

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Air Force

The Role of Natural Support Systems in the Post-Deployment Adjustment of Active Duty Military Personnel

Welsh, J. A., Olson, J., Perkins, D. F., Travis, W. J., & Ormsby, L. (2015). The role of natural support systems in the post-deployment adjustment of active duty military personnel. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 56(2-Jan), 69-78. doi:10.1007/s10464-015-9726-y

SUMMARY: Researchers explored relationships between negative deployment experiences, naturally occurring social support (i.e. romantic partners, friends and neighbors, and unit leaders), and post-deployment adjustment in Active Duty Air Force personnel. Overall, higher levels of social support was associated with better outcomes regardless of negative deployment experiences.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Support from spouses or significant others was less strongly related to mission readiness than leadership support.
- Support from neighbors was less important than either support from romantic partners or leaders for depressive symptoms and Air Force satisfaction.
- All three support types were associated with satisfaction with military life, and mission readiness.
- Military personnel who perceived high levels of deployment-related stressors were less likely to experience depression if they perceived high levels of support from spouses or significant others, unit leadership, and neighbors.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop programs that maximize the benefits of naturally occurring support systems
- Support unit leaders and installation support personnel in providing resources and education to spouses, significant others, and neighbors to strengthen the support offered to military personnel returning from deployment
- Promote programs where unit leaders mobilize alternative social support for those who do not have these critical social support systems

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Extend and support policies that include critical social support systems of Active Duty military personnel
- Encourage awareness campaigns among Service members' spouses, significant others, and neighbors about post-deployment support
- Support programming for military personnel critical social support groups

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Data were drawn from a subset of 22,150 Active Duty Air Force personnel who responded to the 2011 Air Force Community Assessment project.
- Eligibility criteria included Active Duty personnel who had been deployed and were married or in a committed romantic relationship.
- Survey administered to Service members had seven separate scales that measured depressive symptoms, Air Force satisfaction, perceived mission readiness, negative deployment experience, spouse/ significant other support, leadership support, and neighbor support.

PARTICIPANTS

- Out of the 22,150 participants, 86.4% were men, their median age was 28 years.
- Participants had an average of 13.5 years of military service.
- No other demographic information (e.g., race/ethnicity) was provided.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was limited to Active Duty Air Force personnel; therefore, not representative of the entire military population.
- Some of the support, deployment and well-being variables could potentially impact each other in transactional ways that are impossible to detect with cross-sectional data.
- Study used cross-sectional data; therefore, unable to explore the pathways of these relationships.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Identify gaps in post-deployment resources and education to spouses, significant others, and neighbors
- Examine the usefulness of military personnel self-help support groups that offer unit-specific discussion platforms post-deployment
- Explore other naturally occurring social support, such as best friends or extended family in promoting well-being of Service members

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>