

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Comparing Strategies to Help Spouses of Service Members Cope with Deployment

Nichols, L. O., Martindale-Adams, J., Zuber, J., Graney, M., Burns, R., & Clark, C. (2017). Comparing strategies to help spouses of service members cope with deployment. *Military Behavioral Health*, 5(2), 137-146.
doi:10.1080/21635781.2016.1272018

SUMMARY: Deployment-related stressors can negatively impact the emotional, physical, and psychological well-being of military spouses. Helping spouses cope with deployment-related stressors may improve their well-being. Partners of deployed Service members were randomly assigned to either a telephone support group or webinar intervention both aimed at promoting coping skills and reducing the negative effects of deployment (e.g., depression, anxiety). Partners who engaged in either intervention showed significant improvements and reported benefits of participating.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The most commonly reported family life stressors included increased Service member absence, uncertainty about future deployments, and difficulty balancing family life and military duties.
- Partners in both interventions showed significant improvements in resilience, depression, anxiety, personal coping, and family coping.
- Partners who engaged in the webinar intervention showed significantly more improvement in anxiety than those assigned to the telephone intervention.
- Participants reported a variety of benefits from participating in either intervention, such as increased support from others in the military, improved self-efficacy, and the ability to share what they learned with others.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Continue to provide opportunities for spouse of deployed Service members to connect with other military spouses
- Disseminate information about the effects of deployment on spouses physical, psychological, and emotional well-being
- Provide military spouses with information regarding the resources and services available to help them cope with deployment-related stressors

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that promote resilience in Service members and their families
- Encourage collaboration between DoD and community-based programs that support spouses throughout the deployment cycle
- Recommend continued education for service providers around the possible effects of deployment on the well-being of military families

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.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Participants were recruited nationally via advertisements (e.g., on military family websites) and through military service providers (e.g., family support specialists).
- Participants were spouses or significant others of Service members who were deployed overseas and had at least six months left of deployment.
- Both interventions included 12 sessions that occurred over six months and presented information about deployment, its effects, and coping strategies.
- The telephone support group intervention had hour-long sessions that occurred twice per month and included group participation and time to practice coping skills. The webinar intervention presented the same information in a 30-minute slideshow but did not include group participation.

PARTICIPANTS

- Eighty participants were assigned to the telephone support group intervention and 81 participants were assigned to the webinar intervention.
- The majority of participants were female (98%), White (80%), and were on average 35.6 years old (SD = 8.2).
- Most participants were partners of Service members in the Navy (35%), Army (23%), or Army Guard/Reserve (22%).

LIMITATIONS

- Not all spouses assigned to the interventions participated, which could influence the results; partners who chose to participate may differ from those who chose not to participate and this was not explored in the analyses.
- Partners had low levels of depression and anxiety and high levels of coping and resilience pre-intervention; therefore, results may not be applicable to spouses with higher levels of distress and lower levels of coping.
- This study lacked a control group, making it difficult to determine if the interventions improved spouses outcomes or if they were influenced by something else (e.g., improved naturally over time).

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Continue to examine the effectiveness of webinar and telephonic support groups for military spouses coping with deployment-related stress
- Explore strategies that encourage military spouses to utilize the support service available to them during deployment
- Continue to investigate how deployment impacts spouses' well-being

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>