

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Associations Among Experiential Avoidance, Couple Adjustment, and Interpersonal Aggression in Returning Iraqi War Veterans and Their Partners

Reddy, M. K., Meis, L. A., Erbes, C. R., Polusny, M. A., & Compton, J. S. (2011). Associations among experiential avoidance, couple adjustment, and interpersonal aggression in returning Iraqi War veterans and their partners. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 79*(4), 515-520. doi:10.1037/a0023929

SUMMARY: Avoidance of painful emotions can have negative impacts on romantic relationships. To better understand the potential impact, military couples' reports of avoidance of painful negative emotions, aggression, and relationship adjustment were examined. Findings suggest there may be a stronger link between avoidance of painful emotions and relationship adjustment among Service members than among their spouses and partners.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Soldiers, but not their partners, who reported that they avoid painful and negative emotions were more poorly adjusted in their relationships.
- For both Soldiers and their partners, more avoidance of negative emotions was not associated with psychological aggression.
- For Soldiers, but not their partners, more avoidance of negative emotions was associated with more physical aggression.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop workshops to help Service members and their partners learn alternative ways to cope with emotions besides avoidance
- Offer training for professionals who work with military families on how best to refer couples with histories of aggression to supportive services
- Host activities for military families that teach youth healthy strategies to manage negative emotions

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support opportunities for outreach activities to support Service members who have difficulty with emotion regulation
- Encourage professionals to participate in trainings about how to address and help prevent issues of domestic violence in military families
- Recommend collaborations among military-based and community-based programs to help with initiatives aimed at enhancing the well-being of military families

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited from a longitudinal study of Army National Guard Soldiers who were married or cohabitating during a redeployment briefing 1 month before returning from deployment.
- Data were collected from self-report measures and structured interviews that participants completed privately, as well as behavioral observation tasks that were completed together.
- Behavior observation tasks were used to elicit avoidant behavior among the participants. Surveys were used to collect data on emotional avoidance, relationship adjustment, and interpersonal aggression.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were male National Guard Soldiers ($n = 49$) and their female civilian partners. Average age of the Soldiers was 35 years ($SD = 7.39$) while the partners' average age was 34 years ($SD = 8.43$).
- Most of the couples were married (98%) and were White (92% of the Soldiers and 96% of the partners). Seventy-five percent of the couples had children.
- Ninety-six percent of the Soldiers were of enlisted rank and 90% worked full or part-time. Seventy percent of the partners worked full or part-time.

LIMITATIONS

- There was not a description of the type of the behavior observation tasks that were used in this study, which limits the ability to evaluate the nature of those tasks.
- It is unclear at what point during post-deployment the data collection occurred, and this makes it difficult to compare these findings with other studies of aggression and adjustment during post-deployment.
- The sample size was relatively small and limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader military population.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate this study with female Service members and their partners
- Use varying behavior observation tasks that attempt to elicit more breadth of negative emotions
- Examine associations between avoidance of negative emotions and parenting behaviors

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