

# Family stress may figure in soldiers' suicide risk

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Photo courtesy: U.S. Army

Findings suggest need to support those at home, expert says.

(HealthDay)—Service members who have to deal with trouble at home when they're deployed may be at increased risk of suicidal thoughts, a study of U.S. veterans suggests.

In a survey of more than 1,000 Iraq and Afghanistan vets, researchers found that about 14 percent said they'd had [suicidal thoughts](#) in recent months. And the odds were greater for those who'd dealt with family [stress](#) or felt unsupported by [family members](#) during their deployment.

The findings, reported recently in the journal *Anxiety, Stress & Coping*, show only a correlation.

They don't necessarily mean that family problems caused service members to contemplate suicide, said lead researcher Jaimie Gradus, an

assistant professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine.

"This is just one study, and it surveyed veterans at one point in time," Gradus said. "I think we need further research—and, in particular, longitudinal studies," she added, referring to studies that follow people over time.

That way, researchers could see whether service members' family problems actually come before any symptoms of depression or thoughts of suicide.

But simply knowing there's a connection is important, said Dr. Jeffrey Borenstein, a psychiatrist and president of the New York-based Brain & Behavior Research Foundation, which studies service members' [mental health](#) issues.

"I think this points to the importance of supporting families during deployment," said Borenstein, who was not involved in the study.

"Deployment can be very hard on spouses and children," Borenstein said. And thanks to the Internet, he added, deployed service members are often in tune with their families' stress as it's happening.

"In many ways, deployment now is different than in years past," Borenstein said. "Service members can be in constant contact with their families. That's a good thing, but it can also add to their stress in some cases."

None of that means families should stay silent about what they're going through, Borenstein emphasized.

"They shouldn't feel guilty. It's natural to feel overwhelmed," he said.

"They should make use of the services that are available to help them. That could be beneficial for them, and possibly for their loved one who's deployed."

Borenstein noted that the U.S. Department of Defense has various resources for service members and families, available through its Military OneSource website.

The issue of suicide in the U.S. military has received growing scrutiny in recent years. A 2013 study found that while such deaths remain rare, service members' suicide rates began to rise sharply in 2005.

That study found no evidence that the increase was due to deployment or combat exposure, per se. Instead, rising rates of depression and drinking problems seemed to be the major risk factors.

In this study, Gradus and her colleagues found that depression symptoms, and to a lesser extent post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), seemed to explain the link between family stress and suicidal thoughts.

It's not clear that family problems actually caused service members' mental health symptoms, Gradus said.

To Borenstein, that finding highlights the importance of screening for and treating service members' mental health symptoms. Vets suffering from depression or traumatic stress should not be afraid to seek help, he said.

**More information:** The U.S. Department of Defense has resources for [service members' families](#).

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