

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Gender Differences in the Associations of PTSD Symptom Clusters with Relationship Distress in U.S. Vietnam Veterans and Their Partners

Renshaw, K.D., Campbell, S.B., Meis, L., & Erbes, C, (2014). Gender differences in the associations of PTSD symptom clusters with relationship distress in U.S. Vietnam veterans and their partners. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 27(3), 283-290. doi:10.1002/jts.21916

**SUMMARY:** Posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms may cause greater relationship distress. Although women represent a growing proportion in the military, research regarding how posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affects female Veterans and their male partners is scarce. This study examined gender differences in relationship distress between male and female Veterans of the Vietnam War. Results suggest that PTSD symptoms are associated with relationship distress for both male and female Veterans.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Emotional numbing (e.g., difficulty feelings positive feelings, such as love) and withdrawal symptoms were the most strongly associated with relationship distress for both genders and their partners.
- The association between numbing and withdrawal symptoms and relationship distress was 25% greater for female Veterans and their male partners than it was for male Veterans and their female partners.
- For Veterans, but not partners, the PTSD symptoms of hyperarousal and feeling a lack of control were associated with greater relationship distress.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education to Service members and their partners to increase their understanding of PTSD symptoms, particularly emotional numbing and withdrawal
- Provide a workshop for Service members experiencing PTSD symptoms and their partners focused on communication and cohesion
- Provide workshops for female Service members to learn about services available that work to prevent emotional numbness and withdrawal

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs for Service members and their families that address the relationship between PTSD and relationship distress
- Recommend education for service providers regarding how PTSD symptoms may affect relationship distress for Service members and their partners differently according to gender
- Encourage the training of professionals to better identify emotional numbness and withdrawal in Service members

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



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## METHODS

- Data were used from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study, a Congressionally mandated study in the 1980s to understand PTSD prevalence.
- Veterans (n=3,016) completed home interviews lasting between three to five hours regarding psychological health, combat and postwar experiences, and family adjustment.
- Within the larger sample, 465 Veterans were invited to participate in the Family Interview section of the study with their spouses or romantic partners. During this section of the study, romantic partners were interviewed for one hour.
- Researchers analyzed data to determine gender differences in PTSD symptoms and relationship distress.

## PARTICIPANTS

- The participants were 465 U.S. Vietnam Veterans (male=375, female=90) and their opposite-sex romantic partners.
- The sample was approximately 61% White, 19% Black, 18.5% Latino, and 1.6% unknown.
- The mean age for Veterans and their partners was 42 years and 40 years, respectively.
- Ninety-four percent of the couples were married at the time of the study and the average length of marriage was 14.44 years.

## LIMITATIONS

- The U.S. Vietnam Veterans reported on symptoms and experiences between 10-20 years after the Vietnam War ended, increasing the chance of recall bias.
- Data were cross-sectional, so the direction of effects between PTSD and relationship distress is unknown.
- Most female Veterans in this sample were nurses and did not have combat exposure. This reduces the study's generalizability to female Veterans as their experiences are likely very different from female Veterans OEF/OIF/OND.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore PTSD in the context of same-sex marriages and unmarried couples
- Conduct a longitudinal study to examine gender differences over time
- Gather data on PTSD and relationship distress from recent Veterans who were involved in OEF/OIF/OND

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