

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

An Examination of Family Adjustment Among Operation Desert Storm Veterans

Taft, C. T., Schumm, J. A., Panuzio, J., & Proctor, S. P. (2008). An examination of family adjustment among Operation Desert Storm veterans. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 76*(4), 648-656. doi:10.1037/a0012576

SUMMARY: This study examined interrelationships among combat exposure, family adjustment, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including symptom clusters (reexperiencing and avoidance, withdrawal and numbing, arousal and lack of control, and self-persecution), in a sample of Operation Desert Storm Veterans (N = 1,512).

KEY FINDINGS:

- Combat exposure predicted poorer family adjustment for female, but not male, Veterans.
- Higher combat exposure was associated with more PTSD symptoms for all Veterans, and increased PTSD symptoms were associated with poorer family adjustment for all Veterans; however, the relationship between combat exposure and family adjustment was not accounted for by total PTSD symptoms.
- Two PTSD symptom clusters, withdrawal and numbing and arousal and lack of control, did account for the relationship between combat exposure and family adjustment such that combat exposure influenced family adjustment through increased symptoms of withdrawal and numbing and arousal and lack of control.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide information about PTSD symptoms to help families become better equipped to seek assistance when necessary
- Offer workshops that increase skills for coping with PTSD symptoms to help military families retain cohesion and adaptability in the face of a PTSD diagnosis
- Enhance education for Service members and their families regarding the use of constructive expression of emotions during conflict management to increase family resilience

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend collaboration among providers and professionals who work with military families to increase awareness of the services available to families dealing with a mental health diagnosis
- Encourage training for professionals who work with military families regarding the possible impact of PTSD symptoms on family functioning and how to mitigate those impacts
- Continue to support programs that aim to increase the cohesion and adaptability of military families

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METHODS

- In 1991, Soldiers completed self-report questionnaires within five days following their return from Operation Desert Storm, prior to rejoining their families, and again 18 to 24 months later.
- Questionnaires included information about combat exposure, PTSD symptoms, and family functioning.
- Data were analyzed to determine the relationships among combat exposure, PTSD, and family adjustment and mechanisms underlying those relationships

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 1,512 Service members residing with family members, who were on average 31.6 years old (SD = 8.9 years).
- The ethnic composition of the sample was 87.4% White, 5.5% Black, 3.3% Latino, 2.3% Native American, 0.5% Asian-American, and 1% another race.
- The sample consisted of 93% males.

LIMITATIONS

- Those who participated may differ from non-participants in a way that is not measured but affected the outcome variables. For instance, those that participated may have been functioning better (or worse) than those who did not participate.
- The data were collected over 20 years ago and the demographic characteristics of the sample may not represent today's Army.
- No data were collected on nonmilitary stressors that may have influenced the relationships described.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the impact of combat exposure and PTSD symptoms and include a larger number of women to provide a clearer picture of the experiences of female veterans
- Use longitudinal studies that incorporate deployment-related stressors, pre-deployment family vulnerabilities, and nonmilitary stressors
- Incorporate a wider array of family adjustment measures obtained from multiple reporters

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