RESEARCH SUMMARY: FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SPOUSES’ REACTIONS TO COMBAT DEPLOYMENT

This short research summary is an addendum to the subsection entitled Spouses’ Reactions to Combat Deployment that appears in section 6.2 of the Operation READY U.S. Army Leader’s Handbook: Trauma in the Unit. In subsection 6.2 of the handbook, a brief synopsis of the research on the impact of wartime deployments on families, with particular emphasis on the impact of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) is provided. The findings indicate that coping with lengthy combat deployments, intense family emotions, and intense fears and worries about Soldier’s safety are difficult for families. Lengthy combat deployments create a prolonged period of stress that eventually becomes too much, even for those who cope well. Reunion following a combat deployment is also a stressful time for families, particularly adjusting to changes in Soldiers' behaviors and mood and other factors that impact the reintegration of the Soldier into the family.

Spouses' (and families') abilities to cope with combat deployments are affected by:

- Circumstances of the combat deployment
- Coping strategies
- Army support.

The table below provides key points and detailed findings from the preliminary research on the impact of OIF and OEF.

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<th>Circumstances of the deployment</th>
<th>OEF and OIF Findings</th>
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<td>A long combat deployment and multiple tours to a war zone appear to have greater psychological effects and more likely to impact spouse functioning.</td>
<td><strong>Length of the deployment</strong> – When spouses completed the Survey of Army Families (SAF V) in late 2004, half reported that they coped well during a deployment between 2001 and 2004 (54%) or were coping well while Soldier currently deployed (50%). In contrast, only 39% of those spouses who experienced (or were currently experiencing) a lengthy separation of 18 months or more reported coping well (Orthner &amp; Rose, 2006). The toll of lengthy deployments was also found to lead to increased reporting of marital problems and more negative attitudes towards the Army (Orthner &amp; Rose, 2006).</td>
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<td><strong>Multiple tours</strong> – Multiple deployments mean that families face ongoing exposure to war.</td>
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<td>– The impact of this situation is creating a &quot;spiral&quot; not cycle for families. Families are carrying unresolved anxieties, more fatigue and more concerns about family relationships and children along with skills gained with next deployment (NMFA, 2006).</td>
<td>– The majority of spouses on the SAF V indicated concerns about the Soldier being in combat and having to redeploy (Orthner &amp; Rose, 2006).</td>
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• **Coping strategies** – Spouses who actively keep themselves informed and have a support network cope better.

OIF and OEF Findings

• How families handle mid-deployment appears crucial to how families handle subsequent deployments (NMFA, 2006).

• **Effective strategies.** Effective strategies appear to be having information, knowing what resources are available and having a support network (including strong marriage). More specifically, the strategies that enabled spouses to cope with deployment and have an easier reunion adjustment were:
  – knowing where to go for emergency assistance,
  – keeping well informed,
  – being comfortable using Army services,
  – having a person outside of the home to talk to,
  – participating in FRG during deployment (also corroborated by NMFA, 2006),
  – willingness to talk to clergy for help,
  – doing volunteer work, and
  – satisfaction with marriage during or after the deployment (Orthner & Rose, 2006).
  – maintaining communication with Soldier (i.e., “hearing the voice” reassures Soldier safe) is also important to families (NMFA, 2006; Henderson, 2006).

• **Ineffective strategies.** Ineffective strategies or factors that did not make a difference are:
  – communication with Soldier (e.g., stories of near misses increased spouses and children's anxiety) (Huebner & Mancini, 2005; Henderson, 2006; Orthner & Rose, 2006),
  – focusing too much on Soldier well-being (NMFA, 2006),
  – experience with the military,
  – participation in AFTB, and
  – attendance at church/synagogue during deployment (Orthner & Rose, 2006).

ODS/S Finding

• The OIF/OEF findings corroborate earlier findings from Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm. In ODS/S, Figley (1993) observed:

  – **Coping strategies that were effective for families were:** talking with others, increasing support network, channeling energy into helping others, communicating with deployed military member, joining a support group, engaging in exercise, and becoming occupied with hobbies and other activities.
  – **Ineffective coping strategies were:** blaming, avoiding daily tasks, being cynical about life circumstances, taking frustrations out on others, abusing drugs and alcohol, and excessively seeking information.
OIF and OEF Findings

- **Perceptions of leadership concern for families.** Spouses who perceived and were satisfied that leadership at all levels are concerned about and respect families coped better during deployment and had easier reunion readjustment (Orthner & Rose, 2006).
- **Connections to unit.** The source of help that spouses used the most was the FRG (Orthner & Rose, 2006). Contact with unit representative (RDC or FRG leader) and their checking on the family were reported by spouses to be helpful in dealing with feelings of being alone (NMFA, 2006).
- **Briefings and services.** Both Orthner and NMFA found that families are not taking advantage of services available.
  - Less than half of spouses (between 40 to 50%), who were surveyed about their deployment experiences between 2001 and 2004, reported receiving reunion training. Only one fourth received training on preparing children for reunion. Further, half or less of those spouses who used the assistance found it helpful (Orthner & Rose, 2006).
  - Some spouses reported they used and found counseling helpful in being able to deal with multiple deployments (NMFA, 2006).
  - While a higher percentage of families experiencing multiple deployments report higher use of services, there are families who are not using the services available (NMFA, 2006).

**Army support** –
- A supportive Army environment (e.g., contact from and with the unit) helps families cope with stress of combat deployment.
- Greater outreach and refocus of support efforts are needed to help families cope with combat deployment and reunion.

For full citation of the literature referenced in this document, see the References in the U.S. Army Leader’s Handbook: Trauma in the Unit.