

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

A Qualitative Study of Single-Trauma and Dual-Trauma Military Couples

Nelson Goff, B. S., Irwin, L., Cox, M., Devine, S., Summers, K., & Schmitz, A. (2014). A qualitative study of single-trauma and dual-trauma military couples. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 6(3), 216-233.
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SUMMARY: Trauma survivors and their partners may have relationship challenges due to their traumatic experiences. Military couples in which one or both of the partners had experienced a traumatic event were interviewed to better understand the association between traumatic experiences and relationship functioning. Themes from the interviews were compared and contrasted between single trauma and dual-trauma couples.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Both single-trauma and dual-trauma couples used positive (e.g., faith, social support, and counseling) and negative (e.g., withdrawal) coping strategies to deal with their past traumas.
- In dual-trauma couples communication problems were identified as a barrier to successful relationship functioning.
- Couples, who have both experienced trauma, alter their behavior to avoid trauma-related triggers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Include modules that enhance positive coping strategies to deal with traumatic events such as developing a social support system
- Educate couples who have a history of trauma before deployment on positive coping skills
- Provide education to military couples to enhance positive communication skills such as addressing issues directly and taking the other's perspective

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage Services members and their partners be screened for trauma experiences before deployment to help them better prepare for the upcoming transition
- Suggest that non-clinical providers be trained in identifying trauma-related triggers and how to give couples tools to deal with the identified triggers
- Continue to recommend Service members receive treatment for maladaptive responses to trauma after returning from deployment

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited from two small cities in the Midwest through flyers, newspaper announcements, and referrals from Army Family Readiness Groups.
- Data were collected through an initial telephone screening and separate in-person interviews with each partner.
- Multiple coders identified different themes in the responses from the interviews. Data were analyzed by identifying themes that arose in the interviews of single-trauma versus dual-trauma couples.

PARTICIPANTS

- The mean age of the participants was 31 years old.
- Participants included five single-trauma and six dual-trauma couples with 11 male Soldiers and 11 female spouses.
- The racial background of the participants consisted of 82% White, 9% African?American, and 9% Native American/Alaska Native.

LIMITATIONS

- The impact of multiple deployments on marital adjustment is unknown for these participants because it was not specified how many deployments they had experienced.
- Information about preexisting mental health diagnoses was not available; results may not be generalizable to a clinical sample.
- Only separate partner interviews were conducted and a joint couple interview may have provided more insight about the couple's functioning and interactions.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine a clinical sample to assess whether the themes in this study apply to couples with a mental health diagnosis as well
- Utilize a longitudinal study to explore how previous trauma experiences and current trauma experiences can affect the couple's relationship over time
- Explore how communication problems and trauma triggers may directly impact couple functioning

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