

The Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University's

EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH ON MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILIES

MFRI established the **EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH ON MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILIES AWARD** in 2015.

The goals of the award are to:

- » bring visibility to issues of military and veteran families generally, and to outstanding new research specifically;
- » increase the impact of rigorous scientific evidence on programs, policies and practices affecting military and veteran families;
- » strengthen connections between researchers and practitioners interested in military and veteran families; and
- » raise awareness of research about military and veteran families across many disciplines.

The winning paper is selected through a rigorous process. No nominations or applications are accepted, and authors have no idea their work is being considered. Instead, a panel of accomplished scholars examines every relevant article published during the eligible year. Multiple rounds of review include standardized quantitative assessments. In this way, the panel arrives at the final selection.

MFRI thanks the Association of the United States Army (AUSA) and Military REACH for supporting this award, and joining us in our mission to advance important research about and for military and veteran families.

2019 RESEARCH AWARD

Winner

Allen, E., Knopp, K., Rhoades, G., Stanley, S., & Markman, H. (2018). Between- and within-subject associations of PTSD symptom clusters and marital functioning in military couples. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 32(1), 134-144. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000363>

Study takeaways

1

In a sample of 570 male Army service members and their wives, the current study analyzed how different post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptom clusters (numbing, hyperarousal, effortful avoidance, and re-experiencing) related to three aspects of couple functioning (marital satisfaction, positive bonding, and conflict behavior) over a two year period.

2

Higher overall levels of PTSD symptoms in all clusters were related to poorer average couple functioning, but the strongest effects were seen in the numbing cluster for husbands and the avoidance cluster for wives. Over time, changes in numbing predicted worse couple functioning for both spouses. Thus, numbing showed the most consistent associations with couple functioning in our study.

3

Although all PTSD symptom clusters were linked with couple functioning, couples may experience numbing symptoms as the largest PTSD-related stressor for their marriage. Clinicians could look for numbing symptoms to identify couples who are at risk, and could also target numbing symptoms through PTSD treatments in order to improve service members' relationships.

Biographies



Elizabeth Allen Dr. Elizabeth Allen is a professor in the department of psychology at the University of Colorado-Denver. Her research focuses on a range of issues related to couple functioning, including relationship interventions, extradyadic involvements, military marriages, and associations between relationship factors and mental health. She teaches undergraduate courses in military clinical psychology and family psychology.



Kayla Knopp Dr. Kayla Knopp is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Advanced Women's Health Fellowship program in the VA San Diego Healthcare System. Her research areas include the dynamics of relationship functioning (such as commitment, conflict, infidelity, and aggression) over time, as well as how relationship functioning is related to mental health symptoms, especially for female veterans. She is also passionate about disseminating evidence-based couples' interventions to underserved couples, particularly within large health care systems such as the VA; currently, she is developing a VA Career Development Award project to offer a hybrid clinician-coached online intervention program to veteran couples.



Howard Markman Dr. Howard Markman is a Distinguished University Professor of psychology at the University of Denver and co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies. He is the developer of the internationally known evidence-based couples relationship education program, the Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP), which is listed in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) registry of evidence-based programs and practices. He has had multiple grants to support his research and has written over 100 books and scientific articles in the couples and family field, including the best-selling couples relationship education book, *Fighting For Your Marriage*.



Galena Rhoades Dr. Galena Rhoades is a research professor in the psychology department at the University of Denver. Her research focuses on romantic relationship development and functioning, and the related implications for children and adults. Her projects and collaborations include basic science studies on commitment, cohabitation, aggression, infidelity, family background, relationship processes and psychopathology, military families, and adolescent and child adjustment as well as studies on the effectiveness of preventive relationship interventions for couples and individuals.



Scott Stanley Dr. Scott Stanley is a research professor at the University of Denver. His core research interests including commitment, couple development, and the prevention of marital distress, and has worked for decades on the development and testing of interventions to reduce divorce and relationship distress. He has authored or co-authored numerous books including *Fighting for Your Marriage* and *The Power of Commitment*, and he writes a popular blog on relationship success at www.slidingvsdeciding.com.

2019 FINALISTS: TAKEAWAYS

Gewirtz, A. H., DeGarmo, D. S., & Zamir, O. (2018). After deployment, adaptive parenting tools: 1-year outcomes of an evidence-based parenting program for military families following deployment. *Prevention Science, 19*(4), 589-599. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-017-0839-4>

- 1** Families with parents who deploy to war face significant family challenges, and reintegration can be especially challenging, as (both) parents need to navigate new roles and relationships with children and partners. Evidence-based parenting programs can strengthen families under stress. The After Deployment, Adaptive Parenting Tools/ADAPT program aims to buffer parenting for military families facing transitions related to deployment (and other military stressors).
- 2** For this study, families were randomized to either “services as usual” (40%) or a 14-week multi-family group ADAPT program (60%). Those randomized to the ADAPT condition were invited to a weekly 2-hour group which provided parents with key parenting tools, taught through role play, discussion, and active practice. Tools included teaching through encouragement, problem solving, emotion coaching, mindfulness, effective discipline, positive involvement, and monitoring/supervision.
- 3** Results showed that the ADAPT program improved couples’ (observed) parenting, which, in turn, was associated with reductions in children’s behavioral and emotional problems, as reported by parents, youth, and teachers. Providing a group-based parenting program to Reserve Component families in which a parent has deployed is effective (as well as feasible and acceptable).

Julian, M. M., Muzik, M., Kees, M., Valenstein, M., Dexter, C., & Rosenblum, K. L. (2018). Intervention effects on reflectivity explain change in positive parenting in military families with young children. *Journal of Family Psychology, 32*(6), 804-815. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000431>

- 1** Military families with young children are remarkably resilient, yet also face unique challenges across the deployment cycle. For service members, these challenges can include reconnecting with family and adjusting from military culture to the very different demands of parenting and family life. For spouses and parenting partners, challenges may include reintegrating and reestablishing roles and routines following separation. For young children common challenges include coping with separation and reconnection with a parent who may have missed significant periods of his or her life due to deployment.
- 2** Strong Military Families (SMF) offers an integrated mental health and parenting intervention designed to promote resilience in families with young children who have experienced deployment. The SMF multifamily group capitalizes on the military community’s sense of esprit de corps, encourages peer support, and delivers an attachment-based curriculum, self-care resilience building skills, in vivo support of separations and reunions, and connection to culturally relevant community-based services. Consistent with program goals, SMF multifamily group participants demonstrated improvements in aspects of positive parenting such as their emotional responsivity and positive affect when interacting with their child.
- 3** SMF specifically targeted parents’ reflective functioning as it relates to parenting. Reflective functioning is the capacity to recognize and tolerate mental states in ones’ self and others, and is an important target because it underlies parents’ capacity to understand and respond to their children’s inner experiences (thoughts and feelings), and consequently more effectively meet their needs. As predicted, participation in the SMF multifamily group was associated with improvements in parenting reflectivity. Further, consistent with program goals, intervention effects on parents’ observed positive affect when interacting with their child were partially accounted for by intervention-related improvements in their parenting reflectivity.

Kritikos, T. K., Comer, J. S., He, M., Curren, L. C., & Tompson, M. C. (2019). Combat experience and posttraumatic stress symptoms among military-serving parents: A meta-analytic examination of associated offspring and family outcomes. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 47*(1), 131-148. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-018-0427-5>

- 1** A meta-analysis of multiple studies revealed that higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder/post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSD/PTSS) among parents are significantly related to more family difficulties, including more parenting problems, poorer family functioning, and greater symptoms and problems amongst children of service members.
- 2** Parental PTSD/PTSS was more strongly related to family difficulties than combat exposure.
- 3** In the reviewed studies the relationship between PTSD/PTSS and family difficulties was stronger when a) studies relied on current or retrospective reports, rather than following families over time; b) the person reporting on child problems was the servicemember as opposed to the at-home parent or child; and c) the outcomes of interest in the study were child emotional problems, externalizing problems, and total problems.
- 4** Results from this statistical summary of the literature support recent efforts to consider the impact of service member PTSD/PTSS on the family environment. In addition, this work highlights the need to include multiple informants, longitudinal designs, and a range of outcomes in future research.

O’Neal, C. W., Lucier-Greer, M., Duncan, J. M., Mallette, J. K., Arnold, A. L., Mancini, J. A. (2018). Vulnerability and resilience within military families: Deployment experiences, reintegration, and family functioning. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 27*(10), 3250-3261. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1149-6>

- 1** Frequent communication during deployment is related to more favorable post-deployment family reintegration, particularly for the family members “left behind” during the deployment (civilian spouses and adolescents). Key takeaways are 1) the importance of facilitating family communication, including removing barriers that may impede positive communication during deployment (e.g., lack of access to technology, time differences/scheduling difficulties, and so on) and 2) recognizing that communication during deployment is experienced differently by each family member and, as such, is differentially related to individual family members’ perceptions of post-deployment family reintegration and family functioning.
- 2** Civilian spouses and adolescents experienced more favorable post-deployment family reintegration when civilian spouses more successfully managed household tasks during deployment (for example, finances, disciplining children). These findings highlight the potential merit of preventative resources that facilitate smooth transitions in household responsibilities during deployment. The positive impact of resources that reduce household management stress can extend to other phases of the deployment cycle, including reunion and reintegration.
- 3** There are both positive and negative dimensions of family experiences post-deployment. Positive dimensions of family experiences post-deployment include reductions in reintegration difficulties (e.g., difficulty dealing with changes in the family) and increased realization of the importance of family. Moreover, reintegration is a family process, meaning that how well families function during the reintegration phase of the deployment

ABOUT AUSA

The Association of the United States Army (AUSA) is the only private, nonprofit professional organization serving all components of America's Total Army and its supporters. Since 1950, AUSA has provided a voice for the Army and vital services for Soldiers, Army civilians, and their families to advance the security of our nation. If you have a connection with the Army—professionally or personally—AUSA is your resource for exclusive access to scholarships and grants, business opportunities, educational resources, philanthropy initiatives, family programs, influential representation, and genuine relationships with a supportive Army community. Join us today at www.ausa.org/join.

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ABOUT MFRI

The Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University conducts research on issues that affect military and veteran families and works to shape policies, programs and practices that improve their well-being. Founded in 2000, MFRI envisions a diverse support community that understands the most pressing needs of military and veteran families. To achieve this, MFRI collaborates to create meaningful solutions for them. This internationally-recognized organization is located at Purdue University's College of Health and Human Sciences, in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies.

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ABOUT MILITARY REACH

The purpose of Military REACH, a partnership between Auburn University and the DoD-USDA Partnership for Military Families, is to bridge the gap between military family research and practice. To facilitate the DoD's provision of high-quality support to military families, our objective is to make research practical and accessible. We do this by producing research summaries with action-oriented implications for our target audiences: families, helping professionals, and those who work on behalf of military families. Our team critically evaluates and synthesizes military family research related to issues of family support, resilience, and readiness. We identify meaningful trends and practical applications of that research, and then, we deliver research summaries and action-oriented implications to our target audiences.

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