The Impact of Predeployment Functional Impairment on Mental Health After Combat


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

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.

www.reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu
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

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design
Appropriate Research Plan and Sample

Methods
Appropriate Measurement and Analysis

Limitations
Few

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

www.reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu