

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

The Impact of Predeployment Functional Impairment on Mental Health After Combat

Wright, K. M., Cabrera, O. A., Eckford, R. D., Adler, A. B., & Bliese, P. D. (2012). The impact of predeployment functional impairment on mental health after combat. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice & Policy*, 4(3), 260-269. doi:10.1037/a0024373

SUMMARY: Service members preparing for or returning from deployment to Iraq completed written surveys to assess the role of pre-deployment impaired functioning in predicting mental health post-deployment. Service members with pre-deployment impaired functioning who are exposed to high levels of combat are at greater risk for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms post-deployment.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Soldiers who reported pre-deployment impairment and high combat exposure also reported the highest level of PTSD symptoms after deployment.
- Pre-deployment functional impairment predicted post-deployment depression and anger.
- Pre-deployment impairment combined with high combat exposure did not predict any other outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop services for Service members who are having difficulty functioning pre-deployment as they may be most in need of support to avoid later mental health difficulties
- Disseminate information regarding possible symptoms of mental health problems Service members may face after deployment and where individuals and families can find help for those problems
- Educate couples who have a history of trauma before deployment on positive coping skills

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, their partners, and children
- Promote reintegration programs that include attention to assisting Service members' family in adjusting to the Service member's return
- Recommend training for community providers to educate them about unique factors that contribute to marital strain for military couples

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METHODS

- U.S. Soldiers from a combat brigade preparing to deploy to Iraq were invited to complete a written survey two months prior to and three months after deployment; 96% consented at pre- deployment, 93% at post-deployment.
- Soldiers completed measures of demographics, PTSD and depression symptoms, anger problems, functional impairment (pre-deployment only), combat exposure (post-deployment only) and disability (post-deployment only).
- Functional impairment was assessed by one item asking how difficult their symptoms made it to do work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people.

PARTICIPANTS

- Five hundred twenty-two Soldiers who had a one year deployment to Iraq were surveyed.
- Ninety-eight percent of the sample was male, 70% was White, 52% was married, and 49% was between 18-25 years.
- Fifty-nine percent reported being in the military for five years or less; in the sample 89% were junior enlisted or non-commissioned officers.
- Fifty-one percent of the sample reported some schooling, high school diploma or GED, and 37% some college.

LIMITATIONS

- This study relied on self-report measures of combat exposure that may result in biased reporting.
- The assessment of pre-deployment functional impairment was only a single-item measure that may reduce the complexity and multiple dimensions of the construct.
- The researchers collapsed the disability scale into one item which results in loss of information.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate the study using a multi-dimensional measure of functional impairment instead of the single items used for various domains
- Examine these relationships in female Soldiers and others in high-risk occupations (e.g., firefighters)
- Gather longitudinal data to explore the relationships among disability status, PTSD, and deployment over time

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