

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Coping, Family Social Support, and Psychological Symptoms among Student Veterans

Romero, D. H., Riggs, S. A., & Ruggero, C. (2015). Coping, family social support, and psychological symptoms among student veterans. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 62(2), 242-252. doi:10.1037/cou0000061

SUMMARY: Iraq and Afghanistan student Veterans participated in a study examining the contributions of coping style and family social support on mental health symptoms (e.g., anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress). Higher levels of support from family related to lower levels of depression and anxiety. Veterans who used more avoidant coping techniques (avoiding or denying problems) had higher levels of PTSD symptoms.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Almost a quarter (24%) of the Veterans reported a past psychiatric diagnosis, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety.
- Twelve percent of Veterans were currently prescribed mental health medication and 45% indicated a history of psychotherapy.
- Problem-focused coping (actively focusing on a particular behavior to deal with the stressor causing stress) was not directly associated with mental health symptoms, but it was linked to fewer depressive symptoms when the Veteran had a lot of family social support.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop and implement outreach programs targeting student Veterans who may benefit from mental health services
- Offer informational sessions on mental health resources for student Veterans
- Create classes for spouses of student Veterans, providing specific tips for how they can support their Veterans in the pursuit of higher education

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support awareness campaigns through campus outreach programs, especially related to increasing family support
- Recommend professional education for mental health professionals in colleges and universities working with student Veterans, offering information on military culture
- Encourage institutions of higher learning have student Veteran organizations, preferably staffed by Veterans themselves, to support these students in their academic pursuits

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

- Veterans were recruited through email invitations and fliers posted at two large state universities and one small private university.
- Participants completed an online survey through Survey Monkey which included measures of anxiety, symptoms of PTSD, family social support, avoidant coping, and problem-focused coping.
- Statistical analyses examined differences in outcomes between those who reported or did not report combat exposure, as well as associations between coping styles, family social support, and psychiatric symptoms.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were Veterans (28 female and 104 male), who were undergraduates attending southwestern colleges and universities, with a mean age of 31.94 years (SD = 7.39).
- The racial/ethnic composition in the sample was White (77%), Latino (10%), Multiracial (5%), Black (4%), and Asian American/Pacific Islander (3%).
- Most Veterans (73%) had been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.

LIMITATIONS

- The size of the sample (N = 136) may have limited the ability to detect some of the relationships.
- The sample was all student Veterans who had been receiving counseling; it is uncertain how rates compare to student Veterans who were not participating in counseling.
- Due to a low proportion of Black and Latino Veterans as well as female Veterans, generalizing findings related to links between combat exposure and PTSD may not be representative of female Veterans or Veterans of diverse ethnicities.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore the gender differences in symptomatology, avoidance, and other coping behaviors among student Veterans
- Collect data from student Veterans throughout the U.S.; both Veterans receiving counseling and those who are not
- Investigate student Veteran functioning to better equip college personnel in prevention and intervention planning

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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