

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Health Risk Behaviors Among Afghanistan & Iraq Veterans Attending College

Widome, R., Kehle, S. M., Carlson, K. F., Laska, M. N., Gulden, A., & Lust, K. (2011). Post traumatic stress disorder and health risk behaviors among Afghanistan & Iraq veterans attending college. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 35(4), 387-392. doi:10.5993/ajhb.35.4.1

**SUMMARY:** Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans attending 15 post-secondary institutions in Minnesota completed an online anonymous survey which examined relationships between posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and health risk behaviors. PTSD diagnosis was significantly related to reporting involvement in a physical fight in the past year, and somewhat associated with high-risk drinking.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Past year PTSD diagnoses increased the risk of being involved in a physical fight (3 x greater odds) and marginally increased the odds of high-risk drinking (1.32 times more likely).
- Sixteen percent of Veterans reported having a PTSD diagnosis at any time in their lives, and 8% reported a PTSD diagnosis in the previous year.
- No additional associations between PTSD and other health behaviors examined were significant.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop curricula for Service members about the potential for risky health behaviors and teach healthy ways of managing stress
- Host classes that educate military families about signs and symptoms of PTSD and how to seek treatment
- Offer workshops during reintegration to help families and Service members adjust to the Service member's return, especially when the deployment has included combat exposure

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that programs incorporate screening for risky health behaviors among Service members who screen positive for PTSD
- Recommend partnerships among military-based and community-based programs to help military families feel more comfortable accessing health-related resources and services that are not on installations
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, their partners and children

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## METHODS

- All U.S. Military Veterans attending 15 different public and private, 2- and 4-years colleges in Minnesota were invited to complete an anonymous, web-based survey.
- Forty-three percent of the 1,901 student Veterans invited to participate in the study completed the questionnaire. Of those, 49% reported having served in Iraq and/or Afghanistan.
- The survey consisted of questions about health behaviors (tobacco and alcohol use), and participants completed a measure of PTSD.
- Statistical analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between self-reported, past year PTSD diagnosis and health risk behaviors.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Four hundred and six OEF/OIF Veterans (78% male) completed the survey.
- Eighty-nine percent were White, and slightly over half were older than 25 years old.
- No information on military branch or other demographic variables was presented.

## LIMITATIONS

- All variables were self-report, and reporting may be subject to social desirability bias.
- The sample was limited to one state, and results may only generalize to OIF/OEF Veterans attending a Minnesota post-secondary institution.
- In light of the 43% response rate, no analyses were conducted to estimate how responders and non-responders differed.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assess the relationship between PTSD and health risk behaviors in OEF/OIF Veterans over time
- Gather data on pre-military health behaviors and personality factors that could impact the relationship between PTSD and health risk behaviors
- Collect data from military families about Service members' health behaviors and examine potential impacts of these behaviors on family relationships

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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