

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Pastoral Care Use Among Post-9/11 Veterans Who Screen Positive for Mental Health Problems

Nieuwsma, J. A., Fortune-Greeley, A. K., Jackson, G. L., Meador, K. G., Beckham, J. C., & Elbogen, E. B. (2014). Pastoral care use among post-9/11 veterans who screen positive for mental health problems *Psychological Services*, 11 (3), 300-308. doi:10.1037/a0037065

SUMMARY: There are many different types of mental health support services for Veterans who have served since September 11th, 2001. The characteristics of post-9/11 Veterans with a probable mental health problem who seek care from either a pastoral counselor or a mental health provider were examined in this study. Results help to explain the connection between working with a pastoral counselor and seeking mental health care.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Veterans with mental health problems who saw a pastoral counselor in the last year were more likely to seek mental health services than Veterans who did not see a pastoral counselor.
- In Veterans with a probable mental disorder, working with a pastoral counselor was associated with a decrease in reported excessive alcohol use.
- Veterans who worked with a pastoral counselor cited stigmas or distrust of mental health professionals as common barriers to receiving mental health care.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Become familiar with services in the community that provide spiritual support for Service members and their families
- Increase awareness of services available to military families facing mental health challenges
- Educate Service members on different forms of coping methods available, including pastoral care

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage examination of barriers Service members face to receiving care for mental health problems
- Continue to support programs that destigmatize mental health care and encourage Service members and their families to seek help from trusted services
- Recommend collaboration between different mental health care providers and other support communities, such as those that offer pastoral care, to create a continuity of care for military families

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METHODS

- Participants were randomly chosen from a database of over 1 million U.S. Service members and Veterans who had served since September 11, 2001. There was a response rate of 56%.
- Surveys were used to gather information about participants' demographics, military service, combat exposure, health service utilization, barriers to seeking treatment, substance use, and mental health.
- Data were analyzed to explore the association between use of pastoral care and use of mental health care in a Veteran population.

PARTICIPANTS

- Data were collected from 1,068 Veterans who served after the events of 9/11. The sample accurately represented the population of post-9/11 Veterans with 50% being less than 33 years old.
- The gender breakdown was an accurate representation of all Service Members, with 84% male and 16% female. The primary race listed was White (71%) with no information about other races included.
- Participants included Veterans (52%) and Army Reserve or National Guard Members (48%), 17% of whom were officers.

LIMITATIONS

- Posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and alcohol misuse were the only mental health problems sampled, therefore data cannot be generalized to other mental health problems.
- Self-reporting was used to determine the likelihood of a mental disorder, which could have caused response bias in the results.
- The term "pastoral counselor" was not clearly defined, therefore there could be inconsistencies in the responses due to confusion.
- It is unclear if participants saw a pastoral counselor before or after seeing a mental health care provider, therefore causation between the two cannot be implied.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Repeat this study with clearer definitions in order to obtain more accurate results on the characteristics of the type of support services used by Veterans
- Address a larger variety of mental health problems experienced by Veterans and Service members
- Explore the direction of the relationship between pastoral care and mental health care utilization

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