

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Army

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

O'Neal, C. W., Lucier-Greer, M., Mancini, J. A., Ferraro, A. J., & Ross, D. B. (2016). Family relational health, psychological resources, and health behaviors: A dyadic study of military couples. *Military Medicine*, 181(2), 152-160. doi:10.7205/MILMED-D-14-00740

**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

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## 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



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