

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Experiences of Military Spouses of Veterans with Combat-Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Yambo, T. W., Johnson, M. E., Delaney, K. R., Hamilton, R., & York, J. A. (2016). Experiences of military spouses of veterans with combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 48(6), 543-551. doi:10.1111/jnu.12237

SUMMARY: Spouses are often a main source of support for Veterans and may be strongly impacted by Veterans' symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Female spouses of Veterans with PTSD were interviewed about what it was like living with a Veteran with PTSD. Spouses may have to deal with a number of changes and stressors, including changes in family and marital relationships, daily lives and routines, and Veterans' emotions and unpredictability.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Spouses reported dealing with Veterans' negative emotions and unpredictability (e.g., angry outbursts, suicidality, flashbacks) as common stressors when living with a Veteran with PTSD.
- Family relationships were affected by PTSD, and spouses felt they had to keep peace between family members and protect their children from potential physical or emotional harm.
- Spouses adjusted their family's lives to cater to the needs of their Veteran, including assuming more responsibilities, helping with treatment, and changing schedules, activities, and routines.
- Many spouses reported having to adjust to a new sense of normalcy after realizing that their relationship would not be the same again; for some, this included considering divorce.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide workshops for Service members and their spouses to learn about communication skills useful for discussing trauma and negative emotions following deployment
- Engage military spouses in classes that aim to increase knowledge about PTSD symptoms, impacts, treatments, and comorbidity (e.g., traumatic brain injury, substance use disorders)
- Offer support groups for Service members to discuss traumatic experiences and relationship impacts

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend professional development for professionals providing post-deployment programs to Service members about the potential effects of PTSD on marital and parent relationships
- Encourage integrating information about educating youth about PTSD into military parenting programs
- Support programs that help military couples struggling with marital concerns, particularly for couples where the Service member is diagnosed with PTSD

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METHODS

- Female spouses of male Veterans with PTSD symptoms or a diagnosis were recruited through social networking and participant referral from 2013-2014.
- Each spouse completed either a phone or in-person unstructured interview about what it is like to live with someone with PTSD and factors that make it easier or more difficult to do so.
- All interview statements were recorded, transcribed, and coded for common themes.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 14 spouses, ages 21-60 years, who were married to retired or medically discharged Active Duty, Reserve, or National Guard Veterans.
- Participants identified as White (71%), Latino (14%), or White and Latino (14%); the majority had been married five years or longer (86%), had children (86%), and were employed (57%).
- The majority of Veterans had a PTSD diagnosis (86%), had experienced symptoms for three or more years (86%), and had been deployed more than once (57%).
- Half of the Veterans were also diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury.

LIMITATIONS

- Participants did not include male spouses, limiting generalizability.
- Other important, untested variables (e.g., Veterans' combat exposure, Veteran or spouse pre-existing psychological disorders or mental health treatment) may have impacted the results.
- Given that participants were non-randomly sampled and interviews were unstructured, researcher bias may have influenced who participated and what questions were asked.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore whether social support from other military spouses living with Service members or Veterans with PTSD impacts the mental health and well-being of these spouses
- Explore whether social support from other military spouses living with Service members or Veterans with PTSD impacts the mental health and well-being of these spouses
- Compare spouses' stress levels and well-being among families of Service members and Veterans with PTSD with and without children

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