

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Key Factors Involved in Engaging Significant Others in the Treatment of Vietnam Veterans With PTSD

Sherman, M. D., Blevins, D., Kirchner, J., Ridener, L., & Jackson, T. (2008). Key factors involved in engaging significant others in the treatment of Vietnam veterans with PTSD. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 39(4), 443-450. doi:10.1037/0735-7028.39.4.443

SUMMARY: An in-depth exploration of ten Vietnam Veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and their live-in female partner's perceptions about family participation in mental health treatment was conducted. Interviews of couple dyads explored various aspects of family participation including potential benefits and barriers. Findings revealed nine key themes, such as social relationships, fears and apprehensions, and communication that help to explain many of the important issues in family engagement.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Both Veterans and partners considered a decisional balance between the perceived benefits of participation and the potential barriers.
- Partners described the hope that participating in the Veterans' treatment would increase their understanding of PTSD and help them learn how to be supportive.
- Partners' identified barriers were around concerns about participation and logistics, for example, hopelessness about the partners' possible improvement, and access to the program.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Continue providing training opportunities for professionals working with Service members and their families to learn more about ways to develop supportive structures that facilitate families' well-being
- Engage Service members' families and friends in workshops on how to support loved ones with PTSD
- Disseminate information to Service members and their families on how to identify mental health symptoms

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote the development of structured workshops for Service members and their partners to provide support for PTSD and related symptoms
- Encourage awareness among professionals working with Service members families and communities about the effects of trauma experiences on the well-being of Service members and their families
- Support for programs that work to destigmatize depression and PTSD among Service members, their friends, partners, and communities

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METHODS

- Veterans were recruited through direct solicitation following PTSD therapy groups at the Oklahoma City Veterans Affairs Medical Center.
- Veterans and their partners were interviewed separately and were asked questions about their feelings on the appropriateness of family involvement in mental health treatment as well as the benefits and challenges family involvement may have for them and their families.
- Analysis included the research team independently reading each transcript, creating preliminary codes, discussing divergent coding, and establishing consensus on common themes.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample consisted of 10 dyads of male married Veterans and their female partners. Veterans had a diagnosis of PTSD from combat during the Vietnam era.
- Five Veterans identified as White, three as Black, one as Native American, and one as Asian American; whereas, five female partners identified as White, two as Black, two as Native American, and one as Asian American.
- Seven of the Veterans served in the Army, one in the Navy, one in the Marine Corps, and one in the Air Force.

LIMITATIONS

- The study only included Vietnam Veterans, as such the generalizability to other Veterans needs to be given careful consideration.
- The sample was only ten couples from one program; therefore, findings need to be interpreted within these contexts.
- Interviews of Vietnam Veterans and their spouses were conducted more than twenty-five years after the war ended; therefore, family engagement may look different for these couples than those who had a loved one recently return from combat.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Evaluate what supports Service members and their families need most in the reintegration stage of deployment
- Explore Service members' families well-being as they support their partners' psychological well-being
- Probe into mechanisms by which Service members' partners become distressed by or develop resiliency as they support the Service members' psychological well-being

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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