

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Associations of Military Divorce with Mental, Behavioral, and Physical Health Outcomes

Wang, L., Seelig, A., Wadsworth, S. M., McMaster, H., Alcaraz, J. E., & Crum-Cianflone, N. F. (2015). Associations of military divorce with mental, behavioral, and physical health outcomes. *BMC Psychiatry, 15*, 1-12.
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SUMMARY: This study explored links between divorce and various health outcomes among all 5 branches of Service members in the Millennium Cohort Study. Participants who divorced within the 3 year follow-up period had higher rates of new-onset PTSD, depression, weight gain, and alcohol use than participants who remained married.

KEY FINDINGS

- Rates of divorce were significantly linked to new-onset PTSD and depression, as well as increases in binge-drinking and other alcohol-related problems (e.g., driving while under the influence of alcohol).
- Participants who were divorced at the follow-up survey had improved physical function (e.g., exercised more regularly), and more weight gain than participants who remained married.
- Divorced participants were more likely to deploy within a 3 year period and no link was found between divorce and separation from the military.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

Programs could:

- Increase services aimed at recently divorced Service members to help them as they transition from being married
- Offer peer support programs for Service members who are in the process of divorce to increase the amount of their support
- Encourage military personnel to screen for PTSD and depression among recently divorced Service members

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES

Policies could:

- Continue to educate military personnel on links between divorce and behavioral health outcomes
- Recommend installations add information on links between PTSD, depression, and divorce to materials aimed at families
- Support programs that target Service members who report marital issues or family conflict

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METHODS

- Service members who were married and involved in the Millennium Cohort Study were invited to participate in the current study. Participants completed a baseline survey in 2001-2003 and a follow-up survey in 2004-2006.
- Survey data included questions about mental, physical, behavioral and functional outcomes and were obtained by self-report.
- Military and demographic data were obtained from electronic military personnel files at both time points.
- Statistical analyses were conducted to compare married and divorced participants in the sample and the changes in the outcomes between the two groups.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants (n = 29,314) were taken from a broader sample of the Millennium Cohort Study, which included all components of five Service branches of Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard personnel during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.
- Inclusion criteria included participants who were married at baseline and either married or divorced at the time of the follow-up survey.
- The sample was predominately male (81%), White (73%), and most participants were 46 years or older (74%).

LIMITATIONS

- Data were gathered by self-report and diagnoses of PTSD, depression, and weight gain were not verified by medical personnel.
- The length of the follow-up period may have missed acute outcomes and not have captured outcomes that may develop later.
- The participants in this study were in legal, opposite sex marriages, which limits the generalizability to Service members in common law and same sex marriages.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Conduct qualitative research with Service members and their spouses about factors that lead to divorce.
- Gather additional information about the relationships between divorce, physical health, and behavioral health outcomes.
- Explore potential link between Service members who have been divorced multiple times and physical, mental, behavioral, and functional outcomes.

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