Longitudinal analysis of family functioning in veterans and their partners across treatment


This research examined the relation between three Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptom clusters (i.e., intrusion, hyperarousal, avoidance) and family functioning, as reported by veterans of the Australian military and their partners. Data were collected before, three months after, and nine months after a PTSD treatment program that included group and individual therapy sessions that focused on anger management, anxiety management, problem solving, and depression management.

Key Findings:
- Higher family distress before treatment predicted higher PTSD symptoms (i.e., intrusion, hyperarousal, avoidance) at the three-month follow up.
- In addition, higher family distress three months post-treatment predicted higher hyperarousal and avoidance nine months after treatment.
- These results suggest a unique and directional role of family distress on PTSD symptoms, wherein greater family distress leads to greater PTSD symptoms, rather than greater PTSD symptoms leading to greater family distress.

Implications for Programs:
- Program curriculum could be designed and/or enhanced to reduce family distress among veterans, which may then lead to reduced PTSD symptoms.
- Including partners/spouses in therapy and programs could be particularly beneficial in reducing family distress and PTSD symptoms.

Implications for Policies:
- Funding should be continued for existing and new programs aimed at decreasing family distress in military families, as they may help improve the health and well-being of Service members.
- Information about programs and services designed to reduce family distress should be readily available and accessible by military families and Department of Defense personnel who may refer families to programs/services.

Avenues for Future Research:
- Additional research is needed to replicate these findings in a sample of Service members in the United States.
- While the associations between family distress and PTSD symptoms were significant in this study, the effect sizes were generally small. A meta-analysis would help shed light on the strength of the impact of family functioning on PTSD symptoms.
- Future research should disentangle the association between family functioning and PTSD symptoms, examining various elements included in family functioning. For example, it is possible that marital discord and distressed parent-child relations each uniquely contribute to PTSD symptoms.
Background information

Methodology:
- 1,822 veterans of the Australian military who sought treatment for PTSD symptoms were sampled in this study. 702 partners of veterans were also included. A cross-lagged structural equation model was used to estimate relations among family distress and PTSD symptoms prior, three months after, and nine months after a treatment program.
- This article focuses on veterans of the Australian military.

Participants:
- Veterans were, on average, 53.9 years old (SD = 7.36).
- No ethnicity information was provided in this study.

Limitations:
- Only participants in treatment for PTSD symptoms were included in this study, the association between family distress and PTSD symptoms might be different for veterans with non-clinical levels of PTSD symptomology or those not in treatment.
- In addition, participants were veterans of the Australian military and primarily Caucasian; as such, findings may not generalize to U.S. military Service members.
- Without a comparison group it is unclear if these results would hold among veterans without a formal PTSD diagnosis.

Assessing Research that Works

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Overall Quality Rating

Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications