

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

A Comparison Study of Low Trauma Disclosure Participants and Their Partners in Army Couple

Summers, K., Campbell, A. M., Gray, H., Zetmeir, L. A., & Nelson Goff, B. S. (2017). A comparison study of low trauma disclosure participants and their partners in Army couple. *Marriage and Family Review*, 53(6), 556-575.
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SUMMARY: Qualitative and quantitative data were used to examine the experiences of Army couples where at least one partner reported low levels of trauma (e.g., deployment, childhood abuse, assault) disclosure. Three separate groups were identified: couples where both partners reported low levels of trauma disclosure, couples where one partner reported low disclosure and the other mixed, and couples where one partner reported low disclosure and the other high. Differences in individual (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder) and couple functioning (e.g., communication) among participants with low, mixed, and high trauma disclosure were found.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The low trauma disclosure group indicated both positive (e.g., increased communication, use of personal outside resources, support) and negative (e.g., increased relationship stress and adjustment, decreased communication/increased secrecy) effects on couple functioning.
- The mixed trauma group reported more negative effects (e.g., increased relationship stress and conflict, decreased communication/increased secrecy, decreased cohesion) than positive effects (e.g., increased communication) on couple functioning.
- The high trauma disclosure group reported only positive effects (e.g., increased communication and support) on couple functioning.
- Compared to those in the low and high trauma disclosure groups, those in the mixed trauma disclosure group reported lower levels of individual and couple functioning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education to military couples to enhance positive communication skills throughout the deployment cycle
- Disseminate information to military couples regarding trauma disclosure and its impact on individual and relationship functioning
- Offer reintegration workshops aimed at helping Service members and their partners adjust to post-deployment relationship changes

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that enhance couple functioning throughout the deployment cycle
- Continue to promote reintegration programs that help Service members and their families learn to effectively adjust to life after Service members return from deployment
- Recommend training for service providers regarding trauma disclosure in couples and its impact on individual and relationship functioning

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited as part of a larger study examining trauma in 50 Army (Active Duty and Reserve) couples. Participants had to be at least 18 years of age and married for one or more years to a partner who deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.
- Participants were recruited via flyers, newspaper ads, Family Readiness Groups, chaplains, military contacts, and snowball sampling.
- Data were collected between 2004-2005; participants completed survey questions and separate 45-90 minute, semi-structured interviews regarding their trauma experiences and couple functioning.
- Only data from couples with at least one partner reporting a low level of trauma disclosure were included in the current study (n = 13 couples, 26 individuals).

PARTICIPANTS

- Fifteen participants (10 male, 5 female) were in the low trauma disclosure group, seven in the mixed trauma disclosure group (1 male, 6 female), and four in the high trauma disclosure group (2 male, 2 female).
- The average length of marriage was 5.98 years, with the majority of participants being in their first marriage (58%).
- Most participants were White (69.2%) and between the ages of 19-51 years (M = 32.4 years).

LIMITATIONS

- Data for this study were collected over 10 years ago when multiple deployments were less common; therefore, results may not be representative of couples who experienced multiple deployments.
- Trauma disclosure in this study included both prior trauma and military-related trauma, but the type of trauma disclosed could effect couple functioning differently and type of trauma was not accounted for in the analyses.
- Only Army couples were included in this study, which limits the generalizability of results to other service branches.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the long-term effects of trauma disclosure on individual and couple functioning
- Continue to explore how other characteristics (e.g., years of marriage, psychological well-being of partners) influence relationship satisfaction and functioning
- Further investigate why a pattern of mixed trauma disclosure more negatively influences individual and couple functioning than either a high and low trauma disclosure pattern

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