

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Mental Health Needs of Cohabiting Partners of Vietnam Veterans With Combat-Related PTSD

Sherman, M. D., Sautter, F., Lyons, J. A., Manguno-Mire, G. M., Han, X., Perry, D., & Sullivan, G. (2005). Mental health needs of cohabiting partners of Vietnam veterans with combat-related PTSD. *Psychiatric Services, 56*(9), 1150-1152.
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SUMMARY: Cohabiting female partners of male combat Veterans who were receiving outpatient posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) treatment at two Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers completed a telephone survey to assess partner treatment needs and current rates of treatment use. Although most women rated individual therapy, family therapy, and women-only groups to help cope with a partner with PTSD as highly important, only slightly more than one-quarter of the women had received any mental health care in the previous six months.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Having access to individual therapy to cope was considered extremely important for 64% of participants.
- Seventy-eight percent of partners indicated that family therapy was extremely or very important.
- Twenty-eight percent of partners had received mental health care in the previous six months, although services received were minimal (one or two encounters) for 40% of partners.
- Regarding desired services, 54% of partners requested a women's only group, 20% wanted an educational program about PTSD, 19% wanted individual partner treatment, and 13% wanted couples therapy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops during reintegration to military couples regarding the possible mental health issues associated with deployment and ways to cope effectively as a family
- Offer support groups for military families who have a Service member with PTSD as a means of decreasing the isolation that is common among these families
- Disseminate information regarding the resources and services available to help Service members and military families coping with mental health issues

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that help Service members and their families cope with PTSD and related symptoms
- Recommend education for service providers regarding how PTSD symptoms can affect couple and family functioning
- Encourage collaboration between DoD and community-based programs that work with military families struggling with mental health issues following a deployment

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METHODS

- Female partners of Vietnam combat Veterans were recruited through outpatient PTSD treatment programs at the New Orleans and Jackson VA Medical Centers from July to November 2002.
- Participants had to be a female cohabitating partner of a Vietnam War Veteran who had a chart diagnosis of PTSD, service-connected disability for PTSD, and who was actively participating in the PTSD program.
- Female partners were contacted via telephone and invited to complete a phone interview.

PARTICIPANTS

- Eighty-nine partners completed the phone interview (17 from Jackson and 72 from New Orleans).
- The majority of participants were White (51%) or Black (42%), with a mean age of 52 years (SD = 5.8).
- Most participants were married (91%). Data regarding Service branch were not provided.

LIMITATIONS

- Only Veterans of Vietnam who were cohabitating with a female partner were included in the sample; therefore, results may not be generalizable to current Veterans or male partners.
- The study used convenience sampling including couples from two VA hospitals in the southern part of the United States; therefore, the ability to extrapolate these findings to other Veterans and their partners is uncertain.
- Due to the sensitive nature of discussing mental health issues and help-seeking behaviors, partners may not have answered questions honestly, which could bias the results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine help-seeking behaviors among partners of current OIF/OEF Veterans living with PTSD
- Explore barriers to care that prevent help-seeking behaviors for partners of Service members struggling with PTSD
- Investigate the effectiveness of programs and services aimed at helping Service members and their families cope with mental health issues resulting from military service

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