 309-333. doi:10.1177/107484079800400306

SUMMARY: Fourteen civilian spouses of National Guard and Reserve Service members participated in an unstructured interview to explore the experience of wartime military separation from their partners. Three patterns of coming to terms with the separation emerged: settling in immediately, struggling followed by settling in, and struggling without relief.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Uncertainty (the spouse's inability to predict future events, fear of potential outcomes, and lack of confidence in ability to manage responsibilities) was evident for many spouses. The feeling commonly arose from going into the separation unsure of its meaning, the impact of separation on their lives, and how they would cope with the challenges.
- Uncertainty varied considerably among the spouses, and increased perceptions of uncertainty arose for spouses whose Service member deployed to high-threat areas.
- Previous life experiences influenced the meaning spouses attached to the separation. Spouses who had experienced similar events in the past helped other family members anticipate what would happen and felt more prepared to assume new roles.
- Three patterns emerged for coping with the separation: Settling in immediately (spouses experienced little uncertainty and quickly settled into new routines); struggling following settling in (spouse was initial overwhelmed with the uncertainties of the separation, but eventually adjusted), and struggling without relief (spouse was unable to adjust and cope by connecting and accessing social supports).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for Service members' families during deployment that focus on how to cope with uncertainty
- Consider specific outreach efforts to spouses whose Service members are deployed to high-risk areas
- Develop online portals (e.g., websites, blogs) in which spouses and partners could exchange social support during deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to provide programs that offer support services for families and spouses while Service members are deployed
- Recommend professional development courses for community providers to educate them about unique factors that contribute to marital strain for military couples
- Continue to provide support for programs that work to increase family readiness

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited via snowball sampling from local Guard and Reserve medical units in the Northwestern United States.
- In-depth interviews were conducted in the home or via telephone with either just spouses of Guard or Reserve members or families together.
- The interviews were largely unstructured and lasted an average of 2 hours,

PARTICIPANTS

- Seventeen interviews were conducted: 82% were initial interviews, 12% were follow-up interviews, and 6% were third interviews.
- Of the 14 initial interviews, the majority of participants were female (64%), between 40-50 years old (64%) and White (100%).
- Seventy-one percent of the Service members were deployed in the continental United States, while 14% were deployed to Saudi Arabia and 14% to Europe. The following service branches were represented in the sample: 57% Air National Guard, 29% Army Reserve, 7% Air National Guard volunteer, 7% Air Force.

LIMITATIONS

- The coding method was not thoroughly described, so it is unclear how the data were analyzed and how certain conclusions were determined.
- The sample size was small and homogenous; therefore, results may not generalize to other Service member types and families.
- The interview was not structured; it is unclear if similar questions were asked of the participants.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Use a semi-structured interview and clear coding methods to replicate and strengthen the results of a similar study
- Collect longitudinal data on National Guard and Reserve families' experiences during separations
- Compare and contrast families' experiences of National Guard and Reserve families with a Service member who was deployed internationally to those who were not (stayed within the continental United States) to explore how similar are the experiences of their families

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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