

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Marines

## Main and Interactive Effects of Social Support in Predicting Mental Health Symptoms in Men and Women Following Military Stressor Exposure

Smith, B. N., Vaughn, R. A., Vogt, D., King, D. W., King, L. A., & Shipherd, J. C. (2013). Main and interactive effects of social support in predicting mental health symptoms in men and women following military stressor exposure. *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping*, 26(1), 52-69. doi:10.1080/10615806.2011.634001

**SUMMARY:** Survey data of Marine recruits were used to examine the role of social support (from both within and outside of the military unit) in predicting mental health symptoms in the context of exposure to military stressors. Military social support acted as a buffer between the stressfulness of the training experience and posttraumatic stress symptoms. Military social support was associated with lower levels of mental health symptoms among men, while civilian social support was related to lower symptoms among women.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Social support was a significant moderator of the relationship between the stressfulness of recruit training and mental health symptoms; specifically, social support from the military acted as a buffer, weakening the association between the stressfulness of the training and posttraumatic stress symptoms.
- As perceived stressfulness increased, military social support became more important for the recruits.
- Significant gender differences emerged; for men, military social support, but not civilian, was directly associated with lower levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms, whereas for women, civilian social support, but not military support, was directly associated with lower posttraumatic stress symptoms.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups to military recruits, as this may help minimize psychological difficulties in response to stressors, especially for men
- Educate military recruits about the importance of military and non-military support
- Provide Service members with opportunities to engage in family events that are open to extended family and friends as a way to increase social support

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage recruits to access their support networks to reduce mental health symptoms during training
- Recommend the development and evaluation of programs intended to strengthen unit support
- Support programs that offer mental health services to recruits during training

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## METHODS

- The data were collected as part of a larger study of Marines who arrived at Parris Island, South Carolina, for recruit training.
- Those who completed recruit training were eligible to participate; they completed a survey at the beginning of the 13-week military training and a survey two days before completing training.
- Both surveys were administered via paper and pencil; 95% completed the post-survey.

## PARTICIPANTS

- One thousand fifty seventy-one Marine recruits (57% male) participated in and completed the study.
- The average average age of recruits was 18.8 years (SD = 1.92 years, range = 17-34 years).
- Participant ethnicity included 59% White, 19% Black, 14% Latino/Latina.

## LIMITATIONS

- The data was all self-report, and the nature of the study was correlational which limits the ability to imply causation.
- The military stressors studied were recruit training; these relationships may not generalize to other military stressors.
- Personality factors were not included in these analyses; these results could be partly due to recruits' personality style.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine whether the intense recruit training environment overrode civilian social support
- Examine the benefits and the drawbacks of additional kinds of support in the context of stressor exposure
- Test whether these results generalize to a larger military population

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