MENTAL HEALTH AND FAMILY FUNCTIONING AMONG NATIONAL GUARD SOLDIERS

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**Abstract**


**Distribution/Availability Statement**

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**Subject Terms**

- Public health
- Military service
- Family functioning
- National Guard
Overview

I. Background: Readiness and Resilience in National Guard Soldiers (RINGS) Project
II. Conceptual Model: Soldier Resilience and Family Functioning
III. Findings from 3 RINGS studies on PTSD and family functioning
IV. Implications and future directions
The RINGS Project

- OEF/OIF have increasingly relied on large deployments of National Guard troops

- National Guard troops and their families face unique stressors, but remain understudied.

- RINGS Project aims to identify protective and vulnerability factors (risk and resilience) for soldier mental health in National Guard troops following combat deployments.

- Studies described today:
  - RINGS Longitudinal Cohort Study
  - In-theater Screening and Follow-up Study
  - Couples and PTSD Study
RINGS Longitudinal Cohort Study

Aims:
- Identify psychosocial risk and resilience factors associated with post-deployment mental health, health care utilization, and military attrition
- Examine rates of relationship distress and investigate associations between PTSD and intimate partner relationship functioning.

Method:
- Design: Prospective, 4-wave study of 522 OIF deployed National Guard soldiers.
- Data collection: Survey using self report symptom and relationship measures and post-deployment clinical interviews with a subset of 348 veterans.

Status:
- Longitudinal data collection is underway
- Clinical interview data collection is complete
In-Theater Screening and Follow-up Study

- **Aims:**
  - Determine the scope of mTBI/PTSD comorbidity and examine impact on psychosocial functioning across domains.
  - *Examine the effect of growth in PTSD symptoms and couple functioning on OIF veterans’ parenting practices*

- **Method:**
  - Design: Two-wave, quantitative study of 2,677 OIF deployed National Guard soldiers assessed in-theater and followed up one year post-deployment (n = 516 parents)
  - Data collection: Self report symptom, relationship functioning, and parenting measures.

- **Status:**
  - Data collection is complete
Couples and PTSD Study

- **Aims:**
  - Examine the effect of couple interactions and functioning on course of PTSD symptoms.
  - Examine the effect of PTSD symptoms on couple functioning over time.

- **Method:**
  - Design: Two-wave, mixed method study of 49 OIF National Guard veterans and their spouses.
  - Data collection: Self report symptom and relationship measures, clinical interviews, and videotaped observation of couple interactions.

- **Status:**
  - Data collection is complete
  - Coding of behavioral observation tasks is underway
Conceptual Model: Soldier Resilience and Family Functioning

Deployment and Reintegration Stressors

- Couple and Family Distress
  - Avoidance/Withdrawal
  - Impaired Communication
  - Destructive Conflict

- Soldier Distress
  - PTSD
  - Depression
  - Sub. Abuse

- Partner Distress

- Family Support
At 3-6 months post-deployment, 16% of our sample of 424 returnees screened positive for PTSD, and 22% of those with partners screened positive for relationship distress.

PTSD and relationship distress were positively correlated ($r = .32; \text{Meis et al., in revision}$).

The “numbing” cluster of symptoms was most strongly related to relationship distress (Erbes et al., in revision).
Regression analyses found that pre-deployment concern of family and life disruption was predictive of PTSD symptoms post-deployment.

Other predictors:
- Gender, race, rank
- Pre-deployment personality and trauma history
- Combat exposure
- Post-deployment social support and stressors.

Implication: Families can serve as a source of support, or a source of strain, for soldiers in the face of combat deployment.

Erbes, In Press
PTSD, couple functioning, and parenting: In-Theater Screening and Follow-up Study

Adapted from Gewirtz, Polusny, DeGarmo, Khaylis & Erbes, in Submission
Parenting adjustment included positive parenting, positive child relationships, consistent discipline, and effective supervision.

Growth in PTSD at one year predicts both dyadic functioning and parenting.

Dyadic functioning, in turn, also impacts parenting.

Social support in-theater plays a small but significant protective factor for PTSD and parenting.
From the partners: Couples and PTSD Study

- 7 of 49 soldiers (14%) were diagnosed with PTSD.
- Partners of soldiers with PTSD reported less marital satisfaction than partners of soldiers without PTSD ($p < .10$).
- PTSD Numbing symptoms were related to:
  - Soldier reports of:
    - lower levels of intimacy (sexual, recreational, and positive interactions)
    - lower couple satisfaction
    - more coercive and destructive communication
    - less mutual communication.
  - Partner reports of:
    - Lower levels of intimacy (emotional, social, and recreational)
    - Less mutual communication
In their own words: Themes from partner interviews in the RINGS Couples and PTSD Study
Families play a key role in supporting soldiers as they deal with the stressors of deployment.

Family members are themselves affected by deployment stressors and soldier’s mental health upon their return.

Rates of relationship distress are elevated in National Guard soldiers following deployment.

PTSD is associated with greater relationships distress and parenting difficulties.

Identifying ways to support and bolster partner and family functioning throughout a deployment cycle should be a key priority for enhancing soldier resilience.
Future Directions

- Proposal submitted to DOD to study effects of multiple deployments on families, family support, and National Guard soldiers over a deployment cycle.

- Early pilot study of applying couple therapy (Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy or IBCT) to treat PTSD within a marital context.

- Proposal being prepared for a NIDA submission to study parenting support and training for National Guard soldiers and their partners in the context of combat deployments.
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