

Military Service Absences and Family Members' Mental Health: A Timeline Followback Assessment

AUTHORS: Aubrey J. Rodriguez, M.A.,
Ph.D. candidate
Gayla Margolin, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

“Although military service, and particularly absence due to deployment, has been linked to risk for depression and anxiety among some spouses and children of active duty service members, there is limited research to explain the heterogeneity in family members’ reactions to military service stressors. The current investigation introduces the Timeline Followback Military Family Interview (TFMFI) as a clinically useful strategy to collect detailed time-linked information about the service member’s absences. Two dimensions of parent absence—the extent to which absences coincide with important family events and cumulative time absent—were tested as potential risks to family members’ mental health. Data from 70 mother-adolescent pairs revealed that the number of important family events missed by the service member was linked to elevated youth symptoms of depression, even when accounting for the number of deployments and cumulative duration of the service member’s absence. However, youth who reported more frequent contact with the service member during absences were buffered from the effects of extensive absence. Mothers’ symptoms were associated with the cumulative duration of the service members’ time away, but not with family events missed by the service member. These results

identify circumstances that increase the risk for mental health symptoms associated with military family life. The TFMFI provides an interview-based strategy for clinicians wishing to understand military family members’ lived experience during periods of service-member absence.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- The effects of a parent’s absence during a military deployment can vary greatly by many factors, including length of stay, contact with family during deployment, quality of contact. This study represents an early attempt to consider family members’ experiences during the service member’s absence. The authors reconstruct a military service timeline over the past 5 years that includes total months of absence and the co-occurrence of the service member’s absence with important family events.
- The authors tested whether a service member’s cumulative time away and missed family events were associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression for mothers and adolescent youth. They found that cumulative time away was positively associated with mothers’ depression and anxiety symptoms, but was not associated with youths’ symptoms.
- The authors found that number of recent deployments was inversely associated with youths’ anxiety symptoms. This finding suggests that as deployments increase, youth develop coping mechanisms that help reduce anxiety and depression symptoms.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

These findings show that family clinicians need to attend to multidimensional impacts of parental absence and serial absence, even after the family has reunited. Military families should continue to participate in pre and post deployment briefing opportunities. Spouses should consider using these opportunities to address expectations as well as possible benefits and challenges of contact. Though adolescents did not appear to be affected by overall duration of parent's absence, they did appear to be affected by whether the absence co-occurred with significant family events. Before a parent deploys, families should discuss how to maintain contact during significant family events. Families who anticipate future absences might find it beneficial to plan for contact so they have ways of connecting emotionally, even if there are barriers to sharing certain information.

FOR POLICY

The DoD might continue offering opportunities for families to prepare for military absences, such as deployments, through pre-deployment briefings. The DoD might continue encouraging its service members to keep regular and high quality contact with their family members while absent. Upon a service member's return, the DoD might offer additional guidance on family reintegration, including suggestions on how to address anxiety and depression symptoms that spouse or adolescent youth might exhibit as a result of the parent's absence. Currently, the VA offers an array of services and guidance for military families on how to help a veteran cope after returning from a military deployment. Considering the role family health has on a veteran's health, the VA might offer additional services to help military spouses and children effectively address depression and anxiety symptoms related to their veteran's absence.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The discrepancy between the authors' results on contact and previous findings underscore how little is known about the impact of contact between absent service members and family members at home. Researchers should continue investigating how contact during military deployment and other separations affect both the service member and the family at home. The researchers noted that the selection of a 5-year timeframe to assess absence was rather arbitrary, and was dictated by time constraints for data collection rather than empirical or theoretical considerations. Future researchers should examine the effects of different time frames and base such selections on empirical evidence or theories. A limitation of this study is the construct of contact having limited detailed information. Future studies should include more detailed information, including the impact of contact. Another limitation of this study is that important events were selected, instead of written in. To enhance future studies, researchers should allow participants to nominate events, rate event impact/salience, or differentiate nuclear family versus extended family events. The sample used in this study was somewhat skewed to higher military ranks and supervisory positions because service members with adolescent children have largely committed to career-length service, and have advanced to these positions. Future researchers should evaluate their methodology to allow for more service members of lower military ranks with adolescent children. A majority of adolescents included in this sample were mid- to late-adolescents. Researchers should improve generalizability of studies on mental health of adolescents with military deployed parents by ensuring a representative number of younger adolescents are included in the sample. Future studies might use a mental health symptom inventory that allows for researchers to detect daily individual and relationship indicators, such as feeling worried, overwhelmed, or frustrated by the lack of predictability about the service member parent's presence in the family. Future researchers should examine the multidimensional impacts of the deployment, including after the service members has returned. Given the increase of female service members, future researchers should include female service members in their study sample.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Aubrey J. Rodriguez, M.A., Ph.D.
candidate¹

Donna Harrington, Ph.D.²

¹aubreyro@usc.edu; Department of Psychology,
University of Southern California

² Department of Psychology, University of
Southern California