

Accessible, regular leisure can boost health for combat veterans

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Credit: Pennsylvania State University

Engagement in accessible and regular leisure pursuits can contribute to the health and well being of combat veterans, according to a Penn State study.

Penn State researchers are studying leisure in the lives of married Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans as a first step to ultimately designing an intervention program for veterans returning home after deployment.

The recent findings are part of ongoing research by the College of Health and Human Development and the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State. The research is based on interviews with a small sample of married veterans who served during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"With more ill or injured combat veterans returning from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan than any previous war in U.S. history, we know that it is important to improve understanding, and increase the types and frequency of interventions that may improve well-being for these individuals and their families," said Derrick Taff, lead investigator and assistant professor of recreation, park and tourism management at Penn State.

The research helps investigators understand connections between leisure and veterans' marital relationships as part of a larger effort to promote the health and well being of recently returned veterans.

"Given previous research regarding the positive influence leisure and recreation can have on health and well being, our research team wanted to improve understanding of the role of leisure in the lives of combat veterans and their spouses," Taff said.

The latest research demonstrated that frequent engagement in leisure and recreation, which can often be free or inexpensive, can promote health and well-being for combat veterans.

"Based on the findings of our study, interventions, such as communication strategies that are designed to foster positive attitudes

toward leisure engagement, can potentially influence combat veterans to engage more, and ultimately improve overall well-being," Taff said.

Researchers recommend focusing communication interventions on local leisure resources, including military-related opportunities such as base offerings and activities with other service members, as well as outdoor or nature-based opportunities.

Specifically, the research shows that leisure activities available daily in local, accessible settings that provide comfort and restoration – such as simply walking outside or playing a game at home – are valuable in promoting a context that fosters enjoyment. The key is that such experiences are easily accessible to veterans every day.

Existing programs supporting veterans may organize events that are too infrequent or at inconvenient times and locations and primarily focus on the individual veteran, researchers said. The Penn State research focuses on increasing the quality and frequency of daily leisure to promote both individual and couple well-being.

"Past research related to [military veterans](#) and leisure mostly examined the influence of specific treatments via recreation such as fly fishing or a weekend rafting trip. While these are useful, clearly they are not readily accessible," said co-investigator John Dattilo, professor of recreation, park and tourism management at Penn State.

"We encourage practitioners working for military organizations to educate couples that accessible activities, such as going for a hike in a local or state park, sharing a cup of coffee at a neighborhood shop, or bird watching through a window at home have the potential to promote reintegration by providing opportunities for positive interactions and creating contexts to share enjoyable times."

Researchers' findings recently appeared in the *Journal of Leisure Research*.

Investigators plan to expand upon the research by exploring how leisure and recreation can influence the well-being of military families as a whole.

"We're really thinking holistically about the military family by examining the role of leisure for both the service member and their spouse, to examine how leisure engagement influences marital relationships," Taff said.

This pilot study is intended to lead to a larger quantitative study with Iraq and Afghanistan veterans before researchers use the combined results to develop a [leisure](#) intervention program to help veterans and their spouses adjust post-deployment.

"It is an honor and a privilege to work with colleagues, veterans and spouses to try to contribute in some small way to moving things forward for our [combat veterans](#) and their families," Datillo said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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