Pastoral Care Use Among Post-9/11 Veterans Who Screen Positive for Mental Health Problems


SUMMARY: There are many different types of mental health support services for Veterans who have served since September 11th, 2001. The characteristics of post-9/11 Veterans with a probable mental health problem who seek care from either a pastoral counselor or a mental health provider were examined in this study. Results help to explain the connection between working with a pastoral counselor and seeking mental health care.

KEY FINDINGS:
- Veterans with mental health problems who saw a pastoral counselor in the last year were more likely to seek mental health services than Veterans who did not see a pastoral counselor.
- In Veterans with a probable mental disorder, working with a pastoral counselor was associated with a decrease in reported excessive alcohol use.
- Veterans who worked with a pastoral counselor cited stigmas or distrust of mental health professionals as common barriers to receiving mental health care.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:
Programs could:
- Become familiar with services in the community that provide spiritual support for Service members and their families
- Increase awareness of services available to military families facing mental health challenges
- Educate Service members on different forms of coping methods available, including pastoral care

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:
Policies could:
- Encourage examination of barriers Service members face to receiving care for mental health problems
- Continue to support programs that destigmatize mental health care and encourage Service members and their families to seek help from trusted services
- Recommend collaboration between different mental health care providers and other support communities, such as those that offer pastoral care, to create a continuity of care for military families

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METHODS

- Participants were randomly chosen from a database of over 1 million U.S. Service members and Veterans who had served since September 11, 2001. There was a response rate of 56%.
- Surveys were used to gather information about participants’ demographics, military service, combat exposure, health service utilization, barriers to seeking treatment, substance use, and mental health.
- Data were analyzed to explore the association between use of pastoral care and use of mental health care in a Veteran population.

PARTICIPANTS

- Data were collected from 1,068 Veterans who served after the events of 9/11. The sample accurately represented the population of post-9/11 Veterans with 50% being less than 33 years old.
- The gender breakdown was an accurate representation of all Service Members, with 84% male and 16% female. The primary race listed was White (71%) with no information about other races included.
- Participants included Veterans (52%) and Army Reserve or National Guard Members (48%), 17% of whom were officers.

LIMITATIONS

- Posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and alcohol misuse were the only mental health problems sampled, therefore data cannot be generalized to other mental health problems.
- Self-reporting was used to determine the likelihood of a mental disorder, which could have caused response bias in the results.
- The term "pastoral counselor" was not clearly defined, therefore there could be inconsistencies in the responses due to confusion.
- It is unclear if participants saw a pastoral counselor before or after seeing a mental health care provider, therefore causation between the two cannot be implied.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:
- Repeat this study with clearer definitions in order to obtain more accurate results on the characteristics of the type of support services used by Veterans
- Address a larger variety of mental health problems experienced by Veterans and Service members
- Explore the direction of the relationship between pastoral care and mental health care utilization

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design
Excellent
Research Plan and Sample

Methods
Appropriate
Measurement and Analysis

Limitations
Few

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works