

Growing problem for veterans: Domestic violence

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"The increasing number of veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) raises the risk of domestic violence and its consequences on families and children in communities across the United States," says Monica Matthieu, Ph.D., an expert on veteran mental health and an assistant professor of social work at Washington University in St. Louis.

"Treatments for domestic violence are very different than those for PTSD. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has mental health services and treatments for PTSD, yet these services need to be combined with the specialized domestic violence intervention programs offered by community agencies for those veterans engaging in battering behavior against intimate partners and families."

Matthieu and Peter Hovmand, Ph.D., domestic violence expert and assistant professor of social work at Washington University, are merging their research interests and are working to design community prevention strategies to address this emerging public health problem.

"The increasing prevalence of traumatic brain injury and substance use disorders along with PTSD among veterans poses some unique challenges to existing community responses to domestic violence" says Hovmand.

"Community responses to domestic violence must be adapted to respond to the increasing number of veterans with PTSD. This includes veterans with young families and older veterans with chronic mental health

issues."

Even as the demographic of the veteran population changes as World War II veterans reach their 80s and 90s and young veterans completing tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, the numbers of living veterans who have served in the United States military is staggering. Current estimates indicate that there are 23,816,000 veterans.

Matthieu says there are evidence-based psychological treatment programs that can be a great resource for clinicians to learn how to identify and treat PTSD symptoms. However, identifying battering behaviors among veterans with active PTSD symptoms may be difficult and may require consultation and referral to domestic violence experts.

Research in the VA shows that male veterans with PTSD are two to three times more likely than veterans without PTSD to engage in intimate partner violence and more likely to be involved in the legal system.

"Community violence prevention agencies and services need to be included in a veteran's treatment plan to address the battering behaviors," says Hovmand.

"Veterans need to have multiple providers coordinating the care that is available to them, with each provider working on one treatment goal. Coordinated community response efforts such as this bring together law enforcement, the courts, social service agencies, community activists and advocates for women to address the problem of domestic violence. These efforts increase victim safety and offender accountability by encouraging interorganizational exchanges and communication.

"Veterans Day is an excellent reminder that we need to coordinate the services offered by the VA and in the community to ensure that our

veterans and their families get the services they need when they need it,"
Matthieu and Hovmand say.

Source: Washington University in St. Louis

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