

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Dilemmas Families Face in Talking with Returning U.S. Military Service Members About Seeking Professional Help for Mental Health Issues

Wilson, S. R., Gettings, P. E., Hall E. D., & Pastor, R. G. (2015). Dilemmas families face in talking with returning U.S. Military service members about seeking professional help for mental health issues. *Health Communication*, 30(8), 772-783. doi:10.1080/10410236.2014.899659

**SUMMARY:** Potential dilemmas family members may experience when talking with returning Service members about their mental health were addressed. Family members of Service members who served in Iraq or Afghanistan read a scenario where their Service member was displaying posttraumatic stress disorder or depression symptoms. Participants described goals they would pursue, barriers they might encounter, and strategies they would employ in such a situation.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Generally, findings indicated that family members reported using four groups of strategies to manage these dilemmas.
- The first two groups of strategies, nonjudgmental listening and respect, focused on different aspects of communication with Service member about mental health.
- The third set of strategies focused on family members framing the discussions with Service members in a positive and cooperative manner.
- The last group of strategies related to family members seeking out the help of third parties, such as a religious resource or another Service member or Veteran.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer pre and post-deployment support groups for family and Service members to discuss potential difficulties coping with stress
- Continue providing opportunities for previously returned Service member to talk with other Service members about stress and coping
- Provide concrete information on normative versus problematic responses to deployment and strategies to address the deployment-related distress

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue support for research that addresses the unique challenges faced by family members of Service member who have served in combat
- Recommend education of professionals who work with military families on the needs of family members of Service members in talking about stress and coping
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, their partners and children

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## METHODS

- Participants were recruited by sending e-mails to Family Readiness Coordinators and chaplains.
- Open-ended questions were asked regarding potential goals, possible reasons behind behaviors, and advice for others in the context of the hypothetical scenario.
- All members of the research team analyzed the open-ended responses for both the dilemmas and strategies by independently identifying themes based upon common language used by the participants.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants had to be at least 18 years old, have a family member who had served in either Iraq or Afghanistan in the past five years, and complete an online survey.
- Out of the 80 participants, most were female (94%) and not in the U.S. Military themselves (94%); their average age was 44.59 years old and 85% percent were White.
- Participants were Service members' partner (49%), parent (40%), sibling (5%), child (2%), and other (4%).

## LIMITATIONS

- The dilemmas used in the study were general enough to be relevant to all family roles, but did not address unique situations experienced by spouses, parents, and siblings.
- The focus of the study was on family members' experiences, not the Service members' possible mental health issues. Therefore, it's unclear how the findings are linked with Service members' symptoms.
- Not all participants had actually confronted a real situation like the scenario, so follow-up questions or probes could not be asked.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore unique family role situations (e.g., spouses, parents) in talking with Service members about mental health
- Gather data from both family members and Service members to provide insight into what strategies Service members find helpful
- Examine how third parties (e.g., Veterans, other Service members) can be part of the ongoing mental health support of returning 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>