

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Domestic Violence in Veterans With Posttraumatic Stress Disorder who Seek Couples Therapy

Sherman, M. D., Sautter, F., Jackson, M. H., Lyons, J. A., & Han, X. (2006). Domestic violence in veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder who seek couples therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 32(4), 479-490.
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SUMMARY: Mental health diagnoses following deployment can influence Veterans' relationships and risk for domestic violence. The likelihood of experiencing domestic violence was compared across Service members with different diagnoses (i.e., post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD], depression, adjustment disorders, relational problems) and their spouses. Findings suggest that Veterans with PTSD or depression are significantly more likely to perpetrate relationship violence than Veterans without those mental health diagnoses.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Veterans with a diagnosis of PTSD or depression are more likely to perpetrate violence toward their partners than Veterans without a diagnosis of PTSD or depression.
- Younger Veterans and Veterans with major physical health problems are at increased risk for perpetrating domestic violence.
- More Veterans with PTSD (29%) and their partners (40%) listed anger and violence as a reason for seeking treatment than Veterans without PTSD (8%) and their partners (21%).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military spouses and partners about the association between Service member mental health concerns and domestic violence and teach them how to seek help if they become a victim of domestic violence
- Include curricula on domestic violence prevention for Service members with PTSD or depression
- Offer support groups that teach Service members experiencing PTSD or depression coping skills to help deal with anger

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to develop programs that treat PTSD and depression among Service members in committed relationships
- Encourage awareness programs that decrease the stigma of mental health diagnoses and help individuals in violent relationships to seek treatment
- Recommend treatment center initiatives to routinely ask clients with PTSD or depression about problems with aggression and domestic violence

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METHODS

- Researchers recruited Veterans and their partners seeking relationship therapy at an outpatient family therapy clinic in a Midwestern Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center.
- Questionnaires regarding relationship violence, marital satisfaction, and relationship closeness and intimacy were completed by each partner.
- Domestic violence risk was compared across groups of Veterans based on mental health diagnoses (e.g., PTSD, depression, adjustment disorder).

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 179 male Veterans with a primary diagnosis of PTSD (34%), major depression (38%), or adjustment disorder or partner relational problems (28%) and their female partners who sought treatment from 1997 to 2003.
- Veterans were ages 23-83 years ($M = 49.5$, $SD = 10.6$) and identified as White (87%), Black (10%), Latino (2%), and Native American (1%); female spouses or partners were ages 22-77 years ($M = 45.8$, $SD = 10.8$).
- The majority of couples were married (92%), and couples had been together for 13.60 ($SD = 11.93$) years on average.

LIMITATIONS

- This study used a convenience sample from one VA medical center, which may limit generalizability of results to other couples.
- The severity and frequency of domestic violence may have been under-reported due to the stigma of domestic violence.
- Participants were predominately middle-aged, male, Vietnam-era Veterans, which limits the generalizability of the findings to Veterans with differing demographics.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate the study with different military populations (e.g., OEF/OIF Veterans, national samples)
- Examine the impact of family reintegration programs on couples' risk for experiencing domestic violence
- Explore domestic violence among less traditional families (e.g., female Service members, same-sex couples)

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