

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

The Loss Of A Fellow Service Member: Complicated Grief In Post-9/11 Service Members and Veterans With Combat-Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Simon, N. M., O'Day, E. B., Hellberg, S. N., Hoepfner, S. S., Charney, M. E., Robinaugh, D. J., ... Rauch, S. A. (2018). The loss of a fellow service member: Complicated grief in post-9/11 service members and veterans with combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder. *Journal of Neuroscience Research*, 9, 5-15. doi:10.1002/jnr.24094

SUMMARY: Many Service members and Veterans experience complicated grief due to the loss of an important person. The goal of this study was to examine the prevalence, severity, and impact that complicated grief has on Veterans with combat-related PTSD. Findings suggest that complicated grief was prevalent among combat-related PTSD Veterans and Service members led to adverse effects.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The prevalence of complicated grief was significantly higher among individuals who reported losing a fellow Service member than those who did not.
- Participants with complicated grief reported higher PTSD severity than those without complicated grief.
- Bereaved Veterans with complicated grief were more likely to report one or more lifetime suicide attempts compared to those without.
- Individuals with complicated grief experienced higher levels of trauma-related guilt and distress.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Disseminate information regarding possible symptoms related to complicated grief
- Enhance education and curriculum focused on coping mechanisms related to loss
- Provide workshops to help Service members and Veterans apply various coping mechanisms

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs to provide resources for combat-related PTSD
- Encourage the training of professionals to better identify Service members who are dealing with complicated grief following the loss of an important person
- Promote reintegration programs that include attention to assisting Service members in coping following the loss of a fellow Service member

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METHODS

- Active Duty Service members or Veterans who were enrolled in and met the criteria for a Department of Defense funded, randomized controlled treatment trial were selected.
- Participants were considered eligible if they served during OIF/OEF and/or OND and experienced combat-related PTSD.
- Following informed consent, Service members and Veterans participated in a structured clinical interview, a clinician-administrated PTSD scale assessment, and a 19-item inventory of complicated grief assessment.
- Results were analyzed by dividing the sample into those with complicated grief and those without.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 160 Service members or Veterans who reported losing at least one important person and completed the inventory of complicated grief.
- The mean age was 36 years old for Service members and Veterans, and the majority of participants were male (88.75%) and White (55.97%) or Black (32.08%).
- Ninety-five (59.4%) participants reported the loss of a fellow Service member and almost two-thirds of these participants (N=58) identified this as their most distressing loss.
- Most of the Veteran participants had been deployed more than once (68.79%).

LIMITATIONS

- The study was largely men, so the results may not generalize to other populations, such as female Veterans and Service members who may also experience complicated grief.
- Because the sample focused on combat-related PTSD, the data did not address the prevalence of complicated grief in Veterans and Service members in general.
- The final components of the complicated grief diagnosis are still being finalized which may affect the reliability of findings over time.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate the study and include a selection of female participants to ensure an accurate representation of their experiences
- Incorporate a measure addressing complicated grief in a larger sample of Veterans and Service members
- Utilize finalized complicated grief diagnostic criteria for more reliable results

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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