Distress in Spouses of Vietnam Veterans: Associations with Communication About Deployment Experiences

465 Vietnam Veterans and their partners participated in a study investigating the relationship between partner psychological wellbeing and relationship functioning with Veterans’ sharing about their Vietnam experiences. Couples’ general communication factored more heavily in partner relationship satisfaction than did communication about Vietnam.

Key Findings:
- Veteran communication about Vietnam was associated with both distress and benefits in partners.
- When level of general communication and Veterans’ PTSD symptoms were controlled, communication about Vietnam was not associated with partners’ relationship distress.
- Overall, Vietnam-specific communication was associated with better general communication.
- In couples where the Veteran did not have significant PTSD, Vietnam-related communication was similar to their general communication.

Implications for Programs:
- Programs can include with Service members and partners in classes that general communication may be more important for relationship health than military or deployment specific communication.
- Programs could offer communication skills classes as part of reintegration events, noting that Service members may experience strong emotions when talking about deployment experiences.
- Programs could offer classes for family members of Service members with PTSD, providing information about PTSD and its impact on the family.

Implications for Policies:
- Policies could continue to support couples programs for Veterans and Service members and their families who are having relationships problems.
- Policies could allocate funding to implement couple-based workshops and retreats for recently returning Service members and their partners.
- Policies could provide professional development for family service workers on effective communication strategies for couples.

Avenues for Future Research:
- Future research could use a more in-depth measure of communication about deployment in order to assess more complicated relationships.
- Additional studies could use a more recent cohort of Veterans.
- Future research could follow couples longitudinally to assess if communication impacts long-term relationship outcomes and satisfaction.

Prepared by the Military REACH Team.
For additional information, please visit reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu
Developed in collaboration with the Department of Defense’s Office of Family Policy, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture under The University of Minnesota Award No. 2013-48710-21515.
Methodology:
- A subset of the Vietnam Veterans who participated in the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Survey was invited to participate.
- Veterans and spouses were interviewed separately.
- Veterans completed measures of PTSD symptoms, marital problems, psychological distress, and communication questions.
- Partners completed measures of marital problems, psychological distress, and communication questions.
- Correlations and regressions examined the relationships among the variables.

Participants:
- 465 Vietnam Veterans and their opposite sex partners.
- 81% were male Veteran-female partner pairs.
- Average Veteran age: 41.7 years (SD=5.2 years), average partner age: 40.0 years (SD=7.4 years).
- 94% were married, average marriage length = 14.4 years (SD=7.2 years).
- Veteran Racial ethnic composition: 78% White, 19% African American, 3% Other.

Limitations:
- The data are cross-sectional and any causal conclusions are inappropriate.
- Researchers did not assess the precise type, kind, or intensity of communication about Vietnam.
- The data were collected at least ten years after return from combat; results may have differed if collected earlier.

### Assessing Research that Works

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