

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
National
Guard

Combat Veterans' Symptoms of PTSD and Partners' Distress: The Role of Partners' Perceptions of Veterans' Deployment Experiences

Renshaw, K. D., & Campbell, S. B. (2011). Combat veterans' symptoms of PTSD and partners' distress: The role of partners' perceptions of veterans' deployment experiences. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 25(6), 953-962. doi:10.1037/a0025871

SUMMARY: Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can cause relationship difficulties, particularly when symptoms are not well understood. The relationship between Service members' mental health symptoms, partners' perceptions, and partners' distress were examined among the Utah National Guard and Reserves. Only when partners believed that Service members had low trauma exposure did Service members' withdrawal and numbing PTSD symptoms relate to partners' psychological and relationship distress.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Partners who believed that their Service member had low exposure to traumatic experiences, but not those who perceived high exposure, had more psychological and relationship distress when the Service member exhibited numbing or withdrawal symptoms.
- Unexpectedly, partners' perceptions of trauma exposure did not explain the relationship between Service members' overall PTSD symptoms and partners' relationship and psychological distress.
- Greater severity of Service member's PTSD symptoms was associated with greater partner psychological and relationship distress in general.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education for partners about the symptoms of PTSD, including how Service members' symptoms are often part of a reaction to traumatic stress rather than a reaction to the partner or relationship
- Offer classes for Service members about the consequences of PTSD symptoms on relationships and strategies for improving and maintaining relationships while recovering from PTSD
- Educate Service members and partners about the signs and symptoms of PTSD and where to seek help for mental health problems

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage mental health professionals working with military families to receive education about PTSD, including the impact of symptoms on relationships
- Continue to support programs for Service members and families suffering from the effects of PTSD, including programs focusing on marriages and relationships
- Recommend education for all Service members and their families pre-deployment regarding the potential effects of trauma and PTSD, including on relationships

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METHODS

- National Guard or Reserves Service members and partners were recruited through eight voluntary post-deployment workshops in Utah from 2007-2008, with a 50% response rate.
- Service members and partners completed questionnaires about demographic information, PTSD, anxiety, and depression symptoms, deployment experiences, and relationship satisfaction.
- The associations between partners' perceptions of Service members' trauma exposure, Service members' mental health symptoms, and couples' relationship satisfaction were examined.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 206 National Guard or Reserved Service members ($M = 35$ years, $SD = 8.35$) who deployed during OEF/OIF and their spouses or romantic partners ($M = 33$ years, $SD = 8.29$).
- The majority of Service members were male (99%), married (99%), White (86%), and identified as Mormon (82%); they represented both the Army (80%) and Air Force (20%).
- The majority of partners were female (99%), White (85%), and identified as Mormon (84%); they had been married to the Service members for an average of 10.17 years ($SD = 7.90$).

LIMITATIONS

- Data are cross-sectional, so conclusions cannot be drawn regarding the direction of effects.
- The sample was mostly White, Mormon, and male Service member-female partner couples, so results may not generalize to other military couples.
- Participants may have differed in unknown ways from those who chose not to participate, including in PTSD symptom levels or relationship satisfaction.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate this study among Service members from other branches of the military and with a more diverse background
- Utilize a longitudinal design to explore the causal relationships between Service members' PTSD, partners' attributions about deployment experiences, and partners' psychological and relationship distress
- Explore whether partner education about PTSD can reduce their levels of psychological and relationship distress about Service members' numbing and withdrawal symptoms

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