

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

A Qualitative Analysis of Military Couples With High and Low Trauma Symptoms and Relationship Distress Levels

Wick, S., & Goff, B. S. (2014). A qualitative analysis of military couples with high and low trauma symptoms and relationship distress levels. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 13, 63-88. doi:10.1080/15332691.2014.865983

SUMMARY: A greater understanding of the effects of war deployment on military couple functioning was explored. The Couple Adaptation to Traumatic Stress (CATS) theoretical model was utilized as a frame to analyze couple interviews. Five primary themes were identified in the results: communication, conflict management, roles, support or nurturance, and posttraumatic growth.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Highly satisfied couples and those with the lowest presence of posttraumatic stress, were more likely to engage in open communication marked by high levels of information sharing and emotional expression.
- Highly satisfied couples were most likely to enjoy higher frequencies of deployment contact and were predominantly supportive, nurturing, and empathetic toward their spouses.
- Couples reporting higher traumatic stress symptoms and lower relationship satisfaction indicated varied or inconsistent results across the five thematic areas.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop workshops for professionals working with Service members and their partners around topics related to posttraumatic stress, conflict management, and supportive relationships
- Engage Service members and their partners in classes that aim to increase communication and coping skills
- Enhance education, activities, and curriculum for Service members and their partners related to coping behaviors and dealing with posttraumatic stress

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage collaboration among Department of Defense programs and community-based organizations to support Service members who have been deployed as well as their partners
- Recommend education for service providers around the possible effects of deployment on not only the Service member, but their intimate relationships, and families
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can support Service members who have been deployed, their partners, and families

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited through publicly posted flyers and newspaper announcements as well as referrals from Army Family Readiness Groups, chaplains, and other local military sources.
- Couples were asked 13 questions pertaining to their relational and interpersonal functioning.
- A preliminary codebook of themes based on the “couple functioning” portion of the CATS model was established and a single coder analyzed the data for emerging themes.

PARTICIPANTS

- These inclusion criteria included recent deployment to OIF or OEF, a minimum age of 18 years, involvement in their current relationship for at least one year, and no substance abuse or domestic violence when the initial telephone screening was made.
- From the total sample of 45 couples, 15 couples (n = 30 participants) were selected to comprise the subsample based upon their scores on the relationship satisfaction/functioning test.
- Among the male participants, 11 identified as White, three as Black, and one as Latino. Among the female participants 12 identified as White, two as Native American, and one as Black.

LIMITATIONS

- Although female Soldiers were not excluded from the sample, no female Soldiers elected to participate; therefore, results may not be generalizable to a female Soldier and partner’s couple functioning.
- The study did not have a second coder of the data and therefore, there is no way to confirm accuracy of it.
- Spouses’ prior trauma symptoms or the impact of spouses’ trauma history on the Soldiers was not directly addressed as part of the current study; which could have influenced this study’s results on couples’ functioning.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate other groupings of couples or within couple differences in trauma histories and individual and interpersonal functioning levels
- Explore longitudinally the effects of the deployment experience on couple functioning over time and throughout the deployment cycle (i.e., pre-deployment, deployment, and reintegration)
- Examine the effects of multiple deployments on the marital relationship and how this differs from a single deployment

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