

Baylor, Waco VA hospital studying veterans' family stress

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A coalition of researchers from Baylor University and a research hub based at the Waco Veterans Affairs Medical Center are expanding a study on how overseas deployment affects military members and their families.

The Military Family Coping Project, headed by Baylor social work professor James Ellor, examines the different challenges deployment poses on a soldier's family life and how those issues may affect combat performance or the soldier's return home.

The project is now in the middle of Phase II of the research, which surveys Fort Hood soldiers gearing up for overseas missions to examine how they manage pre- deployment stress.

Phase II also seeks input from soldiers' parents and spouses or significant others on how they cope in preparing for the military member's deployment.

"The uniqueness of this study is we're trying to look at the interaction, in terms of stress and stressors, between soldiers, spouses and parents," Ellor said. "Our ultimate goal is to enhance readiness for the soldiers, so that when they get into their deployment we can understand how to help them help their families."

Phase II research is funded by a \$350,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Defense's Telemedicine and Advanced Technology Research Center.

The goal is to gather information from 500 military members, 175 spouses or significant others and 175 parents. So far, surveys have been collected from about 50 soldiers and a handful each of spouses and parents.

Ellor said the research team is reaching out to commanders of different units at Fort Hood to get their permission to approach troops about participating in the study.

Phase I findings

Phase I of the project, which started in 2010, used focus groups of military members who recently had returned from deployment, and their significant others, to explore the challenges combat experience places on family life.

Ellor said the Phase I responses helped guide the research focus to stress and the interactions between soldier, spouse and parent.

For example, some of the soldiers in Phase I commented that while they looked forward to communicating with family at home, hearing about the problems their significant other encountered was sometimes distracting.

“They would be in contact with their spouse and (find out) the plumbing had gone out in the house, or something catastrophic, (like) the car didn’t work,” Ellor said. “At that point, they have to go back out to guard duty or whatever it is they are working on and try not to be worried about their spouse here who’s struggling. The same can be said for (interaction with) parents.”

Ellor said those findings sparked discussion about crafting programs to support military family members. Participants suggested that having a church group that could volunteer to mow lawns or offer referrals for a handyman would have been helpful, as well as having a pool of local teens to call on to baby-sit.

“The military has, for the significant other, what they call the Rear Guard, which is a group that is supposed to help with that sort of thing, but it depends on where the spouse is,” Ellor said.

“If they’re being deployed out of Fort Hood and the person lives in Killeen, yeah, the Rear Guard might be helpful. But it’s harder to help if they’ve moved back to their hometown of Poughkeepsie, (N.Y.)”

Research goals

The research team for the project includes a cross-disciplinary group of Baylor faculty members, including two professors in the family and consumers sciences department, as well as a neuroclinical psychologist and a statistician from the psychology department. Fort Hood psychologist Janet Whitacre also is lending a hand.

The project also has support from the VA’s Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans, which is housed at the Waco VA hospital, and the Texas A&M Health Science Center.

“We think that it is important, because the deployment preparation period may represent a critical period of time that then later impacts what happens during and following deployment,” said Sandra Morissette, associate professor at Texas A&M Health Science Center and co-principal investigator for the project.

“We want to understand what’s happening and how families and military personnel prepare for deployment.”

Morissette leads the assessment research core at the Center of Excellence. She leads Project SERVE, or Study Evaluating Returning Veterans Experiences, which conducts psychological assessments of veterans who have been deployed to war in an effort to identify cues that could predict whether a veteran may face difficulties transitioning to civilian life.

While there aren’t any data-sharing agreements in place yet to share information gathered between that study and the Military Family Coping Project, Morissette said the findings will add to the knowledge bank of work looking at how to help soldiers successfully handle combat deployments.

“We feel that if we can collectively combine that information, we’re going to have a better picture of what we need to do and the factors that influence resilience and recovery over time,” Morissette said.

Eventually, Ellor hopes to move to a Phase III of the project to track the same respondents and gather information on how well they handled stress and issues during deployment and after returning home. But that first will require seeking additional grant funds.

The goal is to craft recommendations for things that can be done ahead of and during deployment to reduce stress levels.

“You’ve got to figure, if you and I take a trip to Europe, there’s going to be a certain amount of stress involved, and they’re not exactly going for a European spa vacation,” Ellor said. “A certain amount of stress is normal, but there are certain situations that are over the top. So our question is, ‘How do they handle that?’ ”