

Increasing Marital Satisfaction as a Resilience Factor Among Active Duty Members and Veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Previous studies have indicated that healthy marriages provide an important level of protection against the development of PTSD in military personnel. In order to determine which factors lead to healthy marriages (and, in turn, how the health of a marriage affects these factors), this study surveyed military personnel from all service branches.
- Both the extent of PTSD symptoms and the length of time stateside significantly predicted marital satisfaction. More severe PTSD was more likely to disrupt a marriage, while longer periods spent stateside after deployment increased marital satisfaction.
- Researchers suggest that future studies examine the importance of spousal attribution of symptom origin, which may moderate the relationship between effectiveness of treatments, symptom level and marital satisfaction.

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ABSTRACT:

“Supportive relationships are protective against a number of prevalent health risks among military populations, including post-traumatic stress disorder. Increasing marital satisfaction and strengthening that relationship is an important avenue for maintaining health among returning service members and their families. The current study builds upon two earlier studies that were limited to National Guard personnel from one state. An exploratory survey was employed to identify variables that influenced marital satisfaction among Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom veterans. Using regression analysis, the statistically significant predictive model included five variables. In addition to the identification of this predictive model, other variables found to be non-predictive are reported.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

In a finding that supports those of previous studies, military personnel who reported having significant PTSD symptoms also reported marital problems in this study. In addition to PTSD severity, findings indicated that length of time stateside significantly impacted marital satisfaction; military personnel indicated that the more time they spend stateside after deployment increased their marital satisfaction. In turn, healthy marriages can provide some degree of protection against the effects of PTSD on military personnel and their partners. For military couples, this study emphasizes the importance of spending quality time together and accessing appropriate mental health care. Couples who work on their marriage together have a double benefit – marital satisfaction and some degree of protection against mental illness.

FOR POLICY

The Army has initiated mental health screenings for veterans upon their return stateside, which would be a beneficial policy for each branch of the service. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) may also wish to contract social workers to help veterans and their spouses establish realistic expectations about reuniting stateside and the time needed for readjustment. Social workers should be encouraged to collaborate and develop new ideas to increase the likelihood of marital satisfaction after combat service. Additionally, social work programs designed to prepare graduates to work directly with military personnel would be particularly beneficial due to the high number of military service members with spouses. The University of Southern California's School of Social Work, in a tradition that extends back to World War I and II, is one example of the type of program needed to prepare professional social workers serving the military.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research was built on previous studies by increasing the number of military personnel and the variety of branches responding to the survey; however, the sample was still limited to military personnel. Future research should survey military spouses as well, to determine whether service members and their spouses differ in their perceptions of marital satisfaction and the factors influencing marriage quality. Limiting the definition of supportive relationships to marriage also excludes examination of other committed relationships, which may provide beneficial effects similar to those of marriage. All measures of PTSD in this study were self-reported, so researchers should use objective measures of PTSD severity, as well as taking spouse or partner perception of service members' PTSD symptoms into account in future studies. Variance in perceptions might serve as one of the factors creating marital tension. Future research using interview methodology or open-ended questions might also identify variables missing from current and previous studies.

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