

Risk and Resilience in Military Families Experiencing Deployment: The Role of the Family Attachment Network

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Researchers proposed a military families attachment network model to demonstrate how family relationships are impacted during deployment and reintegration. These models can be used to guide interventions for service members and their families.
- The proposed model predicts that insecure attachment styles and the resulting maladaptive coping strategies of the non-deploying parent may foster psychological distress, coercive parenting, and harsh discipline, or alternatively, parental incompetence and parent-child role-reversal.
- Health providers should consider attachment and family processes when working with military families to help them develop healthy coping strategies, improve communication, and decrease isolation by utilizing various social supports.

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ABSTRACT:

“Deployment separation constitutes a significant stressor for U.S. military men and women and their families. Many military personnel return home struggling with physical and/or psychological injuries that challenge their ability to reintegrate and contribute to marital problems, family dysfunction, and emotional or behavioral disturbance in spouses and children. Yet research examining the psychological health and functioning of military families is scarce and rarely driven by developmental theory. The primary purpose of this theoretical paper is to describe a family attachment network model of military families during deployment and reintegration that is grounded in attachment theory and family systems theory. This integrative perspective provides a solid empirical foundation and a comprehensive account of individual and family risk and resilience during military-related separations and reunions. The proposed family attachment network model will inform future research and intervention efforts with service members and their families.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

The family attachment network model developed by Riggs and Riggs provides a solid empirical foundation for comprehending individual and family risk and resilience during military deployments and reunions. Research has consistently shown that returning veterans face concerns within intimate relationships, particularly if the veteran is suffering from psychological issues. Poor communication, intimacy problems, relationship dissatisfaction, domestic violence, divorce and co-parenting disagreements are just a few of these concerns. Considering the proposed models by Riggs and Riggs may provide valuable insight into the attachment factors that may be impacting veterans and their families facing such concerns. Mental health professionals should focus on helping families develop or strengthen family resilience processes that facilitate reintegration. These resilience processes include active coping strategies, improving the quality and quantity of family communication, increasing flexibility regarding roles and responsibilities, and decreasing isolation through the utilization of community and social supports.

FOR POLICY

Many military service members who are deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) are leaving families behind to face unique stressors throughout the course of military service, deployments, and reunifications. These unique stressors, such as frequent relocations, loss and fear for a loved one's safety, and reorganizing the family system, demand a greater need for policies, initiatives and programs that address the special needs of these families. The authors of this article address specific needs in the area of attachment relationships among military families. These families would benefit from increased federal funding for research that examines adult attachment styles and parent-child attachment relationships in military families. Also, further family-based research would provide valuable information to assist in developing programs and treatment approaches for military service members and their families.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the proposed model by the researchers appears to provide a solid foundation for comprehending individual and family risks and resilience during military deployments and reunions, it holds the central assumption that attachment relationships and family systems are fundamental contexts for risk and resilience among military service members and their families. The proposed family attachment network model presents theory-based hypotheses for future researchers to test. Undoubtedly, there are other explanatory approaches that could improve upon the current model's limitations, one of which is that the model applies only to two-parent families. Future research should also include the experiences of single parents who are deployed. Further, the model does not account for family maltreatment or domestic violence which would be associated with disorganization in the family system. Other considerations for the model could include intergenerational trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, and single versus multiple deployments. Researchers should also consider potential moderators such as the sex of parent or child, deployment characteristics (e.g., frequency, duration, location, extent of family contact.), and external resources (e.g., social support, financial stability, military services to families).

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