Mental Health Needs of Cohabitating Partners of Vietnam Veterans with Combat-related PTSD


89 cohabitating female partners of male combat Veterans who were receiving outpatient PTSD treatment at two VA medical centers completed a telephone survey to assess partner treatment needs and current rates of treatment use. Although most women rated individual therapy, family therapy, and a women-only group to help cope with a partner with PTSD as highly important, only slightly more than one-quarter of the women had received any mental health care in the previous six months.

Key Findings:

- 64% of partners reported that having access to individual therapy to help them cope more effectively is extremely or very important.
- 78% of partners indicated that it is extremely or very important for the Veteran and the partner to be given family therapy.
- 28% of partners had received any mental health care in the previous six months. Further, 40% of those who had received services received minimal intervention (one or two encounters).
- Regarding desired services, 54% of partners requested a women-only group, 20% wanted an educational program about PTSD, 19% wanted individual partner treatment, and 13% wanted couple therapy.

Implications for Programs:

- Programs serving Service members and Veterans with PTSD could offer educational classes for family members to help them understand PTSD and cope effectively as a family.
- Programs could offer opportunities for peer support and socialization for family members of Service members and Veterans living with PTSD as a means of decreasing the isolation that is common among these families.

Implications for Policies:

- Policies could designate additional resources for family support for partners of Veterans dealing with PTSD and related symptoms.
- Policies could recommend that all programs that support Service members and Veterans with PTSD include information about improving family relationships, as well as opportunities for family involvement in treatment.

Avenues for Future Research:

- Future research could examine participation rates and levels of satisfaction of programs for partners of Veterans living with PTSD.
- Future research may examine the needs and preferences of partners of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans.
- Research may study the treatment needs and preferences of parents of Service members and Veterans living with PTSD.
Methodology:
- A research team member approached Veterans in a VA waiting room and obtained contact information for partners. Partners were contacted by telephone and invited to participate in the study.
- Partner response rate was 100% for Jackson and 87% for New Orleans.
- An individual phone survey was conducted with partners. The survey included 93 items and addressed the following domains: partner burden, partner mental health symptoms, partner treatment experiences and treatment needs, and appraisal of patient threat.

Participants:
- 89 cohabiting female partners of 89 Vietnam combat Veterans recruited through outpatient PTSD treatment programs at the New Orleans and Jackson VA Medical Centers from July to November 2002.
- Veteran inclusion criteria included: Vietnam War service, a chart diagnosis of PTSD, service-connected disability for PTSD, active participation in the PTSD program, and current cohabitation with a female partner.
- Mean partner age was 52.0 years with a standard deviation of 5.8 years (range of 39 to 76).
- 51% of the partners were white, 42% were African American, and 8% were Hispanic.
- 91% of the couples were married.

Limitations:
- All the veterans were Vietnam combat veterans, were cohabiting with a female partner, receiving VA disability for PTSD, and had a telephone. It is unknown how these findings would generalize to other groups of partners.
- The study used convenience sampling including couples from 2 VA hospitals in the southern part of the United States; therefore, the ability to extrapolate these findings to other Veterans and their partners is uncertain.

Assessing Research that Works

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<th>Research Design and Sample</th>
<th>Quality Rating:</th>
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<td>The design of the study (e.g., research plan, sample, recruitment) used to address the research question was...</td>
<td>☐ Excellent (★★★)  ☒ Appropriate (★★)  ☐ Limited (★)  ☐ Questionable (★)</td>
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<td>The limitations of this study are...</td>
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<td>The implications of this research to programs, policies and the field, stated by the authors, are...</td>
<td>☐ Excellent (★★★)  ☒ Appropriate (★★)  ☐ Limited (★)  ☐ Questionable (★)  ☐ Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications</td>
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Overall Quality Rating: ★★★☆☆