

Military Marriages: The Aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) Deployments

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Compared to civilian families, military families face a unique set of stressors that can place them at higher risk for experiencing a crisis. Deployment-related emotional stresses - such as fear for the safety of the service member, shifts in managing household responsibilities and confusion over military entitlements - combined with the increased frequency and length of deployments during the OEF/OIF conflicts can impact both mental health problems and marital problems.
- Researchers interviewed military couples who had experienced OIF/OEF deployments and found that those who relied on their partners and communicated effectively during deployment reported more intimacy in their marriage, and were more able to cope well with stress and adapt to the demands of deployment.
- Avoiding ambiguity in household roles and responsibilities post-deployment, spiritual faith and faith in the mission of the military also helped spouses and service members to maintain and strengthen their marriages post-deployment.

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ABSTRACT:

“An examination of how members of military marriages were affected by and adapted to OIF/OEF deployment found three themes: communicating to stay connected, emotional and marital intimacy, and managing change. The findings demonstrate the nuanced and subtle nature of deployment-related challenges. While open and frequent communication was important in the adaptation process, communication was not synonymous with transparency. Unshared stories created a void that prevented couples from confiding in and supporting their partners. Although wives maintained their marriages by restraining sexual desires and over-extending their responsibilities post-deployment, these behaviors had a negative effect on marital quality. Clinical and research implications are discussed.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Findings from this study indicate that many marriages have the ability to manage stresses resulting from deployment, and with the proper support spouses are able to adapt to new circumstances. This information is particularly valuable to therapists in creating assessments and interventions that are effective in assisting service members and their partners. Systemic therapies are often viewed as being in addition to other individual treatment programs; however, many of the issues discussed in this study, including sexual functioning, communication and relationship roles, need to be evaluated within the context of a couple, not an individual. Couples may need assistance with expressing fears about deployment and what they need from their partners, and therapists and community counselors can assist with these processes. Therapists who work with couples post-deployment can focus on addressing these concerns, including responding to role and responsibility changes and concerns about sexual intimacy. Therapists should explore treatment options increasing a couples' ability to bond with and build empathy for each other, and addressing any previous trauma in the relationship that could impact their ability to be vulnerable and transparent with each other.

FOR POLICY

Some policy changes may be able to reduce the stressors present for military families during deployment so that marriages succeed post-deployment. Policies supporting family communication during deployment and federal funding for programs to help military couples attend counseling sessions would be particularly helpful. In light of the findings from this study, specifically the importance of managing stressors and adapting to changing circumstances, military couples should be provided with ample resources to develop the tools needed to solidify their relationships before, during and after deployment. Policy makers may want to focus on providing federal funding for counselors working with military families so that socioeconomic status does not factor into whether or not military couples can receive assistance throughout deployment.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future researchers should expand on this current study by including a more diverse sample of military families, including those with female service members and families that have experienced more than one deployment. Future studies should aim to include a nationally representative sample not limited to active duty service members, to produce results that are generalizable to the broader military population. Participants in this study may or may not have had pre-existing disorders related to war trauma, so future studies should also include service members with and without post-traumatic stress disorder who have been exposed to war-related trauma. Researchers should also assess the way societal support impacts the adaptation and stresses of families with service members who have experienced multiple deployments. Joint interviews with both spouses should be explored as a future method of research, as these interviews may have resulted in more information about couple interactions and relationship functioning. Further research exploring marital differences in levels of successful adaptation to new circumstances could also be useful, as previous factors such as pre-existing mental disorders, previous traumas and additional external stressors may impede the development of healthy adaptations for some during deployment.

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