

# Posttraumatic stress affects academics

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Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by traumatic military experiences is associated with feelings of anxiety, anger, sadness and/or guilt. New Penn State research is evaluating how PTSD symptoms increase risks for academic difficulties as well.

Steffany Fredman, assistant professor of human development and family studies and the Karl R. Fink and Diane Wendle Fink Early Career Professor for the Study of Families, wanted to explore one potential process by which PTSD symptoms may contribute to academic problems in student veterans.

It's an issue rising to the forefront as increasing numbers of veterans are enrolling in colleges and universities.

"Many of these former service members are experiencing posttraumatic stress symptoms secondary to their military service, and these symptoms are associated with academic difficulties," Fredman explained. "There's an extensive literature demonstrating that PTSD symptoms can cause disruptions in trauma survivors' close relationships. However, less is known about ways that these [relationship](#) problems can, in turn, affect other domains of trauma survivors' adjustment, such as students' academic functioning."

The study, recently published in the journal *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, is the first to demonstrate the effects of military-related posttraumatic stress on academic adjustment through impairments in veterans' relationships with family and friends.

For the study, Fredman and her collaborators examined data from a large, national sample of students seeking mental health services while enrolled in college. The data were collected from college- or university-based counseling centers affiliated with the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH). The CCMH, which is housed at Penn State, is a national practice-research network of more than 500 college and university counseling centers that collects standardized data as part of routine clinical care and then pools de-identified data for research and clinical purposes.

Fredman and colleagues looked at a subsample of over 2,000 student service members and veterans, then further divided them into four groups based on relationship status and gender, including both partnered and non-partnered women, and partnered and non-partnered men. They found that, for all groups, military-related posttraumatic stress was associated with greater family distress and lower support from friends and acquaintances and that these difficulties were, in turn, associated with higher academic dysfunction. Further, the effect of PTSD symptoms on academic dysfunction was strongest for partnered women compared to the other three groups and was due to a greater influence of family problems on partnered women's academic adjustment.

Fredman and colleagues theorize partnered women's tendencies to "tend and befriend" when under stress may make them especially susceptible to the negative impacts of relationship problems on other areas of their lives, including academic functioning.

"Partnered women who are already struggling with the effects of posttraumatic stress and its impact on their relationships may be working extra hard to manage those relationships, leaving less time and fewer emotional resources to devote to their studies," according to Fredman.

In the future, Fredman would like to expand the project to determine

which aspects of student veterans' close relationships are most closely associated with academic success or challenges and to develop and test interventions that simultaneously improve PTSD symptoms, interpersonal relationship adjustment, and academic functioning.

"Our ultimate goal is to develop interventions that can be delivered during critical transitional periods, such as the college years, that can serve as a unique window of opportunity to help trauma survivors address these difficulties so that they can fully benefit from their education and lead happier and healthier lives," said Fredman.

**More information:** Steffany J. Fredman et al, Interpersonal relationship quality mediates the association between military-related posttraumatic stress and academic dysfunction among student veterans., *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/tra0000363](https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000363)

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