

Military Service and Mental Health

Problems Facing University Students Returning from War



MARTA ELLIOTT, PHD
CARLENE GONZALEZ, MA
BARBARA LARSEN, MA



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Mental Health Consequences of War*



- An estimated 14 percent of veterans of OEF (Afghanistan) and OIF (Iraq) are suffering from **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** , and 14 percent are screening positive for **major depression**, both of which increase the risk of **suicide**
- Veterans who are most in need of mental health treatment avoid seeking it because of its perceived stigma; in fact, over half of veterans who screen positive for PTSD or depression are **not receiving mental health care**

From Combat



to College

- The Post 9/11 GI Bill (Aug. 1, 2009 -) covers post-secondary tuition and expenses for veterans of OEF/OIF resulting in an expected ***30 percent increase*** in student veterans attending college this Fall alone
- Some student veterans bear the psychological wounds of war that may impede their transition to college, their academic success, and their long-term prospects both personally and professionally
- Institutions of higher education have an opportunity to improve the odds of student veteran success by acting now

Common problems reported by student veterans



Our survey data and anecdotal evidence at UNR

- Feeling unfairly judged for their military service
- Feeling singled out in class discussions and in conversation
- Feeling alienated from non-veteran students
- Feeling uncomfortable in crowded situations on campus



American Council on Education*

- Lack of flexibility with regard to deployment scheduling
- Hurdles to obtaining academic credit for courses and training completed during military service
- Problems accessing GI benefits

*American Council on Education Report: *From Soldier to Student: Easing the Transition of Service Members on Campus* http://www.aascu.org/media/pdf/09_StudenttoSoldierFinalReport.pdf

Student Veterans' Services at UNR



- UNR already has a full-time Coordinator of Veterans' Services, Johann Sprenger (johann@unr.edu) and a webpage: <http://www.unr.edu/stsv/veteran>
- The Wolf Pack Veterans (a ASUN organization)
- The University Veterans Coalition, a presidential diversity committee (<http://www.unr.edu/diversity/veterans.html>)
- Other ideas:
 - New student orientation for veterans/1st year class geared toward veterans
 - Student Veterans Center
 - How do we get the rest of the campus involved?
 - For a model, see Minnesota: <http://onestop.umn.edu/veterans/index.html>



The Current Study



Spring 2008 survey of UNR student veterans

- To assess:
 - Problems student veterans are having on and off campus;
 - Their mental and physical health needs and how well those needs are being met.
- To identify:
 - Risk and protective factors for mental health problems among UNR student veterans
- Survey response:
 - Roughly half (48%) of all student veterans returned their completed surveys, n=124

Who are our student veterans?

- Gender

- 75% Male; 25% Female

- Race/Ethnicity

- White - 92.4%
- Black - 1.7%
- Asian - 1.7%
- American Indian - 0.8%

- 7.3 % Hispanic Origin

- Age (ranged from 17 to 77)

- Average age = 31.9 yrs

- Marital Status

- Single - 45.9%
- Married - 32%
- Divorced - 16.4%
- Life Partner - 4.1%
- Separated - 1.6%

- Number of Children

- None - 66.4%
- One - 15.6%
- Two - 11.5%

- School and Work

- M = 11.68 semester credits
- 64.8% were also employed
- M = 32.92 hours/week

What was their military service?



○ Military Branch

- Army - 43%
- Marine Corps - 23%
- Air force - 19%
- Navy - 14%

○ Reserve Participation

- Army Reserve - 12.1%
- National Guard - 36.3%

○ Active Duty - 6.3%

○ Conflicts

- Operation Iraqi Freedom - 42.3%
- Operation Enduring Freedom - 32.5%
- Peace-keeping missions - 17.1%

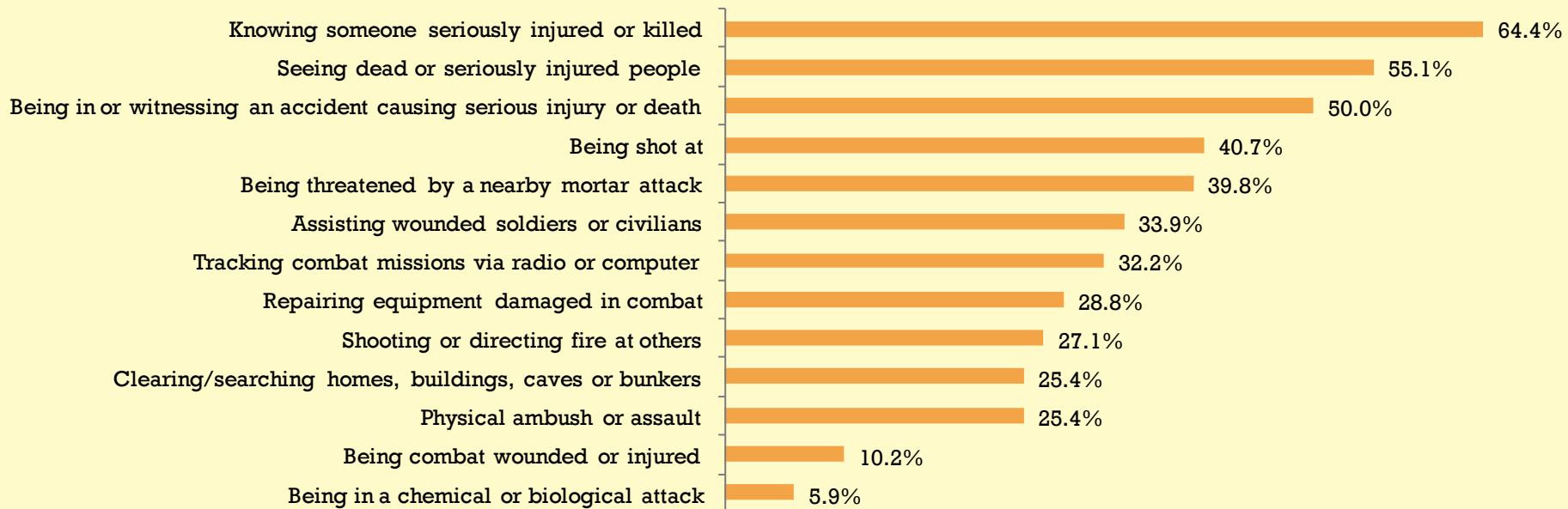
○ Number of Deployments

- None - 8.4%
- Once - 25%
- Two - 30.8%
- Three - 25.8%
- Four - 10%

What have they been through?



Which of the following have you experience while in the military? (n=118)



Military Service as a Source of Stress



- **Sudden Trauma**

- Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)
- Ambush and assault
- Witnessing injury and death
- Nearby mortar attacks



- **Chronic Stressors**

- Ongoing physical and mental deprivation
- Constant threat to life and limb
- Lengthy and multiple deployments



Civilian Stressors



School

- Number of credit hours



Work

- Number of hours of paid employment
- Relationship with the boss and co-workers



Financial situation

- Financial strain



Personal life

- Relationship problems

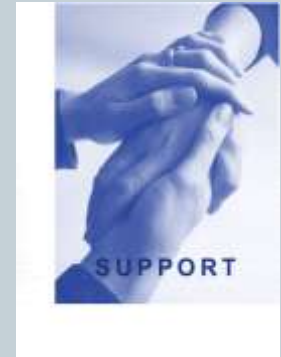


Resources



Resources

- Social Support
 - Someone to talk to vs. alone and misunderstood
- Counseling
 - Received counseling
 - Helpfulness of counseling
- Health care
 - Health insurance
 - Adequacy of health care



Mental Health Outcomes of Stressors and Resources



- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Symptoms of Depression
- Alienation on Campus



- When I hear my teachers talking about US military operations, I feel unfairly judged
- I feel uncomfortable in crowded situations on campus, like when I'm in a big lecture hall
- I do not like it when people at school want to know the details of my military experience
- I sometimes feel like I do not fit in with other students at the university
- I sometimes think my teachers look down on me because I'm a veteran

What are the relative effects of military vs. civilian stressors on student veterans' mental health?*

● PTSD

- Combat exposure (.463)
- Financial strain (.276)
- Relationship problems (.264)
- Functional limits owing to injury (.179)

● Depression

- Functional limits due to injury (.710)
- Financial strain (.422)
- Relationship problems (.210)
- Combat exposure (.144)



*standardized coefficients, controlling for demographics, other traumatic life events, and social support

What resources protect student veterans from having mental health problems?

- **Social support** *protects* student veterans against PTSD and depression
- **Social support** *reduces* the influence of functional limitations on depression



- Mental and physical health care treatment and student veterans' own assessment of their efficacy are **unrelated** to risk of PTSD and depression

How do stressors and resources predict which student veterans experience the most alienation on campus?



- Social support (-.424)
- Combat exposure (.257)
- Physical injury (.243)
- Financial strain (.231)
- PTSD symptoms (.207)





Plans for Future Research



- A NSHE system-wide web survey of student veterans has been planned for the 2009-2010 academic year to expand on what we have learned thus far, emphasizing:
 - More specific information regarding the experiences on campus that are perceived as alienating
 - More detailed exploration of the specific resources that protect against PTSD, depression, and alienation among student veterans
- Any other ideas for the next survey? Email me: melliott@unr.edu

THANK
YOU SO
MUCH!

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