

Study offers insight for returning troops and their relationships

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Troops overseas often want nothing more than to get back home to loved ones – but the reunion period often can be more emotionally taxing than the deployment.

Returning service members are at a greater risk of both depressive symptoms and relationship distress, and research shows the two often go together, says University of Illinois researcher Leanne Knobloch (pronounced kuh-NO-block). That's not a good thing, since someone suffering from depressive symptoms "really needs the support of their romantic partner."

In a study published in August in the *Journal of Family Psychology*, in a special issue on military families, Knobloch, a professor of communication, and co-author Jennifer Theiss, a professor of communication at Rutgers University, offer some advice for returning service members: Recognize the uncertainties you might have about the relationship and address them.

And anticipate sources of interference from your spouse or partner in everyday life and routines, and attempt to resolve them.

Those were two issues that showed up in their study as "mediators" linking depressive symptoms and relationship distress, Knobloch said.

"These may be pathways through which people's depressive symptoms make them dissatisfied or unhappy with their relationships."

They may help explain why depressive symptoms and relationship distress are connected, she said, "and the why is important because it suggests how to attack the problem, how to break the link."

Knobloch emphasized that having questions or uncertainty about a relationship is not unusual for those with depressive symptoms.

"People with [depressive symptoms](#) have a tendency to question everything in their lives," she said.

Feelings of interference from a partner are also not unusual, she said, given that each person has grown accustomed to doing things on their own during the deployment.

The study's conclusions fit with a model of relational turbulence that Knobloch and others have created to understand transitions in relationships. The study also is one of several in a line of research Knobloch and Theiss have conducted with military couples and their families, with other papers in press or under review.

The study was based on a one-time online survey of 220 service members – 185 men and 35 women from 27 states who had been home less than six months from their last deployments. Of the total, 64 percent were in the National Guard and 28 percent in the Army, with the Air Force, Marines and Navy each representing 3 percent or less. Fifty-seven percent had completed multiple deployments. Participants were solicited through fliers circulated at reintegration workshops, through online forums, and contacts with military chaplains, family readiness officers and other military personnel.

The authors found that distress in the relationship was no more or less likely for couples who had been through multiple deployments versus those who had been through just one.

"Military couples often say that every deployment is different," Knobloch said.

They did find, however, that distress was more likely among those in the latter part of their six months after return, which fits with research by others.

"Our findings are important because returning service members and their partners sometime think that the transition home is going to be a honeymoon period where everything is just romance and roses," Knobloch said. "They can be disillusioned if they run into obstacles."

They might be better prepared for the potential upheaval, however, "if they recognize that it's a normal part of the process, that many couples go through it and it doesn't mean your relationship is not good," she said.

"Depression is a really hard thing, and if people can separate their relationship problems from the depression itself, then they're a step ahead," Knobloch said.

More information: The paper, "Depressive Symptoms and Mechanisms of Relational Turbulence as Predictors of Relationship Satisfaction Among Returning Service Members" is available from the *Journal of Family Psychology*, a publication of the American Psychological Association.

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