

Stress and Coping in Spouses of Deployed Military

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Purpose

1. To understand the experience of spouses on the home front during the current middle eastern war.
2. To recognize sources of family stress and strategies to cope with that stress.



Summary of Findings

- ❖ Spouses on the home front in the war led busy lives filled with activities
- ❖ Work and School
- ❖ New household duties
- ❖ Single Parenthood
- ❖ They were busy trying to balance all the "busyness", and still stay connected to their spouse and others, while they cope with thoughts and feelings that take time to process and express.

Introduction

- ❖ U.S. National Guard and Reserves are deploying at higher rates than ever in history, leaving behind spouses in rural and semi-rural settings without the full support of the military
- ❖ The rapid and unexpected activation of Reserve and National Guard units and deployment to a combat zone creates stress for families on the home front

Methodology

- ❖ Qualitative design to explore multiple realities of eighteen military spouses who are in current deployment or post deployment phases
 - ❖ 16 wives, 2 husbands
 - ❖ average age 39 (30 – 49)
 - ❖ 95 % employed
 - ❖ 95% children in the home
 - ❖ 39% previous military experience (at home spouse)
- ❖ Interviews transcribed verbatim identified themes of sources of stress and coping strategies

Data Analysis

- ❖ Transcripts studied by research team to identify and confirm themes
- ❖ Constant comparative analysis
 - ❖ Data reduction
 - ❖ Inductive analysis
 - ❖ Data reconstruction

Stressors

❖ WORRYING: KNOT IN STOMACH

❖ Safety

Two days before Christmas they had the first soldier killed in that unit...that was real tough, because then it was real

❖ Role Changes

What's going to happen when he comes home? The head of the household changes. I think there's more stress in him coming home than there is in him leaving.

❖ Unknown

I know he can't come back exactly the same person he was when he left.

❖ WAITING: LIVES ON HOLD

If he doesn't call, I'm constantly emailing him saying, "What's going on? Where are you?"

❖ GOING IT ALONE: NEVER A BREAK

❖ Finances

Any new bill, I had to deal with. She normally does that. That was an added responsibility I wasn't accustomed to.

❖ Household

You've got a car to maintain. What if something breaks down...the washer, the hot water heater, anything.

❖ SINGLE PARENTING: PULLING DOUBLE DUTY

I feel like I'm on lock down, because I haven't been out. I have to take that baby everywhere I go. I really don't get a break.

❖ LONELINESS: SOCIAL ISOLATION

There are people that have good intentions, but unless you've been in the same situation, it's hard to understand about the loneliness

Coping Strategies

❖ KEEPING BUSY

That is the big secret. That is what gets a person through it, keeping busy. If you are sitting at home worrying all the time about your soldier, it's going to do you in. You need to keep busy.

❖ Future Planning for the Unknown

Getting him to talk about things that need to be done in case he didn't come home. Where he wanted to be buried, things that he didn't want to address but we, back here, needed to know.

❖ Single Parenting

It turns out I have more work than I had before...between a job and a child. You can't focus on the worry thing because you are too tired most of the time or too busy. I cope by doing what I do.

❖ Managing Household

We had a mouse in our kitchen last week. We did not plan for that.

❖ STAYING CONNECTED

I always knew when he was on the computer, because they just did radio watch. So then I would have to be on with him. I always say I took care of my boys while he was gone, but I also took care of him, because I had to be on that computer when he was on. He needed it.

❖ Communication/Technology

Talking on a computer isn't the same as a phone but we can get more time out of the computer than the phone. It's nice to hear the voice every once in awhile, but I'll take instant messaging any day.

❖ SOCIAL SUPPORT

❖ Family, Friends, Church

I just lean on my friends...Getting together with each other, with the families all coming together, so that we weren't so alone in the whole situation.

❖ Military Family Readiness Support Group

Single units are comprised of soldiers from all across the state, therefore, the support group may be located too far for spouses to meet in person

Many National Guard and Reserve may deploy as individuals with a unit from another state and not have access to any military family support

❖ MANAGING PERSONAL NEEDS

❖ Physiological- sleep, exercise, eating, personal time

Once in a while I'd get a break. I would take a vacation day for myself and do "me" things.

❖ Mental/Emotional-managing thoughts and feelings

Journaling, Music, Exercise, Seeking medical care

Results and Conclusions

- ❖ Compared to previous wars, the experiences of our spouses have been dramatically changed by the use of technology
- ❖ Nearly all participants stayed connected to their spouse on a daily or weekly basis
- ❖ Keeping busy was the favored coping strategy
 - ❖ Although the participants were strong individuals many experienced physical and/or emotional weariness
 - ❖ This strategy reflects the culture of the Midwest that values strong work ethic and independence
- ❖ The majority of spouses agreed that no one can really understand until they, themselves, have lived through the experience

Implications for Increased Understanding

- ❖ This study shows additional efforts by the military are needed to connect families and provide support, especially among National Guard and Reserve units
- ❖ Spouses on the home front are isolated and have unmet needs
 - ❖ Most of these families live in rural areas and small towns
 - ❖ They need family, friends, neighbors, and professionals to offer a helping hand and to check in

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