

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

“Out of Sight” but not “Out of Mind”: Parent Contact and Worry Among Senior Ranking Male Officers in the Military Who Live Long Distances from Parents

Parker, M. W., Call, V. R. A., Dunkle, R., & Vaitkus, M. (2002). "Out of sight" but not "out of mind": Parent contact and worry among senior ranking male officers in the military who live long distances from parents. *Military Psychology*, 14(4), 357-277. doi:10.1207/S15327876MP1404_3

SUMMARY: Service members who live far away from their aging parents may have high levels of worry about their parents health and well-being, especially if military duties make in-person contact rare. Characteristics of senior military officers, their parents, and their family interactions, officers worry about their parents, and frequency of parent contact were examined. Officers contacted their parents often and family dynamics, rather than worry about parent well-being, may be more predictive of contact.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Senior military officers had frequent contact with their parents, with 40% contacting them one or more times per week and 80% contacting them at least once per month.
- Officers with fewer siblings and a better parent relationship contacted their parents more often.
- Officers' worry about their parents was not associated with greater frequency of contact.
- Officers who worried about their parents more had older parents, parents with a history of illness, higher levels of anger, lower satisfaction with their parent care plan, and fewer siblings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate Service members about how to talk to their aging parents about a care plan and what should be included in an elder care plan
- Offer workshops on emotion regulation for Service members, including skills to manage anxiety and anger and to deal with stressors
- Disseminate information and resources to military families about how to care for aging parents

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend education for professionals working with military families about the stress and worry surrounding caring for aging parents long-distance
- Encourage availability of time off for Service members to visit aging and ill parents
- Promote programs that would allow aging parents to live with and be cared for by military families if desired

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METHODS

- Two cohorts of male, Active Duty senior military officers with at least one living parent were recruited (92% response rate) during assessments and screenings at a military leadership school from 1997-1998.
- Officers were surveyed about their history of life stressors and personality traits, their parents' age and health, and their family's frequency of contact, number of siblings, and parent care plan.
- The relationships between officer, parent, and family characteristics, officers' worry about their parents, and officers' frequency of contact with parents were examined.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 277 male, Active Duty senior military officers, 40-49 years of age, who were in the Army (82%), Air Force (9%), Navy (6%), and Marines (3%); no data on race or ethnicity were provided.
- Most officers were married (98%) and had children (92%).
- Almost all officer's parents were living independently, and about 70% had a parent care plan.

LIMITATIONS

- Women, who traditionally assume caregiving roles, were not included in the sample, limiting generalizability.
- Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, there is no clear evidence of the direction of effects between officer, parent, or family characteristics and worry or contact frequency.
- The role of officer's wives in parent caregiving is an important variable that may have influenced results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the differences in associations between worry about aging parents, caregiver responsibility and role, and contact frequency between male and female Service members
- Compare frequency of parent contact and levels of worry about aging parents between groups of civilians and Service members who live long distances from parents
- Explore how the impact of parent health and worry about parents may influence Service members' job performance, including during deployment

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