

Deployment-related Stress

Issue Brief ♦ Health Care Survey of DoD Beneficiaries

HEALTH PROGRAM ANALYSIS & EVALUATION DIRECTORATE

Along with the usual stresses faced by American families, military families face stresses unique to military service. Some are related to deployment, including separation from deployed spouses, and the exposure of a family member to the dangers of combat. Spouses of Guard or Reserve members may be less prepared than other active duty spouses to cope with deployment-related stress.

Stress and Its Impact

Results from the HCSDB, shown in Table 1, indicate that spouses of active duty deployed to a combat zone, experience more stress than do other active duty family members. Sixty-three percent with deployed spouses reported “more” or “much more” stress than usual, compared to 36 percent of other active duty family members. Sixty-eight percent of deployed reservists’ spouses reported increased stress, as did 60 percent of other deployed active duty spouses. Other active duty are labeled “Active Duty” here and throughout to distinguish them from activated reservists.

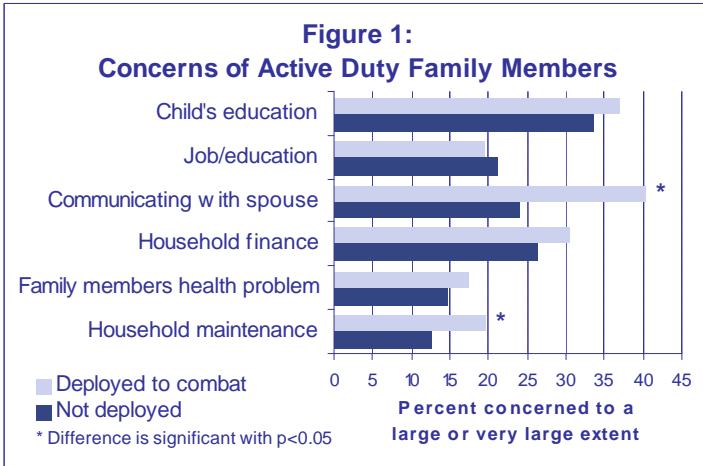
Unlike stress, self-reported mental health status differs little between those whose spouse has been deployed and those whose spouse has not. Compared to large differences in stress, differences are small and not statistically significant in the proportion rating mental health fair or poor (7 percent when spouse is deployed, compared to 5 percent when spouse is not), or seeking treatment or counseling (21 percent when spouse is deployed, compared to 18 percent).

	Among those who do NOT have a deployed spouse	Among those who have a deployed spouse	Among those whose deployed spouse is	
			Guard/ Reserve	Active Duty
<i>Percent</i>				
More or much more stress than usual	36	63*	68	60
Self-reported mental health - fair/poor	5	7	7	6
Needed counseling for a personal or family problem	18	21	24	19

* Difference is significant with p<0.05

Sources of Stress

Leading concerns identified by survey respondents are shown in Figure 1. Other than the risks of combat, the issues that concern spouses of active duty who are deployed and of those who are not are similar. Communicating with one’s spouse and maintaining one’s home become substantially greater sources of stress for spouses of deployed. Other concerns, such as children’s education, household finance and one’s own job or education are equally prevalent in both groups.



Resources Available

The Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness and the branches of service offer or support programs and resources for military families to help them cope with these sources of stress. In addition, TRICARE benefits include psychiatrists, counselors and social workers for those who need professional help.

Examples of resources provided to cope with deployment include:

Military OneSource¹ is a 24-hour information and referral phone counseling service specifically for active duty TRICARE members and their dependents. The OneSource website houses a family assistance center including a library of articles on topics such as Parenting, Readiness, Education, Disability, Financial Planning. The OneSource website also offers a locator service (for child care, etc.) and educational materials.

¹ <http://www.militaryonesource.com>

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The **Deployment Connections**² website delivers deployment-related information and services to all active duty and reserve personnel and their dependents. Website users can access information on their benefits and privileges, what to expect during deployment, and resources available to family members.

A *Family Readiness Handbook*³, provided to all families of deployed personnel, includes information for families on where to look for support groups, counseling, and other resources.

Families of deployed personnel may also turn to **Family Readiness Groups**, support groups sponsored by the branches of service.

Previous surveys of reservists and their spouses indicated that reservists and their families are less likely than other active duty to be aware of resources available to them. DoD and the services have responded with outreach specifically directed at reservists, including a *Guide to Reservist Family Member Benefits* and family readiness toolkits for reservists (GAO, 2003).

Getting Help

The resources available to assist beneficiaries in coping with their deployed spouses' absence include information, support groups, and counseling. As shown in Table 2, half of the family members surveyed have tried to get some kind of help. Fifty percent have sought information, 28 percent have tried support groups and 10 percent have sought counseling to help cope with deployment. Reservist spouses are most likely to seek help. In particular, 40

Resources Sought	Among those who have a deployed spouse	Among those whose deployed spouse is	
		Guard/Reserve	Active Duty
		Percent	
Information	50	58	46
Support groups	28	40	23*
Counseling	10	14	8

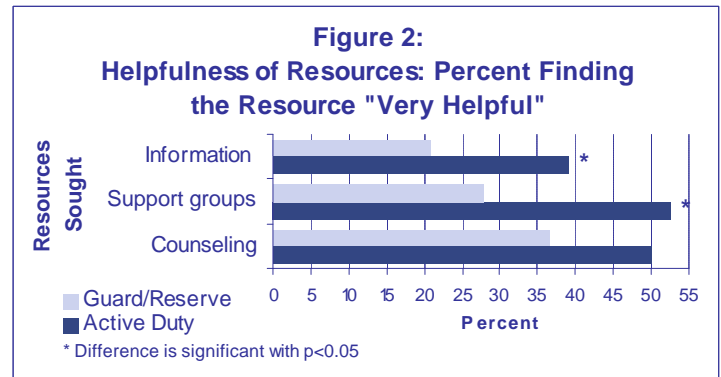
* Difference is significant with $p < 0.05$

² <http://www.deploymentconnections.dod.mil>

³ <http://www.hooah4health.com/deployment/familymatters/FSGhandbook.htm>

percent of reservist spouses tried support groups, compared to 23 percent of other active duty spouses.

Most users found the resources provided them to be at least somewhat helpful (not shown). However, reservist families appear to find these resources less helpful than do other active duty families. Only 28 percent of reservist spouses who tried them found their support groups very helpful, compared to 53 percent of other active duty spouses. Similarly, while 39 percent of other active duty spouses found information provided to them to be very helpful, only 21 percent of reservist spouses did.



Conclusion

Results from the HCSDB survey indicate that spouses of active duty personnel currently deployed to a combat zone face much more stress but do not suffer poorer mental health compared to other active duty family members. To beneficiaries in this situation, DoD, TRICARE and the branches of the armed services provide informational resources and access to support groups and counseling. Most users found these resources to be at least somewhat helpful. However, though they were equally or more likely to look for help compared to other active duty spouses, spouses of reservists find the information provided to them and the support groups less helpful. Our findings suggest that continued efforts by the DoD and services to reach reservists and target support to them are needed.

Sources

Health Care Survey of DoD Beneficiaries, fielded April, 2005. N= 2,512 family members of undeployed active duty, 526 family members of deployed, 145 family members of deployed Guard/Reserve, 381 family members of other deployed active duty.

U.S. GAO. *DoD Needs More Data to Address Financial and Health Care Issues Affecting Reservists*. Washington D.C., September, 2003.