

Deployment still affects veterans ten years later, finds PTSD research

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Ten years later, a group of veterans still struggle daily with the effects of their deployment to Afghanistan. Sanne van der Wal, a Ph.D. candidate at the Leiden University Medical Center (LUMC), conducted research

into the effects of PTSD.

In her research Van der Wal used data from around 1,000 Afghanistan veterans. Although the majority of the veterans from this "PRISMO" cohort did not develop psychological problems after deployment, around 8% still suffer from severe symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The symptoms of agoraphobia, anxiety, depression and hostility are also more common ten years after deployment than before.

How can we help veterans?

According to Van der Wal, the group of veterans that only develop symptoms between two and five years after deployment deserve our particular attention. "These veterans are the only group that does not show a decrease but an exacerbation even of PTSD symptoms over time. It seems that this group does not find the right help. It could be that the treatments offered are not effective or that the veterans simply don't end up accessing mental health services. We therefore have to ask ourselves what the perspective is of these veterans in our current healthcare system and what we can change to help them more," says Van der Wal.

Van der Wal's results also show that various psychological factors, such as perceived [social support](#), and [biological factors](#), such as DNA changes, are linked to the development of PTSD and other psychological symptoms after deployment. Combining all these factors could ultimately lead to the development of a model for predicting psychological problems after deployment, including PTSD. These results also provide some pointers for intervention programs to prevent or reduce symptoms.

"I hope this research will make people realize that deployment really isn't something you can just leave behind you and that there are even veterans who still experience the effects ten years after the event," says

Van der Wal. "Hopefully this research will increase the recognition of [psychological problems](#) in veterans, which will help remove the barriers to talking about them."

Military personnel

Military personnel participated in various data collections that consisted of completing questionnaires and giving [blood samples](#) both a month before deployment to Afghanistan and in the years after returning home. The PRISMO study was a collaboration between the Military Mental Health Services (MGGZ)/the Ministry of Defense, the LUMC and the UMC Utrecht (UMCU). Van der Wal did the [data collection](#) ten years after deployment the under the supervision of Elbert Geuze (EC MGGZ/UMCU) and LUMC professor Eric Vermetten.

Van der Wal defended her dissertation, "At mission's end: The long-term impact of deployment on mental health," on Tuesday, December 13.

More information: Dissertation (in Dutch):

www.universiteitleiden.nl/agen...ent-on-mental-health

Provided by Leiden University

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