

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

PTSD and Physical Health Symptoms Among Veterans: Associated with Child and Relationship Functioning

Sullivan, K., Barr, N., Kintzle, S., Gilreath, T., & Castro, C. A. (2016). PTSD and physical health symptoms among veterans: Associated with child and relationship functioning. *Marriage & Family Review*, 52(7), 689-705.
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SUMMARY: Veterans' family relationships may be impacted by deployment and its effects on Veteran mental and physical health. The effects of Veteran deployment, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and physical health problems on child functioning and intimate partner relationship functioning were examined. PTSD and physical health problems, but not deployment, were associated with Veterans' report of child functioning and partner relationship functioning problems.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Greater PTSD symptoms and greater physical health problems were each associated with poorer child functioning and poorer intimate partner relationship functioning.
- PTSD symptoms were the strongest predictor of child and relationship functioning problems.
- Veteran deployment history was not associated with adverse effects on family functioning.
- Child functioning concerns were more likely to be reported by female Veterans (61%) than males (40%).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate Service members about the potential effects of deployment and related mental and physical health symptoms on their family relationships
- Offer workshops teaching Service members to communicate with their children and their partners about their difficulties post-deployment
- Provide support groups for families of Service members experiencing relationship difficulties

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote routine mental health screenings and referrals for Service members post-deployment
- Encourage education of professionals working with military families about the effects deployment and health concerns can have on Service members' relationships
- Continue to support programs that address the needs of Service members with mental and physical health concerns, including support for family relationship difficulties

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METHODS

- Participants were drawn from a study of 1,356 Veterans in a California county from 2013-2014.
- Participants were recruited by emailing local Veterans on a stage agency list, talking to Veterans served by military groups and programs, and announcing the study via ads and social media.
- Veterans completed online (60%) or paper (40%) surveys about PTSD symptoms, physical health symptoms, deployment information, and family relationship functioning.
- The effects of Veteran deployment and mental and physical health on child functioning and intimate partner relationship functioning were examined.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 448 Veterans with serious intimate partner relationships and 513 Veterans with children; samples were not mutually exclusive.
- Primarily, Veterans with partners were male (88%) and between the ages of 26-50 years (57%), had a history of deployment (81%), and identified as White (39%), Latino (27%), or Black (19%).
- Primarily, Veterans with children were male (85%) and between the ages of 31-60 years (66%), had a history of deployment (77%), and identified as White (29%), Black (29%), or Latino (27%).

LIMITATIONS

- Due to the cross-sectional design, the direction of effects cannot be concluded.
- Untested variables (e.g., depressive symptoms, substance abuse, child age, relationship length, combat exposure) may be influencing the results.
- Results from a non-random sample from one county with a relatively high proportion of Latinos may not generalize to the larger population of U.S. Veterans.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore whether the effects of deployment on Service members' relationships decrease over time
- Investigate whether family members' interpretations of Veterans' physical and mental health problems impact the effects of those problems on relationship functioning
- Compare the impact of parent military service on children between male and female Service members

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