

Suggested APA style reference:

Brown, J., & Hall, B. (2009). Exploring intimate partner communication in military couples: Implications for counselors. In G. R. Walz, J. C. Bleuer, & R. K. Yep (Eds.), *Compelling counseling interventions: VISTAS 2009* (pp. 55-65). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Article 6

Exploring Intimate Partner Communication in Military Couples: Implications for Counselors

Paper based on a program presented at the 2009 American Counseling Association Annual Conference and Exposition, March 19-23, Charlotte, North Carolina.

Jessica Brown and Brenda Hall

“Reunited once again, for the third time; I sat and reflected on our relationship, thinking about all we had been through. The past three years were a blur; now we can slow down. But what now; do we even know how to live outside of the whirlwind of the deployment/reunion cycle we had been caught up in throughout our existence together? I almost couldn’t fathom the fact that I didn’t know how to talk with my own husband; and he didn’t know how to talk to me. Perhaps the most disconcerting part was that we had been through these tumultuous events; and it still wasn’t enough to keep us together.”

Jessica Brown, former military spouse

There are many casualties of war; marriage being one of them (Cohan, Cole, & Davila, 2005). Separation and the pressures of deployment create multiple problems and high levels of stress among military personnel and their significant others. For military couples, maintaining healthy marital relationships is a major concern. Although statistics on divorce in the military vary, there is evidence to suggest that the expectations of military life, including deployment, increase the risk that married couples will experience

failed marriages. As reported by Skipp, Ephron, and Hastings (2006), divorces within the military doubled in 2004. There are documented risk factors for marriage instability in the military, such as long-term separation and post-traumatic stress syndrome (Cook, Thompson, Riggs, & Coyne, 2004). Couples in the military are vulnerable to the effects of living within the military and through the cycles of deployment.

One crucial aspect in determining how well couples deal with the stressors of deployment and maintain a healthy relationship is how well they communicate. As cited in the National Military Family Association Report on Cycles of Deployment (2005), "Communication among service members, families, the unit/command, and family support providers is essential in dealing with both the separation of deployment, and the preparation for the reunion with the service member" (p. 5). Providing opportunities for the ongoing exchange of information helps to answer important questions about the deployment process and allows couples to stay in touch throughout periods of separation. While there seems to be general agreement that communication is an important issue in marital satisfaction, there is little written in the literature specifically about how communication between partners changes or is affected by military life and deployment.

In order to effectively examine elements of communication amongst intimate military couples and how they are affected by military deployment, it is first important to note healthy elements of communication. Healthy communication is paramount in a successful and happy marriage (Karahan, 2007; Walsh, Baucom, Tyler, & Sayers, 1993). When marriages lack elements of healthy communication, conflict may arise (Karahan, 2007). Couples who possess basic communication skills have less marital conflict; suggesting the importance of certain communication skills or elements (Karahan, 2007; Sanford, 2003). These crucial communication elements include: self-disclosure, problem-solving, and warmth.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure involves individuals making themselves known to another person by sharing personal information (Gladding, 2006). Bradford, Feeney, and Campbell (2002) state that self-disclosure serves as the crucial core of an intimate relationship. In addition, the amount of self-disclosure in a relationship can change the dynamics or nature of the relationship (Bradford et al., 2002). When one or both individuals in a relationship withdraw from sharing thoughts and feelings, intimacy is negatively affected.

In military couples, self-disclosure can be affected greatly by the stressors of deployment. Soldiers often remain silent about their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. This reflects an aspect of military culture that expects soldiers to remain strong and quiet. Sharing strong personal feelings or expressing emotions openly could be viewed as a sign of weakness. While this code of silence may be necessary during times of combat, it can destroy effective communication between intimate partners. Unfortunately, the consequences of not talking about traumatic events often result in serious mental health issues that further damage relationships among military couples. Research indicates that individuals involved in military deployment are at increased risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Basham, 2008; Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003). Additionally, Dekel, Enoch, and Solomon (2008) found that individuals with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder self-disclose less to their partners, in turn affecting marital adjustment and satisfaction. Individuals with symptoms of PTSD may be less likely to disclose to their partners about traumatic events because it may trigger a flashback or force the individual to think about painful events or memories. It is especially damaging when the trauma of PTSD results in intimate partner violence. Research suggests that individuals with PTSD are at an increased risk to engage in intimate partner violence. Cattaneo and Goodman (2005) found that symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder were predictors of intimate partner violence.

Fortunately there is evidence to support that appropriate self-disclosure of returning combat veterans to their partners can contribute to healthy communication. Graham, Huang, Clark, and Helgeson (2008) found that self-disclosing, even when the emotion or event is negative, is related to a positive outcome. This concept emphasizes the benefits of honest expression of difficult emotions such as confusion, doubt, frustration, and other feelings associated with negative experiences. Couples who are able to define their own personal guidelines for communicating and learn effective strategies for open, two-way communication can more effectively address the stressors associated with the cycle of deployment.

Problem-Solving

Another element of healthy communication is problem-solving, which involves the ability to negotiate solutions and to cope with problems as well as maintain effective conflict resolution. Problem solving has been linked to effective communication in married couples (Hahlweg, Markman, Thurmaier, Engl, & Eckert, 1998). On the other hand, according to Jackman-Cram, Dobson, and Martin (2006), poor problem-solving behavior can lead to increases in marital conflict. Often problem-solving requires effective conflict resolution, especially with high stress situations (Ronan, Dreer, Dollard, & Ronan, 2004), such as military deployment. If couples can learn effective problem-solving skills while communicating, they may better navigate through the various cycles of military deployment.

Deployment involves separation and reunification of partners (Rotter & Boveja, 1999), which entails a variety of situations and events involving problem-solving skills. When a couple separates for deployment, they must decide who will take on certain tasks while the other partner is deployed (Rotter & Boveja, 1999). Tasks taken on by the partner staying at home may include increased financial responsibility, house and car repairs, and parenting by oneself. In preparing for deployment, couples can implement plans in order to deal with situations that will arise during deployment. In order to

create and implement the plans, effective communication is crucial. For example, partners can discuss and negotiate about who should be contacted to make vehicle and car repairs during deployment. In order for this process to go smoothly, the couple must be able to actively dialogue and negotiate between one another. Then a plan can be put in place for the spouse at home so that phone numbers are provided for repairs that the deployed spouse used to handle. Utilizing communication skills that result in shared decision-making helps both partners to feel connected and less resentful about responsibilities at home during deployment.

Since deployment requires that the spouse at home manages more of the household duties, couples must often renegotiate roles when the soldier returns home (Rotter & Boveja, 1999). Reuniting after deployment involves relinquishing and undertaking tasks on behalf of both the deployed partner and the partner on the home front. This can be an extremely stressful time and the potential for communication that involves withdrawal and anger between partners is high. The partner who remained at home may feel resentment and express anger and the soldier may withdraw. Or, the soldier and partner who remained at home may both express anger or withdraw. Couples who get caught in the anger and withdraw pattern are unable to effectively solve problems or address conflict; in fact, this type of communication only increases conflict. The process of reintegration can go more smoothly if the couples are effectively communicating using problem-solving. The couple must be able to communicate to each other how they feel about the roles each had during deployment and identify the tasks they wish to reclaim or relinquish upon return. In order to do this, the couple must be able to negotiate a solution together. The couple will then be able to resolve any feelings of resentment and identify what tasks and roles each partner will claim.

Warmth

Gladding (2006) defines warmth as a positive emotion as well as the ability to communicate caring, concern, and acceptance of

others. Warmth in couple communication can also be described as positive affect which involves the display of immediacy behaviors (Guerrero & Andersen, 1991). When partners display these behaviors, they are communicating a sense of closeness to one another. These behaviors include eye contact, touch, body orientation, the use of positive facial expressions, tone of voice, and other non-verbal signals that communicate a sense of warmth. These behaviors are related to the degree of closeness a couple has in their relationship (Guerrero & Andersen, 1991).

Warmth is a healthy element of communication because it undermines hostility in a relationship. Hostility implies a lack of warmth (Rogge, Bradbury, Hahlweg, Engl, & Thurmaier, 2006). The importance of warmth is illustrated when discussing the increasing rate of intimate partner violence (IPV) among returning combat veterans and their partners. Fonseca et al. (2006) suggest that “IPV is a dysfunctional and maladaptive manner of responding to disagreements in an intimate relationship” (p. 627). Couples who engage in hostile behavior, and who communicate about problems using aggression are more apt to experience IPV. If deployed individuals and their partners displayed aspects of warmth when communicating, such as showing that they genuinely cared and accepted each other, there could be a possible decrease in hostile interactions when returning home. For example, most deployments are lengthy in nature, some lasting over a year. During deployment, it may not be necessary for the deployed partner to use immediacy behaviors or communicate a sense of warmth or closeness to individuals. The nature of combat entails killing, injury and death. These experiences may necessitate detachment from oneself and others in order to cope. When transitioning home, there may be transference of detachment and lack of ability to communicate warmth on the behalf of the individual that was deployed. With the element of warmth missing from communication, it is easier for the couple to grow apart. The more emotionally separate the couple becomes, the more likely hostile behaviors could replace immediacy behaviors. Additionally, increased hostility in communication could contribute to intimate partner violence among military couples.

Implications for Counseling

Military couples represent a diverse and growing client population for professional counselors. Soldiers from all branches of service, including Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, Marines, Reserves and National Guard, their spouses, and children account for one-third of the United States population (Rotter & Boveja, 1999). Currently, military personnel are more accessible for counseling as increased numbers reside in civilian communities. It is inaccurate to assume that the military takes care of its own and military personnel do not want or need additional help and support. As cited in Hoshmand and Hoshmand (2007), there has been a shift away from military community support toward local community resources. Additionally, there is growing evidence that dependents of soldiers use or would seek counseling services if they were available to them (National Military Family Association, 2006). Married couples represent an important population within the military. Exploring how communication relates to relationship stability is an important aspect in serving military partners and their families. Couples who utilize effective communication, especially through deployment, are more likely to maintain and strengthen their relationship, thus keeping their families together.

There are many ways that counselors can reach out to military couples and help to foster positive, healthy communication and relationships. Being aware of the unique circumstances of military life and the effects of stressors such as deployment is an important first step. Counselors can be instrumental in helping military couples understand healthy communication elements of self-disclosure, problem-solving, and warmth, as well as in assisting couples explore how the various phases of deployment affect their communication patterns, both individually and as partners.

Counselors provide an environment that supports honest and appropriate self-disclosure. Outside the confines of the military structure, counselors can encourage the sharing of thoughts and feelings without fear of consequences. With an emphasis on respect,

understanding, and open expression, couples can learn to effectively listen, express honest feelings and negotiate through difficult decisions. Counselors can also help couples practice skills in expressing honest feelings while maintaining positive regard for each other. In this way, intimate partners learn to focus on their relationship and to express their confusion and doubt in ways that are less likely to result in hostility and withdrawal. One aspect of this involves helping military couples to identify how they want to communicate with each other as intimate partners separately from the expectations for silence that is pervasive in the military culture. As soldiers and their intimate partners learn skills to clearly define and redefine their personal guidelines for effective communication, they can better negotiate the demands of military life and avoid being pulled into negative patterns of interactions.

Giving partners an opportunity to share the fears and expectations of deployment can help ease the anticipation of separation. They can establish guidelines regarding how everyday duties will be handled during separation and anticipate how to resolve problems as they arise. Not only does this lead to a more positive deployment departure for the couple, it also sets a strong foundation for reconnecting and for addressing the types of negotiation that reunification requires.

According to Sanford (2003), when couples are having problem-solving conversations regarding highly difficult topics, they are likely to engage in negative communication, such as criticizing each other. Counselors can help the couple use effective problem-solving skills when engaging in difficult conversations. Counseling can help restore a sense of trust and reliance on each other as the major support in each other's lives. Practicing strategies that promote two-way communication allows both members of the couple to express their concerns and needs and to feel as if they are being heard and understood. This type of interaction is more likely to pull them together instead of tearing them apart; thus, reducing the risk of hostile engagement and possible IPV. Counselors can offer strategies, interventions and programs that emphasize healthy communication

and assist these couples in maintaining strong, satisfying marital relationships.

References

- Basham, K. (2008). Homecoming as safe haven or the new front: Attachment and detachment in military couples. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 36(1), 83-96.
- Bradford, S. A., Feeney, J. A., & Campbell, L. (2002). Links between attachment orientations and dispositional and diary-based measures of disclosure in dating couples: A study of actor and partner effects. *Personal Relationships*, 9, 491-506.
- Cattaneo, L., & Goodman, L. (2005). Risk factors for reabuse in intimate partner violence: A cross-disciplinary critical review. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 6(2), 141-175.
- Cohan, C. L., Cole, S., & Davila, J. (2005). Marital transitions among Vietnam-era repatriated prisoners of war. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 22(6), 777-795.
- Cook, J. M., Thompson, R., Riggs, D. S., & Coyne, J. C. (2004). Post-traumatic stress disorder and current relationship functioning among World War II ex-prisoners of war. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 18(1), 36-45.
- Dekel, R., Enoch, G., & Solomon, Z. (2008). The contribution of captivity and post-traumatic stress disorder to marital adjustment of Israeli couples. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 25(3), 497-510.
- Drummet, A. R., Coleman, M., & Cable, S. (2003). Military families under stress: Implications for family life education. *Family Relations*, 52(3), 279-287.
- Fonseca, C. A., Schmalings, K. B., Stoeber, C., Gutierrez, C., Blume, A. W., & Russell, M. L. (2006). Variables associated with intimate partner violence in a deploying military sample. *Military Medicine*, 171, 627-631.
- Gladding, S. T. (2006). *The counseling dictionary: Concise definitions of frequently used terms* (2nd ed.) Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.

- Graham, S. M., Huang, J. Y., Clark, M. S., & Helgeson, V. S. (2008). The positives of negative emotions: Willingness to express negative emotions promotes relationships. *Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc.*, 34(3), 394-406.
- Guerrero, L. K., & Andersen, P.A. (1991). The waxing and waning of relational intimacy: Touch as a function of relational stage, gender and touch avoidance. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 8, 147-165.
- Hahlweg, K., Markman, H. J., Thurmaier, F., Engl, J., & Eckert, V. (1998). Prevention of marital distress: Results of a German prospective longitudinal study. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 12(4), 543-556.
- Hoshmand, L. T., & Hoshmand, A. L. (2007). Support for military families and communities. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 35(2), 171-180.
- Jackman-Cram, S., Dobson, K. S., & Martin, R. (2006). Marital problem-solving behavior in depression and marital distress. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 115(2), 380-384.
- Karahan, T. F. (2007). The effects of a couple communication program on passive conflict tendency among married couples. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, 7(2), 845-858.
- National Military Family Association. (2005). *Report on the cycles of deployment*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- National Military Family Association. (2006). *Report on the cycles of deployment*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Rogge, R., Bradbury, T., Hahlweg, K., Engl, J., & Thurmaier, F. (2006). Predicting marital distress and dissolution: Refining the two-factor hypothesis. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20(1), 156-159.
- Ronan, G., Dreer, L., Dollard, K., & Ronan, D. (2004). Violent couples: Coping and communication skills. *Journal of Family Violence*, 19(2), 131-137.
- Rotter, J. C. & Boveja, M. E. (1999). Counseling military families. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 7(4), 379-382.

*Exploring Intimate Partner Communication in Military Couples:
Implications for Counselors*

- Sanford, K. (2003). Problem-solving conversations in marriage: Does it matter what topics couples discuss? *Personal Relationships*, 10(1), 97-112.
- Skipp, C., Ephron, D., & Hastings, M. (2006). Trouble at home. *Newsweek* 10/23/2006, 148(17), 48-49.
- Walsh, V. L., Baucom, D. H., Tyler, S., & Sayers, S. L. (1993). Impact of message valence, focus, expressive style, and gender on communication patterns among martially distress couples. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 7(2), 163-175.

