Family Relational Health, Psychological Resources, and Health Behaviors: A Dyadic Study of Military Couples


SUMMARY: Military families face unique challenges attributed to military-specific events such as deployment and relocation. Healthy family relationship may serve as a protective factor against these challenges. The relationship between family relational health (i.e., family satisfaction) and healthy behaviors (i.e., sleeping and eating) was examined by surveys. Results showed that family-level resilience was important for military couples’ mental well-being and healthy behaviors.

KEY FINDINGS:
- Military families members who viewed their family relationship positively were likely to have better mental health (e.g., less depression and anxiety symptoms, higher level of self-efficacy), and the better mental health, in turn, were related to healthier sleeping and eating behaviors.
- Individuals’ healthy behaviors were related to their own perception of relational health, and also were related to their partners’ view of family relational health.
- Wives who experienced spousal deployment in the past year had poorer sleeping behaviors compared to wives whose husbands were not recently deployed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:
Programs could:
- Develop curricula that teach military couples about ways to improve family relational health
- Offer support groups for civilian spouses that promote healthy behavior and family well-being
- Create family activities that allow Service members and their partners to engage with each other and express feelings about deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:
Policies could:
- Raise awareness of the importance of family relational health for the well-being of Service members and their civilian partners
- Recommend professionals who work with military families monitor partners’ and children’s physical and mental health during deployment of the Service member
- Continue to offer support to military couples so that they develop healthy relationship, adequate psychological resources (i.e., mental health), and healthy behaviors
METHODS
- A sample of Army families were recruited via print and radio advertisements.
- For each participating family, the husband and wife took a survey in different rooms at the same time.
- Couples answered questions regarding their relational health, psychological resources (i.e., mental health), sleeping behaviors, and eating behaviors.

PARTICIPANTS
- The sample included 236 couples with husbands who were Active Duty Soldiers, and wives who were civilians; each family had at least one adolescent aged between 11 and 18 years.
- Most of the participants were between 31 and 40 years of age (68%), and most of the husbands were enlisted personnel (89%).
- Race of the participants were not indicated in the article.

LIMITATIONS
- Because of the cross-sectional design of the study, it is unclear whether better mental health leads to better family relational health, or vice versa.
- The sleeping and eating behaviors were assessed by only three questions each; therefore, the information gleaned from these assessments may be limited.
- Other important health behaviors (e.g., sedentary lifestyle, smoking), which may potentially be associated with psychological resources and relational health, were not included in the study.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
Future research could:
- Examine mechanisms other than psychological resources that may explain the connection between family relational health and health behaviors
- Include other health behaviors into the study to make the results more comprehensive
- Design randomized controlled trial study to determine the directionality of the relationships among family relational health, psychological resources, and health behaviors

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design  
Appropriate  
Research Plan and Sample

Methods  
Appropriate  
Measurement and Analysis

Limitations  
Few

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

www.reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu