

Avoidant coping interferes with military veterans' successful transition to university life

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Military veterans who use avoidant coping strategies—denying or minimizing distressing thoughts, experiences and emotions—are more likely to exhibit symptoms of depression and generalized anxiety. However, emotional help and support from family members reduces the negative impacts of these conditions, according to a University of North Texas study on veterans' transition to becoming college and university students.

Counseling and wellness centers at colleges and universities—where student veterans may seek help—should therefore have more outreach to veterans' families, including couples counseling, the UNT researchers say.

The VETS, or Veterans Experiencing the Transition to Students project, is directed by Shelley Riggs, UNT associate professor of psychology, and four doctoral students in the UNT Family Attachment Lab. They surveyed 165 veterans who were currently enrolled in one private and two public universities in Texas, including UNT. The majority—117—had been deployed in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan or Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn in Iraq.

The survey respondents represented all military branches, with nearly half serving in the Army and more than 83 percent being non-

commissioned officers.

In addition to being asked about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other psychological [symptoms](#), the student veterans responded to questions about their academic, emotional, personal and social adjustment to college, coping styles, social support and romantic relationship functioning, as well as their sense of being connected to their universities.

Fourth-year doctoral student Daniel Romero focused on the student veterans' coping strategies. Avoidant [coping strategies](#), he said, appear to interfere with the veterans' successful adaptation and psychological functioning in a school setting. He noted that avoidant coping can often be adaptive in military settings, where traumatic reactions must be suppressed to continue a mission.

"However, in the civilian world, ignoring difficult emotions and stressful events is counterproductive and can contribute to intrusive thoughts and other PTSD symptoms, and depression and anxiety symptoms," Romero said.

Veterans who used problem-focused coping, which involves identifying problematic stress and taking steps to resolve or overcome it, reported significantly lower levels of depression and [generalized anxiety](#) symptoms—but only if they also reported high levels of emotional support from [family members](#), Romero said. He noted, however, that this emotional support didn't affect levels of PTSD symptoms, which he said usually results from traumatic events, such as military combat, rather than other circumstances that could lead to depression and anxiety.

Romero's study will be published in an upcoming issue of *Journal of Counseling Psychology* and is currently available through the American

Psychological Association's Online First Publications.

In other findings from the VETS project:

- Data from only the student veterans who had been deployed showed that, surprisingly, the 25.6 percent of the veterans who reported PTSD symptoms also reported positive academic adjustment. One possible explanation, says fifth-year doctoral student Robyn Campbell, who analyzed the data, "is that studying and other school tasks requiring focused attention are part of an attempt to avoid distressing thoughts and reduce intrusive recollections of the trauma."

"If that is the case, then avoidance may actually facilitate successful adaption in a college setting," says Campbell, a Navy veteran. She noted that only hyperarousal symptoms of PTSD—sleep disturbances, tension and being easily startled—directly interfere with studying and completing class assignments. This type of hypervigilance about their surroundings "may make sitting in lecture halls particularly difficult" for veterans, which may distract them from absorbing information presented in class, she said.

Generalized anxiety symptoms, including restlessness and worry, also contribute with poor academic performance, Campbell said.

- The student [veterans](#) reported more relationship distress than civilian students and more likely to be married or in committed relationship. However, secure attachment—a relationship style that results in a person being comfortable with closeness and asking for help from others—was linked to better relationship adjustment and fewer symptoms of anxiety, depression and PTSD. Secure attachment was also linked to better academic, social and personal and emotional adjustment to college and

greater sense of being connected to universities.

Results from the study were presented at the 2014 Texas Psychological Association and the American Psychological Association annual conventions.

Provided by University of North Texas

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