

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Traumatized Relationships: Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Fear of Intimacy, and Marital Adjustment in Dual Trauma Couples

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**SUMMARY:** The effects of combat trauma and combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can extend beyond the Veteran and can disrupt their intimate relationships and families. From a sample of Vietnam Veterans and their intimate partners a more systematic examination of the interrelationships of individual PTSD symptoms and marital adjustment was conducted. Results addressed the interplay between an individual's trauma-related symptoms and his or her difficulties within intimate relationships.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- The PTSD symptoms experienced by each member of the couple were independently associated with the quality of the relationship.
- There was a significantly greater likelihood that Veterans with PTSD were partnered with females who also had PTSD compared with the non-PTSD Veterans.
- Both males and females who experienced PTSD symptoms felt distressed and vulnerable in the context of intimate interactions and relationships.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop workshops for professionals working with Service members and their partners around topics related to PTSD and intimate relationships
- Engage Service members and their partners in classes that aim to increase communication and coping skills
- Enhance education, activities, and curriculum for Service members and their partners related to coping behaviors and dealing with anxiety symptoms

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage collaboration among DoD programs, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and community-based organizations to support Service members and their partners who have experienced combat trauma
- Recommend education for service providers around the possible effects of combat trauma on not only the Service member, but their intimate relationships, and families
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can support Service members who have experienced combat trauma, their partners, and families

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## METHODS

- The study included 50 male Veterans and their intimate female partners and were recruited through newspaper ads and flyers placed in a VA Medical Center.
- Several measures were administered to participants including the Fear of Intimacy Scale, PTSD checklist (for measuring PTSD symptomatology), and the Traumatic Stress Survey.
- Using correlations, multiple regression, and path analytic techniques, we found that the trauma-related symptoms of each member of a couple were independently related to distress in their relationship.

## PARTICIPANTS

- All of the males served in the Vietnam War between 1965 and 1973 and all couples were married or cohabiting for at least one year prior to participating in the study.
- Twenty-six (52%) of the Veterans and 14 (28%) of the partners had symptoms on the PTSD checklist that were consistent with a diagnosis of PTSD.
- About 90% of the participants identified as White, 6% African American, and 4% other.

## LIMITATIONS

- The sample was selected based on the men's experience of combat in Vietnam. Results may not be generalizable if the focus was on the female's trauma experience.
- The study used a convenience sample of Veterans and their partners limit the generalizability of the results.
- The relationships studied in the present study largely developed subsequent to the onset of PTSD in the participants. It is not clear how well the results will generalize to relationships that were already established at the time of the trauma and development of PTSD.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the specific mechanisms through which the difficulties in intimacy associated with PTSD might lead to breakdowns in relationships among Service members and their spouses
- Explore additional difficulties Service members who have experienced trauma and their spouses may have, including intimacy, trust, conflict, and aggression, that might create difficulties as they are attempting to form and maintain intimate relationships
- Investigate mental health issues that commonly occur alongside PTSD, such as depression and substance abuse and the effects these may have on the intimate relationships of Service members who have survived trauma

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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