



The Impact of the United States Air Force Deployment Transition Center on Postdeployment Health Outcomes

Schneider, K. G., Bezdjian, S., Burchett, D., Isler, W. C., Dickey, D., & Garb, H. N. (2016). The impact of the United States Air Force Deployment Transition Center on postdeployment mental health outcomes. *Military Psychology, 28*(2), 89–103. doi:10.1037/mil0000105

SUMMARY: An evaluation comparing the mental health and well-being of a sample of United States Air Force participants who were required to attend the deployment transition center (DTC) program to a weighted control group who did not attend the DTC program was conducted. The DTC program consists of two travel days and a 2-day decompression program prior to reintegration back into their home lives and work stations. The evaluation investigated whether DTC program participation had an impact during the six months following reintegration on participants' self-reported mental health problems or mental health disorder diagnosis.

KEY FINDINGS

- Program participants reported lower levels of depressive and posttraumatic stress symptoms as compared to the control group upon completion of the program.
- Program participants experienced lower levels of relationship conflict following return from deployment, as compared to the control group.
- Mental health diagnostic rates were comparable for the two groups.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

Programs could:

- Develop online modules around reintegration and reflective practice for Service members and their families
- Create support groups for Service members upon their return from being deployed to address issues of mental and physical health
- Educate Service members who have a history of depression or other mental health issues before deployment on positive coping skills

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES

Policies could:

- Recommend that training or workshops be provided for Service members and their families on the warning signs of post-deployment mental health problems
- Continue efforts to support programs that focus on the post-deployment transition process for Service members through reintegration focused programming
- Recommend professional development for professionals who work with Service members and their families around post-deployment reintegration and debriefing

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METHODS

- Records used were retrieved from two sources: the Defense Manpower Data Center Contingency Tracking System and the DTC Participant List.
- The study used completed health assessments participants had filled out before deployment, within 30 days following return from deployment, and within 3 to 6 months post-deployment.
- Analysis of data determined to what extent the DTC program was effective for a unique subsample of deployed AFSMs who were required to attend.

PARTICIPANTS

- The initial sample included the entire population of Active Duty enlisted Air Force Service members who redeployed between July 1, 2010 and December 31, 2011.
- Participants included those in four “high exposure” career fields, which included vehicle operations, vehicle maintenance, explosive ordnance disposal, and security forces.
- Most DTC program participants were male (92%), White (77%), and married (54%).

LIMITATIONS

- Most participants were sent to the program as members of their deployed team; therefore, it is difficult to determine whether the beneficial impact of the program was due to the content of the program itself or the opportunity to process deployment experiences with team members.
- Participants in the program were required to attend; therefore, in order to have a somewhat comparable control group complex modeling techniques were used in order to try to balance the groups; as such, results should be interpreted with caution.
- Data were gathered from a group of participants who attended the program in 2010 and 2011; thus, results from the present study may not generalize to future participant groups.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the effects of the DTC program for Service members with lower levels of trauma exposure
- Investigate the impact of the program content as well as the opportunity to process experiences with their deployed team on participants
- Evaluate the effectiveness of reintegration program models for both Service members and their families in terms of developing protective factors and supporting strong families

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