

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Army

## Military Couples' Trauma Disclosure: Moderating between Trauma Symptoms and Relationship Quality

Monk, J. K., & Nelson Goff, B. S. (2014). Military couples' trauma disclosure: Moderating between trauma symptoms and relationship quality. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 6(5), 537-545. doi:10.1037/a0036788

**SUMMARY:** After returning from deployment, Soldiers differ in how much of their combat experiences they share with loved ones. In this study, the relationship between Soldiers' trauma disclosure and perceived relationship quality was analyzed in military couples. It was found that trauma symptoms and trauma disclosure can impact the perceived relationship quality.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Soldiers tended to perceive their relationship quality as being lower when they experience greater trauma symptoms.
- Trauma symptoms experienced by Soldiers also negatively impacted their partner's perceptions of relationship quality.
- Soldiers who were more likely to disclose details about their trauma experiences had spouses who rated the relationship as stronger than Soldiers who did not disclose such details.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops for Service members and their spouses to help them learn how to effectively communicate with each other about trauma
- Develop support groups for Soldiers that may help moderate the severity of trauma symptoms by creating a space in which they can process some of their experiences with each other
- Increase awareness about the negative effects trauma has on relationship quality in order to reduce the stigma of seeking help

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that provide treatment for Service members who are impacted by trauma and their spouses
- Recommend that treatment for trauma symptoms include awareness of and attention to relationship factors
- Encourage education for providers that increases awareness of the negative impacts of trauma symptoms on relationship quality

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.



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## METHODS

- Participants were recruited through a variety of methods, including flyers, referrals from other research participants, and Army Family Readiness Groups.
- Male Soldiers and their female partners completed questionnaires and participated in interviews conducted over the phone that evaluated trauma symptoms, relationship quality, and trauma disclosure.
- The association between relationship quality and trauma symptoms was examined to see if it differed among people with high and low trauma disclosure.

## PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 50 male Soldiers who had been to Iraq or Afghanistan as their only deployment and their female spouses.
- Male Soldiers had mean age of 32.0 years old (SD = 7.43) and their female spouses had a mean age of 30.47 years old (SD = 7.02).
- The races of the participants were White (Soldiers 80%, female spouses 78%), Black (Soldiers 9%, female spouses 4%), and Latino, Asian, or other (Soldiers 11%, female spouses 18%).

## LIMITATIONS

- There was not a clear definition of “trauma disclosure” that was used among the researchers, which could have impacted the reliability of the findings.
- The design of this study does not allow for analysis of causation between trauma disclosure and relationship quality.
- This study only gathered a sample of male Soldiers, therefore data cannot be generalized to female Service members or other military branches.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate the study with a larger and more diverse sample and in different populations (e.g., other military branches)
- Using a longitudinal design to explain how the relationship between trauma disclosure and relationship quality changes over time
- Assess the effectiveness of existing treatment programs that include couples to better understand ways to lessen the impact of trauma symptoms on relationship quality

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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