

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Relational Turbulence and the Post-Deployment Transition: Self, Partner, and Relationship Focused Turbulence

Theiss, J. A., & Knobloch, L. K. (2014). Relational turbulence and the post-deployment transition: Self, partner, and relationship focused turbulence. *Communication Research*, 41(1), 27-51. doi:10.1177/0093650211429285

**SUMMARY:** Researchers examined how the relational turbulence model applied to post-deployment couple reunions. They used relational uncertainty (uncertainty about the relationship) and partner interference (a behavior of one partner that interrupts the other's routine or pursuit of a goal) to predict three markers of possible relationship distress: (a) relational maintenance, (b) partner responsiveness, (c) and turmoil appraisals. An online survey was used to collect data Service members and their partners. Findings suggest that the model is relevant for explaining the communication experiences of military couples during the post-deployment transition, and that relational uncertainty and partner interference explained unique variance in relationships distress markers beyond the effect of reported relationship satisfaction.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Self-uncertainty (the individual's uncertainty about the relationship) was negatively associated with relationship maintaining behaviors, potentially due to those partners being less willing to invest in a relationship about which they are not certain.
- Partner uncertainty (your partner's perceived uncertainty about the relationship) and partner interference (either blocking or not facilitating a partner's goal) were negatively related to partner responsiveness.
- Frequent interruptions to partners' goals and routines contribute to a tumultuous relationship climate.
- Relationship distress was more pronounced for couples who had been reunited for a longer period of time.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Assist military couples in navigating the post-deployment reintegration phase of the deployment cycle
- Teach military couples skills related to being responsive to one's partner and making realistic appraisals of his/her behavior
- Continue to offer educational workshops to military couples regarding how to engage in effective communication following a deployment

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend consideration for frequency of deployment and geographic moves and the potential challenges military families will encounter when making decisions regarding staffing
- Continue to support reintegration programs for military families, and possibly extended these programs since couples may experience relationship distress several months after reintegration
- Recommend education for professionals working with military couples regarding the possible effects of deployment on couples functioning

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## METHODS

- Participants were recruited across branches of service, regions of the country, deployment circumstances, and levels of relationship satisfaction.
- Participants were contacted through emails to family readiness officers, flyers at reintegration workshops, and posts in online forums for military families.
- Online questionnaires were filled out by one eligible member of a military couple within six months of post-deployment reunion.

## PARTICIPANTS

- The sample was comprised of 235 participants (128 service members, 107 at-home partners) living in 30 states, with an average deployment length of 11.4 months and average time home from deployment of 3.16 months.
- The sample included military Service members (98 men, 30 women), civilian partners (2 men, 105 women), and dual-military couple members (11).
- The majority of the sample were White (85%) and between 19-55 years; 59% were National Guard, 32% Army, 4% Marines, 3% Air Force, and 2% Navy.

## LIMITATIONS

- Cross-sectional design (single snapshot) precludes long-term observations of relational change.
- U.S. Army and National Guard members dominated the sample; therefore, results may not be generalizable to other branches of the military.
- Relatively low levels of relational uncertainty and partner interference may have biased the results.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include both partners of the couple so that comparisons of relational turbulence could be made within pairs
- Utilize relationship turbulence model to explore how disruptions during other transitions (e.g., becoming a parent, career changes) may provide a more complete picture of how military couples navigate transitions
- Continue to examine the applicability of the relational turbulence model with same-sex military couples

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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