

# Study highlights how family dynamics impact work-related stress and enrichment for service members

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When one family member is stressed, the whole family may feel it. And this stress can boil over into their work life, including military service.

According to a study from the University of Georgia, when service members struggle to cope with the personal and family demands of military life, they feel more guilt about their work and perceive their work does not enrich their family life. The study is [published](#) in the journal *Military Psychology*.

"Service members give a lot to the career of being in the military," said lead author Meredith Farnsworth, a 2022 doctoral graduate from UGA's College of Family and Consumer Sciences. "It's about understanding how we take care of service members and their families in the best way through policy and programming."

The researchers analyzed data from more than 200 military families made up of a service member father, civilian mother and adolescent child between the ages of 11 and 18. All three family members were surveyed about [stress levels](#) and relationship dynamics. Service members indicated how guilty they felt about their work impacting family life as well as how their work enriched their family.

"Family members are interdependent, and their stress can be contagious from one another," said Catherine O'Neal, co-author of the study and an assistant professor in UGA's College of Family and Consumer Sciences. "But it's also true that each individual sees things differently. Some family members experience more or less stress, and that has implications for managing work and family life."

Work-related guilt was highest among fathers who say they and their family have challenges coping with the demands of [military service](#). In contrast, when fathers reported they and their family coped well with military stress, they perceived their military service enriched their family's life (for instance, seeing the benefits of military service for their children).

"Research tends to take a deficit approach. For instance, focusing on what leads to workers feeling guilty about how their work impacts their family. It's important for research to also take a strength-based approach, in identifying factors connected to family life being enriched because of work," O'Neal said.

The researchers also found that when adolescents reported a more positive relationship with their service member father, the father generally reported lower levels of family enrichment from their work. One potential explanation, Farnsworth said, is that adolescents with good parental relationships open up about stress and concerns. That open flow of communication can make parents more aware of difficulties, leading to lower perceptions of work-family enrichment.

"In [close relationships](#) with high levels of warmth and less hostility, parents may hear more about their adolescents' struggles with things that are hard, including military life," Farnsworth said. "So service member parents might be less likely to say, 'Oh, look at all the good things happening at home because of my work.'"

While all jobs and industries come with their own stressors, O'Neal said it's important to understand the unique role of military service.

"Military is not just the workplace," O'Neal said. "It represents a lifestyle with its own culture, especially for active duty service members."

The concept of [work-life](#) stress appears differently in [military families](#), given the potential deployments and separations, as well as concerns for individual health and safety. Military service creates demands, such as relocation or the absence of a partner or parent, for all family members. But studies like this one can uncover new ways to support families through stressors.

"The more we can figure out specifically what's going on and the ways military service creates guilt and family enrichment, the better positioned we are to create more effective and efficient policies to help families," Farnsworth said.

This could involve workplace flexibility, centering families in [support programs](#), and catching potential stressors early. But by taking these steps, it's possible to improve overall job satisfaction and retention in the military, Farnsworth said.

**More information:** Meredith L. Farnsworth et al, How military-related stress and family relationships are associated with perceptions of work-family impact for married male service members with adolescent children, *Military Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/08995605.2024.2351750](#)

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