

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Sleep Variability in Military-related PTSD: A Comparison to Primary Insomnia and Health Controls

Straus, L. D., Drummond, S. P., Nappi, C. M., Jenkins, M. M., & Norman, S. B. (2015). Sleep variability in military-related PTSD: A comparison to primary insomnia and health controls. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 28*(1), 8-16.
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SUMMARY: There were 45 Operation Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND) Veterans seeking treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and sleep problems that were compared to 25 patients with primary insomnia and 27 healthy controls to examine differences in sleep patterns. Sleep symptoms in Veterans with PTSD were more variable across nights and less consistent across patients relative to sleep symptoms in insomnia patients without PTSD.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Veterans with PTSD had more sleep complaints, worse sleep quality, and greater night to night inconsistency than comparison individuals.
- Veterans with PTSD had more insomnia symptoms and lower sleep efficiency than patients with primary insomnia.
- Veterans with PTSD did not differ in mean sleep scores from the primary insomnia group.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Incorporate information in their curricula about ways to improve the quality of sleep for Service members with PTSD
- Educate couples who have a history of trauma before deployment on positive coping skills
- Offer classes that teach relaxation techniques to Service members and their families

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend screening all returning Service members for insomnia
- Continue to support programs that address the unique challenges faced by deployed Service members and their spouses
- Promote reintegration programs that include attention to assisting Service members' family in adjusting to the Service member's return

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METHODS

- Active Duty Service members and Veterans seeking care for PTSD and sleep problems were recruited.
- Patients with primary insomnia and healthy controls were taken from separate studies to match the PTSD sample according to age.
- Participants had a structured clinical interview for psychiatric diagnoses, completed sleep diaries, had formal sleep testing, and completed questionnaires.
- Daily sleep assessments were compared among the three groups (PTSD, insomnia, controls).

PARTICIPANTS

- Ninety-seven people participated (76% male).
- Average age of the sample was 34 years (SD = 8.50 years).
- Thirty-eight percent of participants were Veterans, 5% were Active Duty, and 3% were Reserves.
- Racial/ethnic composition of the sample is as follows: 70% were White, 15% were Black, and 6% were Asian American. Education level of the sample was 49% with college or higher, 33% with some college, and 17% were high school graduates.

LIMITATIONS

- The two groups of patients were not matched on several key variables (e.g., education, race) which may have biased results.
- The study was correlational and causal conclusions cannot be drawn.
- The groups were not of equal size which may have impacted the results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assess both intra- and inter-individual variability in sleep across the course of a study
- Examine the effectiveness of treatments for insomnia, comparing PTSD and insomnia groups among Service members
- Explore the role of physical activity and exercise in sleep among Service members with PTSD

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