

A Systematic Review of the Impact of Foreign Postings on Accompanying Spouses of Military Personnel

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Although limited, contemporary research on the impact of overseas relocations on military spouses indicates that spouses face significant stressors, including possible financial strains and limited employment opportunities.
- Overall, the results of this review indicate that spousal satisfaction on overseas postings is heavily influenced by employment opportunities and family life. Military spouses may also feel a sense of identity loss or loss of autonomy if unable to gain employment.
- Military spouses vary in their ability to adjust to, and cope with, changing circumstances. Increased social support, however, could potentially help everyone facing these challenges. Researchers suggest that spouses maintain varied forms of social support, as solely relying on internal family could result in an isolation of experiences and reduce chances of forming positive support networks.

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ABSTRACT:

“Military spouses frequently cope with separation, but limited research reviewing the impact of an overseas relocation when a spouse accompanies their serving husband/wife has been conducted. A search for studies reviewing the impact of foreign postings on these accompanying spouses was undertaken utilizing 12 databases and other resources. Ultimately, 12 studies were analyzed and four key themes produced: functioning of a military family on an international posting, loss, wellbeing and support. Overall, additional stressors are associated with an overseas posting and experiences are specific to an individual and their circumstances. Further research is required to examine the potential relationship between a spouse’s experiences overseas and the impact on their health and wellbeing. This would help to identify possible areas of health care provision and support necessary to maximize a military spouse’s experience.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Military spouses can be placed under significant stress when military families need to relocate, especially in cases involving overseas postings. Although there are positive aspects to moving overseas, including the opportunity for travel and new cultural experiences, the additional stressors of such a move may involve financial strains and limited employment opportunities for spouses that are beyond those associated with domestic relocations. It is even more important in these circumstances for military families to establish a strong family unit and develop mechanisms to facilitate adjustment to their new environment. Overseas relocation can impact military service members' spouses and children differently, with a wide variety of emotional and psychological responses dependent on the individual. In addition, support from family and community varies, and spouses may not universally benefit from such support. In these cases, it is important for health professionals, such as nurses, general practitioners or psychiatrists to work with military families to provide support and mechanisms to combat anxiety and social isolation. Community-based facilities are also an important resource for military families posted overseas, and health professionals serving these populations may want to focus on pre-deployment meetings with military families to prepare them for the emotional and social challenges they may face in undertaking a relocation abroad.

FOR POLICY

Policymakers may wish to work with the U.S. Department of Defense and other members of the military community to ensure that there are policies and practices in place to support military families before and during an overseas relocation. Policies that provide funding to assist military spouses with overseas job searches would be especially important, as the difficulty of finding employment in a new location is increased with an overseas move, and may also require licensing or certification in the new country of residence. Because a spouse obtaining successful employment can bolster personal identity, serve as an opportunity for socialization, and provide the military family with important financial resources, policies supporting spousal employment should be a priority both domestically and abroad. Policymakers may also wish to look into funding or other supportive services for military families to volunteer and/or make use of educational opportunities in their new locations. Policymakers should also work with Veterans Health Administration (VHA) officials to allow for wellness checks for military families prior to, and following relocation, so that health professionals and counselors can prepare families for the challenges of relocation and oversee any complications in their adjustment process.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Overall, there is a need for more contemporary research on military families and military spouses overseas, as very few studies have been completed in the last ten years. Future research should incorporate the experiences of military spouses from and within multiple countries. Currently, only one study investigates the experiences of British military spouse relocations, and very few studies explore the specific impact of postings in certain geographic locations on military spouses' health, for example, in the occurrence of seasonal affective disorder. Future studies should aim to gather a large, diverse sample of military spouses and use in-depth interviews to gather information about the impact of foreign postings on their careers, health and family life. Studies should also be sure to gather information from spouses from all branches of service. In addition, researchers should explore whether spouses contemplate leaving foreign postings, and the experiences of those who do leave and return to their usual residences or domestic locations. Many spouses may decide to leave foreign postings for career opportunities or familial reasons, and future research should capture the experiences of these military spouses as well.

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