Dilemmas Families Face in Talking with Returning U.S. Military Service Members about Seeking Professional Help for Mental Health Issues


SUMMARY: Potential dilemmas family members may experience when talking with returning Service members about their mental health were addressed. Eighty family members of Service members who served in Iraq or Afghanistan read a scenario where their Service member was displaying posttraumatic stress disorder or depression symptoms. Participants described goals they would pursue, barriers they might encounter, and strategies they would employ in such a situation.

KEY FINDINGS
- Family members reported using four groups of strategies to manage these dilemmas.
- Several of the strategies focused on different aspects of communication with Service member about mental health, including nonjudgmental listening and respect.
- Another set of strategies focused on framing the discussions with Service members in a positive and cooperative manner.
- The last group of strategies sought out the help of third parties, such as a religious resource, another Service member or Veteran.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS
Programs could:
- Offer pre and post-deployment support groups for family and Service members to discuss potential mental health issues
- Continue providing opportunities for previously returned Service member to talk with recently returned Service member about potential mental health issues
- Support campaigns that feature military leaders as role models talking about mental health

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES
Policies could:
- Continue support for research that addresses the unique challenges faced by family members of Service member who have served in combat
- Recommend education of professionals (e.g. child caregivers, mental health, and education professionals) on the needs of family members of Service member in talking about mental health issues
- Continue efforts with each military branch to destigmatize mental health and facilitate help seeking by Service members
METHODS

- Participants were recruited by sending e-mails to Family Readiness Coordinators and chaplains.
- Participants were randomly assigned to respond to one of four hypothetical scenarios which described a situation in which their Service member was experiencing problems readjusting.
- Open-ended questions were asked regarding potential goals, possible reasons behind behaviors, and advice for others in the context of the hypothetical scenario.
- All members of the research team analyzed the open-ended responses for both the dilemmas and strategies by independently identifying themes based upon common language used by the participants.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants had to be at least 18 years old, have a family member who had served in either Iraq or Afghanistan in the past 5 years, and complete an online survey.
- Out of the 80 participants, most were female (94%) and not in the U.S. Military themselves (94%); their average age was 44.59 years old and 85% percent indicated they were White.
- Participants were Service members’ partner (49%), parent (40%), sibling (5%), child (2%), and other (4%).

LIMITATIONS

- The dilemmas used in the study were general enough to be relevant to all family roles, but did not address unique situations experienced by spouses, parents, and siblings.
- The focus was on family members’ experiences, not the Service members’ possible mental health issues.
- Not all participants had actually confronted a real situation like the scenario, so follow-up questions or probes could not be asked.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Future research could address unique family role situations (e.g. spouses, parents) in talking with Service members about mental health.
- Additional research could interview both family members and Service member to provide insight into what strategies Service member find helpful.
- Future research could look more into how third party individuals (e.g. Veterans, other Service members) can be part of the ongoing mental health support of returning Service members.

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design: 3 stars
Appropriate Research Plan and Sample

Methods: 3 stars
Appropriate Measurement and Analysis

Limitations: 2 stars
Few