

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Partners' Attributions for Service Members' Symptoms of Combat-Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Renshaw, K. D., Allen, E. S., Carter, S. P., Markman, H. J., & Stanley, S. M. (2014). Partners' attributions for service members' symptoms of combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder. *Behavior Therapy, 45*(2), 187-198.
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SUMMARY: Civilian wives married to U.S. Army Active Duty husbands completed questionnaires to explore the impact of attributions of their spouses' posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and combat exposure on marital satisfaction. Symptom attributions were associated with marital satisfaction even when controlling for PTSD symptoms; external attributions were associated with more marital satisfaction and internal attributions with less marital satisfaction.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Spouses' attributions for their husbands' symptoms were associated with marital satisfaction, even when controlling for husbands' PTSD symptoms. Specifically, external attributions were associated with more marital satisfaction and internal attributions with less marital satisfaction.
- Internal attributions of husbands' PTSD symptoms moderated the association between PTSD symptoms and marital satisfaction, such that the association became stronger as wives tended to make more internal attributions.
- Wives' perceptions of more re-experiencing symptoms were associated with more external internal attributions. Wives' perceptions of more emotional numbing symptoms were associated with more internal attributions.
- Wives' perceptions of higher levels of combat exposure were associated with a greater tendency to make external attributions for Service members' PTSD symptoms.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Disseminate information regarding how external events might contribute to PTSD symptoms
- Offer workshops to military couples who are managing combat related PTSD regarding how symptoms can influence relationship functioning
- Provide couple support groups that allow Service members to share the totality of their PTSD symptoms to help attenuate the internal attributions their spouses may make

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continued support for programs aimed at PTSD psychoeducation, particularly for significant others
- Continue to develop and evaluate interventions aimed at decreasing internal attributions and increasing external attributions for Service members' PTSD symptoms
- Encourage collaboration between DoD and community-based programs that work with military couples coping with mental health issues, such as PTSD

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METHODS

- Wives of couples from a previous randomized clinical trial of a 14-hour marriage education intervention and two day workshop participated.
- They completed baseline and two year follow-up measures of spousal perceptions of PTSD and combat exposure, marital satisfaction, internal and external attributions of their spouse's behavior, and demographics.
- Only survey responses from the two year follow-up assessment were utilized for the current study.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 483 civilian wives of Active Duty U.S. Army husbands.
- The majority of participants were White (71%) and had a mean age of 30.80 years (SD = 6.12).
- For 52% of the sample, their highest degree was a high school diploma or GED.

LIMITATIONS

- The portion of the sample that completed the follow-up questionnaire had high levels of marital satisfaction at baseline, and all were willing to participate in a marriage education seminar; results may be biased.
- The variables measured accounted for only a small portion of the variance in the outcomes; additional unmeasured factors are likely implicated.
- These results may not generalize beyond U.S. Army Active Duty husbands and civilian wives who participated in marriage enrichment programs.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assess pre-combat couple functioning measures and use a longitudinal design to address these questions more thoroughly
- Replicate the current study with different samples of military couples
- Continue to examine the effectiveness of marriage interventions with military couples

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