

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Sex Differences in Coping Strategies in Military Survival School

Schmied, E. A., Padilla, G. A., Thomsen, C. J., Lauby, M. D., Harris, E., & Taylor, M. K. (2015). Sex differences in coping strategies in military survival school. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders, 29*, 7-13. doi:10.1016/j.janxdis.2014.10.005

SUMMARY: Two hundred U.S. Service members undergoing a stressful mock-captivity exercise participated in a study examining the role of sex differences in coping as a potential factor that might explain gender differences in PTSD. Analysis indicated that sex had a direct effect on baseline PTSD, self-blame, and denial. Women had higher posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptom scores than men following the exercise.

KEY FINDINGS:

- After controlling for education, women were significantly more likely than men to report using self-blame, denial, and positive reframing coping strategies than men.
- Self-blame and denial were the only coping strategies that emerged as significant mediators between sex and psychological distress following the exercise.
- The use of adaptive coping strategies (positive reframing, behavioral disengagement) was not associated with less PTSD.
- Prior trauma was indirectly related to follow-up distress through both prior distress and self-distraction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer Service members short, informal workshops regarding risk factors for PTSD and effective self-care strategies to promote wellness
- Tailor curricula for the unique needs and preferences of male and female Service members, supporting them in coping with stressful incidents
- Continue to provide resources for families of Service members with mental health diagnoses

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend screening Service members for previous traumatic experiences and mental health concerns
- Recommend that Service members undergoing this type of exercise be offered immediate mental health care if desired
- Continue to provide support for programs that work to increase family readiness

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METHODS

- U.S. Service members undergoing a stressful mock-captivity exercise in 2011-2012 were invited to participate; the first 200 interested were enrolled.
- Participants completed a questionnaire including medical history, PTSD symptoms, and prior traumatic experiences before training started, and measures of coping and PTSD symptoms after the training.
- Statistical analyses were used to compare the sexes on outcomes, and predict follow-up PTSD symptoms from all the remaining variables.

PARTICIPANTS

- Two hundred U.S. Service members participated (78% male).
- The average age of the sample was 25.20 years (SD = 4.40 years).
- Of the participants, 64% completed more than high school level of education and 36% completed high school/GED.
- The sample consisted of participants from the following service branches: 71% Navy and 29% Marine Corps.

LIMITATIONS

- The study did not assess individual's level of threat assessment or personality which may have important impacts on PTSD symptoms.
- The sample was a highly specialized group undergoing a specific experience; these results may not generalize to other Service members or stressful experiences.
- All measures were self-report and may be biased.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include measures of threat appraisal to explore the reasons why women, particularly in military settings, use more coping strategies compared to men
- Explore the relationship between types of prior trauma, this kind of exercise, and PTSD symptoms
- Examine which coping techniques employed by Service members during training are associated with decreased rates of PTSD and other mental health concerns

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