

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Developing Conceptual Definitions and Theoretical Models of Coping in Military Families During Deployment

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SUMMARY: Female spouses of currently deployed Service members were interviewed to examine spousal coping strategies. Spouses described multiple helpful coping strategies during deployment, including being flexible, informing and reassuring children, and engaging in healthy behaviors.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Women reported using multiple coping strategies during deployment, including keeping busy and distracting themselves, engaging in healthy behaviors such as visiting with friends and exercising, and using positive self-talk.
- During deployment, women attempted to be more flexible and open to new things; they also relied more on social connections with friends, family, partners, and social groups.
- While their partners were deployed, women helped children cope by offering information (e.g., where their fathers were and what they were doing) and reassurance (e.g., how much their fathers loved and missed them).
- Women expressed that maintaining communication between their deployed Service members and at-home children (e.g., via the phone, web camera, email, packages, and letters) helped the family cope with deployment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support classes for military spouses experiencing deployment about effective coping strategies
- Provide courses for family members about the impact of deployment on children's adjustment and tips for helping children adjust during deployment
- Host activities that promote healthy behaviors for at-home spouses, such as opportunities to exercise together or experiment with new hobbies

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs for military spouses and children during deployment
- Continue to encourage the use of communication technology such as web cameras and phones for deployed Service members and their families
- Continue to support enjoyable family activities for at-home parents and their children during deployment to promote healthy coping

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METHODS

- Online outreach (e.g., Meetup, military spouse blogs), network outreach (e.g., support groups, colleagues) and snowball sampling (e.g., asking participants to refer people they knew) were used to recruit military spouses.
- Semi-structured interviews queried about deployment experiences, challenges and benefits of deployment, and the effects of deployment on families.
- Data were analyzed based on themes present throughout the interview transcripts.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 26 women who were married or engaged to male Service members who were deployed outside the United States.
- Their average age was 27 years and the average number of children was 1.2. The racial composition of the sample was 81% White, 8% Latino, 12% multiracial.
- Among the sample, the average number of Service member deployments was two.

LIMITATIONS

- Additional factors that may influence spouses' coping during deployment, such as differences across branches, jobs, or deployment locations, were not examined.
- Only female spouses were included in the study; it is unknown how these results might generalize to male spouses.
- All data were self-report, which may introduce biases.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Gather data about coping with deployment from both the deployed spouse and at-home spouse
- Employ longitudinal designs to examine spouses' coping strategies across the deployment cycle
- Replicate this study with a larger and more representative sample of military spouses

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