

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Psychological Effects of Deployments on Military Families

Warner, C. H., Appenzeller, G. N., Warner, C. M., & Grieger, T. (2009). Psychological effects of deployments on military families. *Psychiatric Annals*, 39(2), 56-63. doi:10.3928/00485713-20090201-11

SUMMARY: Military spouses of a single Army Brigade Combat Team (BCT) who were enrolled in a family readiness group completed an online survey as their Service member (partner) prepared for deployment. The survey was designed to identify stressors, perceived barriers to mental health treatment, and levels of depression and stress occurring among spouses of about-to-be-deployed service members. Over 40% of spouses reported moderate or severe symptoms of depression, and a large majority reported willingness to seek mental health care if needed or if suggested by friends or family.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Forty-three percent of spouses reported moderate or severe depressive symptoms during this pre-deployment period and nearly all endorsed potential feelings of loneliness and fearing for their spouse's safety during deployment.
- Seventy percent of the spouses had one or more children living at home, but having children at home was not a risk factor for depression.
- Eighty-nine percent of spouses endorsed being willing to seek mental healthcare if needed.
- Twenty-nine percent reported concern that their own mental health treatment could have a negative impact on their spouse's career, with older spouses more frequently reporting this specific concern.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education aimed at helping military spouses cope with stressors specific to the preparation phase of their partners' military deployment as part of BCTs.
- Disseminate information regarding DoD and community-based programs that offer services and resources to military spouses throughout the deployment cycle
- Offer support groups for military spouses throughout the deployment cycle to reduce the risk of loneliness and mental health issues

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend expanding access to and reducing perceived barriers to mental health care for spouses and families of deployed service members
- Continue to support efforts to reduce stigma regarding mental health treatment for Service members and their spouses
- Continue to provide support for programs that work to increase family readiness prior to deployment

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METHODS

- Eight hundred seventy-two spouses of one deploying Army BCT were invited to participate in an online anonymous survey.
- Measures included demographic questions, number of previous OIF/OEF deployments, and whether the non-deploying spouse was currently or had previously been in mental health treatment.
- Participants were recruited via an email, which contained a link to the online survey, explained the importance of their participation and the anonymous and voluntary nature of the study.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 295 Army spouses.
- The majority of the sample was female (96%), White (80%), and between the ages of 17-24 years (33%) or 25-29 years (29%).
- Seven percent of spouses were currently receiving mental health care, 9% had within the past year, 13% had more than one year ago, and 5% received care prior to their Service members' deployment.

LIMITATIONS

- Low response rate and self-reported measures may have resulted in bias due to self-selection or socially desirable responses.
- The sample demographics contain an overrepresentation of White and female participants and the sample was comprised of one Army BCT; therefore, the results may not accurately generalize to the larger military population.
- Some of the instruments used in the study have not been validated in groups under high levels of environmental stress, so reported rates in this study should not be understood as prevalence rates of disorders.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine which stressors related to spousal deployment are experienced as most stressful and which are most closely linked to the experience of depression
- Conduct a similar study with spouses from other service branches and a more demographically representative sample
- Investigate potential differences in coping mechanisms and mental health concerns between spouses and families of first time deployed service members and spouses and families who have experienced prior deployment

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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