Study suggests how, when to support military couples after homecoming

March 25 2019, by Craig Chamberlain

Communication professor Leanne Knobloch's work in recent years has focused on how military service members and their families adjust following deployments. It's an outgrowth of her research interest in how people communicate within close relationships, especially during times of transition. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Military couples look forward to joyful celebrations and reunions after long deployments. Difficulties may lie ahead, though, and new research with more than 500 couples in the months after homecoming suggests how and when to help.

"Military couples are incredibly resilient," says University of Illinois communication professor Leanne Knobloch, the lead author of a first-of-its-kind study of post-deployment (also called reintegration). A long separation, however, can bring uncertainty into any relationship, Knobloch said. Living together again means readjusting to each other's routines. And both partners bring new experiences into the mix.

The military branches offer various support services to help couples and families after deployment, but the research on reintegration has been limited. Through the new study, Knobloch and her research colleagues gained insight into how both relationship characteristics and mental health factors play a role.

"This research is important because both civilians and military families can benefit from understanding the experiences of returning service members and at-home partners reuniting after deployment," Knobloch said.

"There's a need for scientific data to guide the design of resources and programs to support military families," she added. "They deserve the highest standard of care, given the sacrifices they're making every day to serve our country."

Among the study's recommendations, published in the April issue of the Journal of Clinical Psychology:

- Provide ample support for at-home partners, who reported more difficulty with reintegration than returning service members.

- Don't push assistance too soon. A key window for offering help comes four to five weeks after homecoming, when couples report the most difficulty with reintegration.
- Address mental health symptoms. The study showed that mental health symptoms predicted reintegration difficulties to come—particularly post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms for returning service members and depressive symptoms for at-home partners.
- Work with couples to address unresolved questions about their relationship and to troubleshoot disruptions in their everyday routines. Couples fared better during the transition when questions and disruptions were minimized.

"Questions and disruptions are perfectly normal," Knobloch said, "but if couples don't recognize them and don't address them, then problems start to magnify and people get pushed apart."

Importantly, the study showed that reintegration was just as challenging for military couples who had been through deployment and reunion on previous occasions. Each deployment is different in mission and location, in the frequency and quality of communication linking family members, and in the experiences of at-home partners and children, Knobloch said. "Homecoming doesn't get any easier, even if your family was able to adjust smoothly before."

Knobloch was the principal investigator on the project, which was funded by a $834,000 grant from the Military Operational Medicine Research Program, within the U.S. Department of Defense. Her twin sister, Lynne Knobloch-Fedders, a professor at Marquette University, was the co-investigator, and Jeremy Yorgason, a professor at Brigham Young University, was a co-author of the study.

The researchers collected online survey data from 555 military couples

over the first eight months following the service members' return from deployment. All 1,110 individuals, including both the service members and their at-home spouses or partners, were surveyed monthly starting a week after homecoming. They reported on their communication during deployment, their experiences following reunion and their mental health.

Previous research had studied individuals at one point in time following deployment, but "research was needed to document the ebbs and flows of the transition across time," Knobloch said. This study also investigated both relationship factors and mental health factors together, rather than separately, she said.

The size and scope of the project owe a great deal to the participants themselves, Knobloch said. The study was originally planned for 250 couples, but the research team received such an overwhelming response to their recruitment and advertising efforts that they were able to more than double the number of participants.

"Lots and lots of couples volunteered because our findings could help families in the future," she said. "Military couples really appreciate the value of paying it forward."

More information: Leanne K. Knobloch et al, Mental health symptoms and the reintegration difficulty of military couples following deployment: A longitudinal application of the relational turbulence model, *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2018). DOI: 10.1002/jclp.22734

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Study suggests how, when to support military couples after homecoming (2019, March 25) retrieved 25 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-03-military-couples-

homecoming.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.