

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## The Effects of Trauma on Intimate Relationships: A Qualitative Study with Clinical Couples

Nelson Goff, B. S., Reisbig, A. M. J., Bole, A., Scheer, T., Hayes, E., Archuleta, K. L., ... Smith, D. B. (2006). The effects of trauma on intimate relationships: A qualitative study with clinical couples. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76(4), 451-460. doi:10.1037/0002-9432.76.4.451

**SUMMARY:** Most research focuses on the negative impact of trauma on relationships; however, it is possible that trauma may also have some positive relationship effects. Interviews of trauma-exposed couples were coded for themes of the effect of trauma on their relationships. Both positive and negative relationship themes were commonly found, and couples often reported positive and negative impacts within the same domain (e.g., communication, connection, understanding).

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Couples reported that trauma had both negative (e.g., sexual intimacy problems, decreased communication) and positive (e.g., increased support and understanding) relationship impacts.
- The most common relationship themes included increased or decreased communication, connection, and understanding, sexual intimacy problems, relationship distress, partner support, and relationship resources.
- Couples often reported having both increased and decreased communication, connection, and understanding within the same relationship as a result of trauma.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Help develop online education modules to provide easy access to information about trauma and relationships to military families
- Facilitate support groups for military couples experiencing negative relationship impacts due to trauma exposure

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military couples struggling with trauma histories about effective ways to communicate, support one another, and talk about the trauma and related emotions
- Offer post-deployment classes for Service members and spouses to learn to discuss trauma immediately following deployment as an early intervention

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend education of professionals working with military families about the effects of trauma on relationships, particularly romantic relationships
- Continue to support programs, initiatives, and dissemination of research and resources for military families with Service members who have experienced trauma

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

- Couples in which at least one partner had experienced a trauma and who were receiving therapy at a Midwest university-based counseling center were recruited.
- All partners completed semi-structured interviews about current relationship functioning and the impact of trauma on themselves, their partner, and their relationship.
- Interview statements were coded based on a secondary trauma themes codebook and themes added by the coding team when necessary; the most common themes were reported.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included nine couples (N = 18); however, an error was made in one recording, and results are based on 17 interviews of partners in serious relationships lasting at least one year.
- Participants had an average age of 34.89 years (SD = 10.20) and an average relationship length of 7.37 years (SD = 9.13); they were either married (78%), dating (11%), or separated (11%).
- Participants identified as White (89%), Asian American (6%), and Native American (6%).
- The most common traumas included natural disasters (50%), accidents (44%), adult physical abuse (33%), news of a death (28%), and violent crime victimization (22%).

## LIMITATIONS

- Without a non-trauma comparison group, causal conclusions cannot be drawn.
- Several themes applied to relationships generally, and it is unclear whether participants differentiated between the effects of trauma or other factors on their relationships.
- With the small sample, range of traumatic experiences, and lack of trauma diagnoses, it is unclear how these results would generalize to other couples impacted by trauma.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine relationships longitudinally to understand what factors of individuals and couples impacted by trauma predict relationship outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, breakup, communication)
- Compare differences in relationship satisfaction, communication, and understanding between couples with one or both partners having experienced a trauma or with one or multiple traumas
- Investigate the effects of relationship difficulties on children of trauma-exposed couples

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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