Stress and Coping on the Home Front: Guard and Reserve Spouses Searching for a New Normal


Stressors and coping mechanisms of 18 National Guard and Reserve spouses during pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment were examined through interviews. Implications for how nurses may provide assistance are also discussed.

Key Findings:

- During pre-deployment, the major source of stress for spouses was a feeling of putting their lives on hold. During deployment, five major stressors were reported: (1) worrying (danger, changes in the relationship), (2) waiting (phone calls, emails, etc.), (3) going it alone (taking over previously shared responsibilities), (4) pulling double duty (child care and home care) and (5) loneliness. The primary stressor during post-deployment was arriving at a new normal relationship and household functioning when the member returns home.
- During pre-deployment, spouses primarily used social support and preparing for the separation as coping mechanisms. During deployment, keeping busy, staying connected to the Service member, managing personal needs (e.g., "me-time"), and seeking support primarily from other home-front spouses were used. During post-deployment, family briefing sessions were reported as helpful as well as maintaining patience and space for the Service member when they returned.
- Spouses also expressed the need for a connection to individuals currently in the same position.

Implications for Programs:

- Facilitating group meetings in health clinics and other opportunities of convenience, e.g., Yellow Ribbon events, with family members of National Guard and Reserve Service members would enable nurses to bring spouses together who may not know one another but who are experiencing pre-deployment, deployment, and/or post-deployment.
- Programs for military spouses and their children, particularly during deployment, may be helpful as a means to keep them busy and develop social support networks.

Implications for Policies:

- Training should be provided to nurses who serve military families to include National Guard and Reserve components to help them acknowledge and respond to the family members’ experiences.
- Training could also be about spouse experiences and stressors that may require a more emotional understanding.

Avenues for Future Research:

- Understanding the stressors and coping mechanisms of male at-home spouses would be considerably useful as this is a growing population.
- Future studies should explore previous exposure to military experience prior to deployment and how that experience assists with the coping of impending deployments and post-deployments for at-home spouses.
- Research related to specific stressors and coping strategies need to include larger, representative samples and should consider unique stressors/coping for the different service branches and components, including comparing spouses National Guard and Reserve Service members to other military branches.

Prepared by Military REACH Team.
For additional information, please visit http://reachmilitaryfamilies.arizona.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 Award No. 2009-55697-05835.
## Background Information

### Methodology:
- This was a qualitative study using open-ended, semi-structured interviews with 18 National Guard and Reserve spouses.
- This article focuses on military spouses of National Guard and Reserve members.

### Participants:
- Eighteen National Guard and Reserve spouses (M age=39 years, 16 female) from rural Wisconsin participated (no ethnicity information provided).

### Limitations:
- This was a small convenience sample of spouses living in rural Wisconsin; therefore, there is a selection bias and the findings may not be generalizable to other military spouses.
- The authors did not specify their qualitative analysis strategies, thus it is unclear how themes were selected.
- The constructs of stress and coping were confounded by the fact that some of the participants had children and some did not. Stressors and coping strategies are likely to be different for those spouses with children versus those without.

## Assessing Research that Works

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☐ Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications

Overall Quality Rating: ★★★