

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Psychological Symptoms and Marital Satisfaction in Spouses of Operation Iraqi Freedom Veterans: Relationships with Spouses' Perceptions of Veterans' Experiences and Symptoms

Renshaw, K. D., Rodrigues, C. S., & Jones, D. H. (2008). Psychological symptoms and marital satisfaction in spouses of Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans: Relationships with spouses' perceptions of veterans' experiences and symptoms. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*(4), 586-594. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.22.3.586

SUMMARY: The psychological symptoms and marital satisfaction of women who were the wives of Army Veterans who had been deployed were assessed. This study asked husbands for self-reports of their experiences and wives their perception of these experiences. Results indicated that spouses experience mental health issues. When Veterans failed to acknowledge their own mental health issues, wives reported higher levels of distress. Wives' perceptions of the cause of mental health issues in Veterans influenced marital satisfaction.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Some spouses reported clinical levels of depressive symptoms (45%) and met criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; 10%).
- The negative impact of deployment on marital satisfaction was reduced when wives attributed Veterans' psychological symptoms to an understandable cause, like high levels of combat exposure.
- Spouses experienced the greatest distress when they perceived substantial psychological problems in Veterans but the Veterans failed to acknowledge such problems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups to spouses of Service members who may be experiencing mental health issues
- Educate military spouses regarding the potential for spouses' attributions about their Veterans' mental health to buffer relationship distress by helping spouses conceptualize Veterans' psychological symptoms in the context of deployment/combat experiences
- Disseminate information to military families regarding how mental health issues in one family member can influence the mental health of other family members and resources to help cope with these issues

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that offer mental health resources to Service members and their families
- Recommend family education and inclusion of wives in Veterans' treatment due to the role that wives' perceptions of Veterans' symptoms play in both marital satisfaction and wives' well-being
- Continue to support programs aimed at enhancing family readiness prior to deployment and reintegration workshops post-deployment

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METHODS

- The Commissioner of Veterans Affairs identified eligible Veterans via discharge paper (DD-214s) who were mailed surveys.
- Male Veterans and their wives completed questionnaires approximately three months post-deployment to Iraq.
- Veterans and spouses completed assessments regarding PTSD and depression symptoms, relationship satisfaction, and combat exposure.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample consisted of 49 male Utah National Guard Soldiers.
- The majority of Soldiers were White (95%), 33.5 years of age on average, and an average length of service of 12.5 years.
- Spouses were mostly White (98%), and had an average age of 32.5 years.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample is relatively small and homogeneous (all from one National Guard Unit), limiting the external validity of the findings.
- The results may not generalize to Active Component Veterans or soldiers from other ethnicities, ages, and backgrounds.
- The couples who chose to participate in this study may differ from nonparticipants in a way that was not measured. For example, they may have better communication skills than those who did not participate.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Utilize a larger, more diverse samples to explore interpersonal perceptions within intimate relationships in military families
- Longitudinally assess marital functioning and mental health in couples prior to deployment and following combat exposure to specifically examine the effects of combat on marital functioning
- Assess if results differ with female Veterans and their intimate partners

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