

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Marines

PTSD Symptom Presentation Across the Deployment Cycle

Steenkamp, M. M., Boasso, A. M., Nash, W. P., Larson, J. L., Lubin, R. E., & Litz, B. T. (2015). PTSD symptom presentation across the deployment cycle. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 176(1), 87-94. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2015.01.043

SUMMARY: Nearly 900 Marines participated in longitudinal study to examine symptom-level variations in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) across the deployment cycle (pre- and several post-deployment time points). There was considerable variation in PTSD symptoms at each time point, and symptom patterns stabilized over time.

KEY FINDINGS:

- There was heterogeneity in PTSD symptom presentation at each assessment point.
- The “Anxious Arousal” class (characterized by elevations in hypervigilance and exaggerated startle reactions) at one-month post deployment was similar to the presentation of PTSD, but their symptoms subsided naturally with time.
- One month post-deployment, Marines in the partial symptom expression classes engaged in less avoidant coping and had fewer prior lifetime traumas than those in the full expression classes.
- Prior lifetime trauma, avoidant coping, and greater combat exposure generally predicted worse outcomes at all time points.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Disseminate information on effective coping strategies for returning Service members
- Provide classes for recently returned Service members and their families to explain common symptom trajectories, emphasizing that symptoms decrease on their own over time for most military personnel
- Host support services for families of Service members living with PTSD

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that Service members who are exposed to higher amounts of combat exposure be routinely assessed for mental health symptoms
- Recommend education for service providers around the possible effects of deployment on Service members' families
- Encourage collaboration among DoD programs and community-based organizations to support a smooth reintegration for Service members and their families

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METHODS

- Data were derived from a longitudinal study of four battalion cohorts of Active Duty male Marines deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan between 2008 and 2012.
- Marines were assessed one-month pre-deployment, 1 week and 5 and 8 months post-deployment; 63% completed all time points.
- Participants completed a measure of PTSD symptoms, coping strategies, lifetime exposure to potentially traumatic events, and war zone traumatic events exposure.
- Statistical analyses was used to identify patterns of responses in PTSD symptoms.

PARTICIPANTS

- Eight hundred ninety-two male Marines participated.
- Average age of the sample was 23.16 years (SD = 3.67 years), most were White (83%), and 41% were married.
- Fifty-two percent had deployed at least once before, and average years served in the military was 3.10 years (SD = 3.15 years).

LIMITATIONS

- All measures were self-reported and may be subject to social desirability biased.
- The sample consisted of all male Marines; these findings may not generalize to women and those in other Service branches.
- There was a high degree of attrition which may have impacted the results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Develop a longitudinal study to follow Service members for a longer time period to see how these patterns predict later functioning
- Replicate the study and include additional predictors of these variables such as personality or childhood experiences
- Gather data from Service members' families to better understand how relationships or home environments might impact patterns of PTSD and other symptoms

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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