

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans' Experiences Living with their Parents after Separation from the Military

PUBLICATION: *Contemporary Family Therapy* (2012); 34(3), 362-375.

PUBLICATION TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Journal Article

KEYWORDS: Military, veterans, parents, family systems theory, reintegration

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Although it is common for veterans to live with their parents after separation from the military, this study is the first to examine the experiences of veterans in this situation. Understanding how veterans experience this transition can prepare parents and families to be more knowledgeable and meet the needs of returning veterans.
- In California, nearly half of unmarried veterans under 30 live with their parents. In this study, three-quarters of the veterans age 25 or younger, and one-third of veterans age 26-31 lived with their parents upon their return from military service; some for a short period before moving for work or school, and some for an extended period.
- Most veterans reported positive experiences living with their parents, appreciating the tangible and emotional support they provided. However, conflicts arose in re-establishing family roles post-service. Parents and veterans experienced the most difficulty when veterans returned home with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or had experienced military sexual trauma. In these cases, it was vitally important for parents to provide children with support, help them navigate systems of care, and to still acknowledge their veteran children's autonomy and treat them as adults.

AUTHORS: Miranda Worthen, Ph.D., M.Phil.; Rudolf Moos, Ph.D.; Jennifer Ahern, Ph.D., M.P.H.

ABSTRACT:

“When military service members separate from the military, many return to their families of origin, living with their parents for a period of several weeks to years. While research with veterans and their spouses has documented the particular strain of this reintegration period on veterans and their partners, little research to date has examined veterans’ experiences living with their parents. The present study sought to fill this research gap by investigating veterans’ experiences living with their parents using qualitative, in-depth interviews with Iraq and Afghanistan veterans in California. Overall, veterans appreciated the instrumental and emotional support their parents provided when they separated. However, in some cases, living with parents also produced conflict and strain. In situations where adult veteran children had difficulty with the transition to civilian life or returned with mental health problems, parents were often the first to identify these problems and to support their children in accessing appropriate care. We analyze these findings in light of family systems theory, identifying ways in which adult veteran children continue a process of differentiation while living with their parents and maintaining emotional connectedness. We suggest ways that clinicians can better support veterans and their parents through the reintegration period and recommend that programming for military families explicitly include parents of service members in addition to conjugal families.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

In this study, most veterans who moved back home after separating from the military appreciated the support of their parents, including having both a place to live during the transition to civilian life, and the emotional support of family members. Sometimes veterans moved in and out of their family home multiple times as they tried different schools or jobs. However, some veterans also experienced difficulties, especially when they felt their parents were treating them like the child they had been before military service. The most harmonious relationships were reported by veterans who felt that their parents recognized the changes they underwent while serving in the military and gave them space, offering a supportive presence by asking solicitous questions, but recognizing that the veteran child needed time to adjust to civilian life. Relationships were strained when parents treated veterans as children who needed to be protected, or as adults who should immediately take on important family responsibilities that the veterans perceived as too demanding. Parents and other family members can use these findings to help guide them as they re-establish relationships with their children upon return from service. In cases where veterans returned with PTSD, the transition to living at home was particularly stressful for both the parent and the veteran. Parents, in these cases, were often the “first responders” to the veteran child’s mental health needs. Because undiagnosed PTSD can pose significant challenges for veterans and their families, it is important that veterans are supported in seeking out medical care upon their return from service, especially if they perceive any distressing symptoms. If the veteran is unwilling to seek care, parents should seek counseling for themselves as they support their child. Finally, veterans who have been sexually assaulted in service may also have difficulty adjusting to life at home. In some cases, parents may feel the need to protect their veteran child in ways that hinder their autonomy. Veterans and their parents may benefit from family counseling to work through any difficulties, as healthy parental and familial relationships are an important part of the reintegration process.

FOR POLICY

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) may wish to explore policies that would provide support and education for parents of returning veterans during their adjustment to civilian life. Parents can strongly benefit from understanding what their sons and daughters may be experiencing and become a key resource for their child during the reintegration period, especially when a veteran has adjustment difficulties or a mental health problem. The VA can work with policy makers and social workers to create a set of resources that help parents understand and distinguish between normal combat stress reactions, adjustment issues and PTSD, among other issues. While parents may find some resources in support groups like the Blue Star Mothers, it would be beneficial for the VA to create additional opportunities for mothers and fathers to network with other parents, and benefit from the guidance of professionals. Policy makers should work with VA health care centers to seek out additional funding for regional counseling programs for parents using family resilience models, which focus interventions on families’ strengths and resources. Using this model, Veterans Health Administration (VHA) clinicians can encourage family members to collaborate to build new competencies and mutual support, work with families to develop flexibility, and help families to face difficulties and maintain connectedness.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should follow a large, diverse cohort of male and female veterans over time as they transition to civilian life. This research should also include the perspectives of the veterans’ parents as the present study only explores the relationship from the veterans’ perspective. Further research should follow these parent-veteran child relationships over several years in order to better understand the trajectories of support and conflict as parents and veterans navigate their new relationships post military service. Research might also usefully examine the role that other important family members, aside from spouses and parents, play in the veteran’s reintegration, especially siblings, aunts and uncles.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Miranda Worthen, Ph.D., M.Phil.

Department of Health Science
San José State University
miranda.worthen@sjsu.edu

Rudolf Moos, Ph.D.

Stanford University, School of
Medicine

Jennifer Ahern, Ph.D., M.P.H.

University of California, Berkeley