

Rates of mental health problems likely to increase in months after UK troops return from Afghanistan

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Mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety are likely to increase in UK military personnel during the months after returning from Afghanistan, according to a study by researchers from King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN), King's College London.

This new study, which is the first to examine the mental health of UK troops during the months following deployment, highlights the need to provide greater psychological support as they make the transition from operational deployment overseas to civilian life back home.

Exposure to traumatic incidents, which are commonplace in combat zones, has already been found to increase the risk of developing PTSD, [depression](#) and [anxiety](#).

The [researchers](#) had expected to find a gradual improvement in these symptoms after the troops returned home but on the contrary found that rates of probable mental health disorders and associated functional impairment rose during a six month period after returning from duty.

The participants comprised UK military personnel from all ranks of the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Army and Royal Air Force who had completed an operational tour in Afghanistan. They all returned to the

UK via a period of decompression, which is the first stage of gradual adaptation from deployment to the home environment. Decompression, which aims to improve psychological adjustment to life at home, lasts for between 24-36 hours and involves psychoeducation and recreational activities.

The research, published today in the *Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps*, found that symptoms of PTSD, anxiety and depression increased between baseline measurements taken at decompression and follow-ups taken three and six months later. However, only PTSD symptoms increased to a statistically significant extent.

The researchers also examined transitional difficulties and found that poor mental health at baseline predicted greater difficulty with adjusting to civilian life and problems with spouse or partner relationships.

Transition difficulties were commonly reported, with the majority of participants expressing that other people had not understood what they had been through - a belief which could exacerbate symptoms of anxiety and depression, according to the study authors.

Neil Greenberg, Professor of Defence Mental Health at King's College London, said: 'When troops return from combat we expected to see their emotional well-being gradually improve over time. However, we were surprised to find that poor mental health actually increased in the months after coming home, which underlines the need to better support UK troops during this important transitional period as they readjust to life at home.'

'The study's results suggest that there may be opportunities to provide brief evidence-based interventions during the homecoming process. These would aim to help troops understand why their symptoms exist and to utilise cognitive techniques to help them make sense of the

various experiences they had been through during deployment.

'We think this study has some really important implications - not only for UK troops but also for their families, who can be a crucial source of social support, especially during the homecoming period.'

Professor Greenberg added: 'Further long-term studies are required to see if these problems persist over time and to identify the best ways to support the mental health of troops returning from deployment.'

Provided by King's College London

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