

Coping, Family Social Support, and Psychological Symptoms Among Student Veterans

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ABSTRACT

“With rising numbers of student veterans on today’s college campuses, multicultural competence in college counseling centers increasingly includes an understanding of military culture and its relation to the psychological health and functioning of student veterans. Research on interpersonal and intrapersonal factors associated with college student veterans’ mental health is scarce. The current study examines the contributions of coping style and family social support on symptoms of anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress in a student veteran sample. We also tested the moderating role of family social support in the relationship between coping style and psychological symptoms. Data from 136 student veterans were analyzed by using path analysis. Results revealed that avoidant coping and family social support significantly predicted depressive and anxiety symptoms. Avoidant coping also significantly predicted posttraumatic stress symptoms. In addition, findings indicated that family social support moderated the relationship between problem-focused coping and depression, as well as between avoidant coping and symptoms of anxiety and depression but not posttraumatic stress. Implications of results for college and university counselors are discussed.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- With the increase in student veterans seeking higher education upon returning from deployments and/or transitioning to civilian life, unique challenges to this population require educating college campuses on military culture and the impact it has on the student veteran. This study examines the links between coping styles, whether it’s avoidant or problem-focused, family social support, and psychological symptoms (i.e. PTSD, Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), or Depression) to provide a better understanding on student veteran challenges and better inform intervention efforts.
- Results of the analysis indicated no significant differences in regards to gender, ethnicity/race, length of time after leaving active duty, and current relationship status, but coping styles and family social supports were closely related to psychiatric symptoms.
- The study highlighted that student veterans with avoidant coping styles had increased psychiatric symptoms. However, strong family social support buffered the negative impact of avoidant coping on depression and anxiety, but not PTSD. The study also noted that problem-focused coping combined with strong family social support reduced the degree of depressive symptoms experienced by student veterans.
- Future research could tackle the scarcity of research examining intrapersonal and interpersonal factors associated with student veterans’ psychological symptoms, the role of social support in the functioning of student veterans, the unique challenges military culture creates for student veterans, and how to better assist in training, preparation, and managing student veterans on college campuses.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Understanding military culture and the effects it has on student veterans is essential to addressing the group-specific challenges this population faces after combat and in their transition to civilian life. Campus officials should be mindful of the stigmatization of seeking help that student veterans have socially-learned during their military service time because their reluctance to seek help contributes to maladaptive responses and coping styles. Unique challenges include feeling detached from academic settings and experiencing additional stressors associated with the college environment, such as unaccommodating school policies and infrastructure, conflictual interactions with civilian students or faculty due to contrasting political views on war, and disconnection from other students due to different values and maturity level. In addition to college officials educating themselves on these barriers and improving their multicultural competence, it's important for student veterans to also educate themselves, utilize the resources available to them, and understand the importance of family social support and psychological regulation.

FOR POLICY

Because the reluctance to seek counseling services is deeply embedded in military culture, college campuses are met with the challenge of providing services to a population that frequently utilizes avoidant coping strategies. Therefore, college mental health providers may want to assess and focus on reducing this coping style, which could in turn, increase the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions. Just as several national programs, such as Student Veterans of America, have proved that student veterans need specific resources and outreach programming, college campuses need to stay involved in the student veterans' education and well-being to reduce dysfunction, maladaptive behaviors, and reluctance for seeking help to avoid feeling weak, a burden, or dependent on someone. With most student veterans utilizing the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill as their primary source of funding, the Department of Veterans Affairs should advocate and collaborate with college campuses to ensure the success of student veterans, thru specific resourcing, oversight, and follow-up techniques. College campuses also need to reframe and normalize counseling services as a positive strategy and increase family involvement and social support, through education and event opportunities, for the student veteran. In addition, the counseling service centers should require training in evidence-based treatment interventions that target avoidant coping and other combat-related psychological difficulties.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Psychological difficulties have been studied among military veterans, but less evidence is available in regards to those veterans who have chosen to attend college. Future research will benefit by addressing limitations in the study's sample. The sample size represented a small portion of student veterans, with a high portion self-reporting pharmacological and counseling intervention prior to participating in the study. Therefore, the participants may have demonstrated better functioning by virtue of greater maturity and stability in their mental health. Researchers are encouraged to collect data from a larger, more diverse sample in order to detect differences in combat exposure and psychological symptoms. Further research is also needed to examine the gender and cultural differences in psychological symptomatology, avoidance and other coping behaviors among student veterans. In addition, exploring the difference between perceived social support and actual support, and utilizing longitudinal designs with multimodal measurements could address this limitation. In sum, future research on student veteran functioning needs continual investigation and collaboration with college campuses in order to better meet the needs of the student veteran.

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