

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Long-Term Effectiveness of Treatment-as-Usual Couple Therapy for Military Veterans

Nowlan, K. M., Georgia, E. J., & Doss, B. D. (2017). Long-term effectiveness of treatment-as-usual couple therapy for military Veterans. *Behavior Therapy*, 48, 847-859. doi:10.1016/j.beth.2017.05.007

SUMMARY: Veterans often face relationship problems that may be partially due to their military experiences (e.g., combat exposure); however, little is known about the long-term effect of couples therapy on Veterans. This study included 238 participants from 125 couples (at least one partner of each couple was a Veteran). Each participant completed questionnaires regarding relationship satisfaction, intimate partner violence (IPV), and psychological symptoms before and 18 months after couples therapy. Results indicated positive effects of couples therapy on Veterans.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Participants reported increased relationship satisfaction and reduced psychological symptoms and IPV 18 months after the couples therapy.
- The long-term effectiveness of the couples therapy was not influenced by participants' pre-treatment characteristics (e.g., demographics, relationship satisfaction, psychological status).
- Participants with IPV before the treatment reported larger improvements in relationship satisfaction 18 months after the treatment compared to participants without IPV. In addition, compared to younger participants, older participants were less likely to show reductions in psychological symptoms after the treatment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop relationship education workshops for military families in order to increase their marriage satisfaction
- Disseminate information regarding useful resources for military couples who have relationship problems
- Promote the benefits of couples therapy intervention for IPV offenders

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support relationship education programs that aim to improve relationship satisfaction and reduce IPV in military families
- Recommend that all military couples who are in serious relationship distress be offered couples therapy
- Encourage the training of professionals who work with military families on common risk factors that may reduce marital satisfaction

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METHODS

- Couples were recruited from two Veteran Administration Medical Centers; they were contacted by the research staff if they were suitable for couples therapy and at least one partner of each couple was a Veteran.
- Each participant completed an initial questionnaire, received couples therapy, and completed a follow-up assessment approximately 18 months after the therapy. For this study, measures included demographics, relationship satisfaction, IPV, and psychological symptom.
- Data were analyzed to examine the long-term effect of couples therapy on relationship satisfaction, IPV, and psychological symptoms.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 113 heterosexual couples and 12 additional individuals whose partner did not complete the study (238 individuals in total); at least one partner of each couple was a Veteran.
- The average ages of the male and female participants were 50.66 years (SD = 13.77) and 47.81 years (SD = 12.77), respectively.
- The majority of participants were White (72% of men and 65% of women) and Black (15% of men and 18% of women); the race/ethnicity of the remaining 13% male and 17% female participants was not reported.
- The military branches that the Veterans used to serve in was not collected or reported.

LIMITATIONS

- There was no control group, so the observed improvements could be due to factors other than the therapy.
- Only self-report data were used in the study, so the findings could be subject to social-desirability and memory bias.
- Only heterosexual couples were included in the study, so caution must be taken to generalize the results to homosexual couples.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assign couples randomly to a treatment group and a control group so that the effect of couples therapy can be separated from other factors (e.g., the willingness to seek help) that may potentially lead to improved relationship satisfaction and reduced psychological symptoms
- Recruit both heterosexual and homosexual couples so that the findings can be better generalized
- Use both subjective (e.g., self-report) and objective (e.g., hospital records) data so that the results are more reliable

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