

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Veteran-Child Communication About Parental PTSD: A Mixed Methods Pilot Study

Sherman, M. D., Larsen, J., Straits-Troster, K., Erbes, C., & Tassej, J. (2015). Veteran-child communication about parental PTSD: A mixed methods pilot study. *Journal of Family Psychology, 29*(4), 595-603. doi:10.1037/fam0000124

SUMMARY: Many adults with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are parents who must navigate relationships with their children in the face of this diagnosis. This study investigated communication with children regarding parent's PTSD as well as parental experiences receiving treatment for PTSD in a Veteran sample. Findings indicated that Veterans desired to share information about their PTSD with their children, but that they experienced several barriers to doing so.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Veterans with PTSD reported a strong desire to talk to their children about their diagnosis in order to empower children, acknowledge the effect of parent's PTSD on the children, and convey hope regarding recovery from PTSD.
- They experienced some barriers to acting on that desire, including worries about consequences, emotional difficulty approaching the topic, and not knowing how to explain PTSD to their children.
- Veterans indicated they would like more attention to and support of their role as parents when receiving treatment for their PTSD.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop classes for Service members to help them understand PTSD and how to share that information with their children in age-appropriate ways
- Provide information regarding resources, such as childcare, for Service members while they receive medical or mental health treatment
- Create programming that allows Service members and their children to engage with each other and express feelings about their relationships with each other

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage professionals who work with Service members to pay careful attention to the way in which being a parent interacts with Service members' other duties
- Continue to support the availability of high quality childcare for Service members and their families
- Promote exploration of age-appropriate methods of communication with children regarding Service members' experiences and possible diagnoses

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited through Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital staff referral, flyers posted in VA hospital waiting rooms, letters to Veterans with diagnoses of PTSD, and presentations to groups of Veterans with PTSD.
- Data were collected through focus groups and individual interviews, including questions about parenting with a diagnosis of PTSD and how the Veterans would like to be supported
- Veterans also completed questionnaires about PTSD symptoms, alcohol use, depression, and anger.
- Interview and focus group content was coded to identify themes in Veterans' responses.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 19 Veterans who were predominantly male (89%), White (84%), and unemployed (82%) with an average age of 39 years old (SD = 6.9 years) with at least one child under 18.
- Of the sample, 53% had experienced one deployment, 27% had experienced two deployments, and 20% had experienced three or more deployments.
- Among the Veterans included, all had a diagnosis of PTSD, and all of the Veterans screened positive for depression, 84% of them in the moderately severe or severe range.

LIMITATIONS

- Most of the participants were unemployed, so results may not extend to employed Veterans.
- All of the sample screened positive for depression, which limits the ability to generalize results to Veterans with PTSD who do not have depression.
- Participants were all currently receiving treatment for their PTSD. Individuals who are not receiving treatment may have different opinions and experiences regarding communication with their children about their diagnosis.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate how parents talk to their children about PTSD immediately after a diagnosis
- Evaluate the effectiveness of different types of communication with children of varying ages regarding PTSD
- Examine the effects of parental communication regarding PTSD on the parent-child relationship and child-specific outcomes

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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