



The Impact of Multiple Deployments and Social Support on Stress Levels of Women Married to Active Duty Servicemen

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ABSTRACT

“Using a large-scale survey, we examined the relationship between number of deployments experienced by female spouses of active duty military members and these spouses’ perceived stress. Results suggest a nonlinear relationship such that spouses who had not experienced a deployment reported the lowest stress levels. Stress levels increase after initial deployments and decrease after approximately two deployments, which may indicate an element of resiliency that builds up as spouses acclimate to a deployment lifestyle. Stress levels again increase after several deployments, which may signify limitations to this resiliency over time. A secondary finding showed that higher levels of social support predicted lower levels of stress, above and beyond the number of deployments. This relationship between social support and stress helped explain the negative relationship between parental status and stress. That is, spouses with children may have lower stress levels due to the social network that accompanies parental status.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Prior researchers have found that deployment-related stress can negatively impact the mental and physical health of military spouses and the military family as a whole. Given that today’s military spouses have faced steady cycles of deployment and reunions, using empirical sources, this study aims to evaluate whether multiple deployments exacerbate the negative impact on military spouses and military families. This study addresses the gap in literature on the cumulative impact of multiple deployments on stress levels.
- Analysis of data from the 2008 Survey of Active Duty Military Spouses shows that military spouses’ perceived stress levels increase as deployments initially increase. After approximately two (2) deployments, the stress levels begin to decrease, possibly because military spouses begin to develop resiliency and acclimation to the deployment lifestyle. However, at around four (4) to five (5) deployments, stress levels begin to increase again, possibly reflecting difficulty coping with continuous and repeated deployment cycles.
- Further studies are needed to evaluate the well-being of military spouses along a continuum of deployments, with higher emphasis on those new to deployment and those who have experienced a high number of deployments within a short period of time.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Given that military spouses who experience deployments report higher levels of loneliness, anxiety, and depression, military spouses should actively participate in military spouse networks. Recent studies on military spouses have found that reliance upon social supports not only serve as coping mechanisms, but also help spouses deal with stress. Military spouses also reported that network support was a helpful resource for dealing with the reunion and reintegration of their deployed spouse. Since perceived social support from friends was predictive of higher life satisfaction in military spouses, military spouses should engage in positive interactions with friends and family. Unit support and informal community support have been found to act as buffers against deployment stress for spouses. Since unit and informal community support can serve as a buffer, friends, organized groups, and coworkers should continue offering positive and direct support to persons with a spouse deployed. In addition to continuing to reach out to military spouses new to deployments, service providers should try to reach out to military spouses who are experiencing multiple deployment cycles to ensure they are receiving adequate support.

FOR POLICY

The DoD might continue encouraging network and community support among military families. Given that military spouses might experience high levels of stress during first deployment and after four (4) or five (5) deployments, the DoD might tailor some of its current preparation strategies to accommodate the differing needs of spouses. Since levels of stress and deployment experiences might differ by branch of service, specific military branches might organize more informal networks of support, such as monthly meetings for persons with a deployed spouse. The DoD and the VA might evaluate the current services provided to servicemembers and their families who separate soon after returning from a deployment. Evaluating current support services might show ways current networks could be improved, especially for military spouses who have experienced multiple deployment cycles. In addition to the services already offered to veterans and their families, the VA might continue offering reintegration supports for separated veterans who recently returned from a tour.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite this research having practical implications for all branches of the military, there may be some service-specific nuances that are not captured by the DoD-wide analysis approach in this study. Future researchers should examine the impact deployment cycles have on stress levels in military spouses at the branch-level. In the initial models, the researchers found that female spouses of active duty military members with children had lower stress levels than spouses without children. However, once social support was added to the model, the relationship was insignificant. Future researchers should examine whether having children has a positive impact on stress levels, since having children could introduce inherent social networks through outside activities and school events. It might also be beneficial to examine whether the military programs aimed at providing support to military families with children introduces an additional source of support for military spouses. Despite this study having a large number of participants (N= 13,423) from the DoD and Coast Guard, bias might still have occurred from respondents self-selecting into certain areas and positions, which are more likely to result in multiple deployments. Though difficult to control for, future studies should consider the effect of selection bias. Future studies should focus on military spouses who have experienced an extreme number of deployments. To pick up on the nuances military spouses with multiple deployments might experience, qualitative work should be conducted.

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