Main and Interactive Effects of Social Support in Predicting Mental Health Symptoms in Men and Women Following Military Stressor Exposure


Using a sample of 1,571 Marine recruits, the study examined the role of social support (from both within and outside of the military unit) in predicting mental health symptoms in the context of exposure to military stressors. Military social support acted as a buffer between the stressfulness of the training experience and posttraumatic stress symptoms. Military social support was associated with lower levels of mental health symptoms among men, while civilian social support was related to lower symptoms among women.

Key Findings:
- Social support was a significant moderator of the relationship between the stressfulness of recruit training and mental health symptoms; specifically, social support from the military acted as a buffer, weakening the association between the stressfulness of the training and posttraumatic stress symptoms.
- As perceived stressfulness increased, military social support became more important for the recruits.
- Significant gender differences emerged; for men, military social support, but not civilian, was directly associated with lower levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms. For women, civilian social support, but not military support, was directly associated with lower posttraumatic stress symptoms.

Implications for Programs:
- Programs that strengthen support for recruits may help minimize psychological difficulties in response to stressors, especially for men.
- Programs may encourage recruits to draw upon civilian social support as well, especially among female personnel.

Implications for Policies:
- Policies which allow recruits access to their support networks may be beneficial in reducing mental health symptoms during training.
- Support for the development and evaluation of programs intended to strengthen unit support may be beneficial.

Avenues for Future Research:
- Research on whether the intense recruit training environment overrode civilian social support could be helpful.
- Research on the benefits and the drawbacks of additional kinds of support in the context of stressor exposure may be helpful.
- Further research could test whether these results generalize to a larger military population or to civilians.
- Additional studies could determine the degree to which the pattern of results is driven by the nature of the stressor.
The data were collected as part of a larger study of Marines who arrived at Parris Island, South Carolina, for recruit training. Those who completed recruit training were eligible to participate; they completed a Time 1 survey at the beginning of the 13-week military training and the Time 2 survey two days before completing training. Both surveys were administered via paper and pencil, and 95% completed the Time 2 survey. The recruits answered questions about prior life stressors; military social support; social support from family, friends, and significant others; stressfulness of recruit training; depression; and post-traumatic stress symptoms. T-tests examined gender differences, and hierarchical multiple regression was used to predict severity scores for posttraumatic stress symptoms and depression.

1,571 Marine recruits (57% male).
Average age = 18.8 (SD=1.92, range= 17-34) years.
59% Caucasian, 19% African American, 14% Hispanic.
81% completed high school, 18% completed at least some college.

The data was all self-report, and the nature of the study was correlational which limits the ability to imply causation. The military stressors studied were recruit training; these relationships may not generalize to other military stressors. Personality factors were not included in these analyses; these results could be partly due to recruits’ personality style.