Emotional Disclosure and PTSD

Explorations Over Time in Romantic Couples
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No relevant disclosures
Current State of Literature: Service Members

- 90% of active duty OIF/OEF exposed (Hoge et al., 2004)

- PTSD Sx pre-deployment = 6% mild–mod, 0.6% severe
  - PTSD Sx 6 months after = 25.8% mild–mod, 20.9% severe (Cigrang et al., 2014)

- Multiple generations of veterans

- Only 54% of those entering treatment were classified as improved posttreatment (Bradley et al., 2005)

Current State of Literature: Partners

- Romantic Partners of Service Members (SMs) with PTSD
  - More distressed than Romantic Partners of SMs without PTSD
    - Psychologically
    - Romantically
  - This is problematic…

Current State of Literature

- Lack of perceived social support
  - Strong predictor (Brewin et al., 2000, Goldmann et al., 2012; Ozer et al., 2003)

- Family dysfunction
  - Impedes treatment
  - Predicts persistence
  - Predicts increase of symptoms (Evans et al., 2009; Evans et al., 2010)

Cycle of Distress

- Service members experience negative post-deployment symptoms
- Relationship becomes more distressed
- Service member’s prognosis worsens
- Partner has greater psychological distress
- Relationship support altered
- Cycle continues…

What are the mechanisms of relationship distress?

PTSD Symptoms

- **5-factor model** (Elhai et al., 2011)
- Reexperiencing
- Situational Avoidance
- Emotional Numbing
  - Feeling distant from others
  - Feeling numb
  - Loss of interest
- Dysphoric Arousal
- Anxious Arousal

- **DSM 5**
- Intrusion
- Avoidance
- Negative Alterations in Cognitions and Mood
  - Feelings of alienation from others
  - Constricted affect
  - Loss of interest
- Alterations in Arousal and Activity

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Impact of Emotional Numbing

• **Individual level:** Self-report of emotion overregulation and avoidance → lower well-being and daily self-esteem in vets with PTSD (Kashdan et al., 2010)

• **Couple level:** Emotional numbing → lower intimacy and commitment, increase in family role-related problems (Renshaw et al., 2010; Riggs et al., 1998; Sayers et al., 2009)

  • Both veteran and partner report

Types of Disclosure

• Information disclosure
  • Some impact on intimacy

• Emotional disclosure
  • Key component
    • Interpersonal Process Model of Intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988)
    • Emotional disclosures most important (Laurenceau et al., 1998)
      • Romantic relationships

Emotional Numbing $\rightarrow$ Emotion Disclosure?

- Some preliminary empirical support
  - Vietnam vets with PTSD - **lower self-disclosure** (Carroll et al., 1985)
  - Qualitative study - **importance of disclosure to military spouses** (Dekel et al., 2005)
- **EN $\rightarrow$ Self-disclosure $\rightarrow$ Intimacy**
  - Self-report (Solomon et al., 2008)
- **Cross-sectional, single member, self-report**
  - Dyadic outcomes!

Method

- Participants recruited at marital enrichment workshops
  - Completed Time 1 measures at workshops (N = 270)
  - Time 2 measures 4-6 months later
- **83** Utah NG/Reserves Service Members (SM)
- **91** Romantic Partners
- **No differences** in PTSD, SM or Partner relationship satisfaction, deployment location, combat or post-battle experiences (T1 vs. T1+2)
- Used **all relevant participants** to maximize power
  - FIML to handle missing data

Participants

- SM age range 20-59 ($M = 36.17$, $SD = 8.5$)
  - 92.5% white
  - 64.3% deployed to Iraq; 20.1% to Afghanistan
  - Only deployed sample

- Partner age range 18-55 ($M = 32.84$, $SD = 7.71$)
  - 93.3% white
  - 96.4% married (3.6% cohabiting)

Measures (Time 1)

- PTSD Checklist – Military Version (PCL-M) (Weathers, Litz, Herman, Huska, & Keane, 1993)
  - 17-item self-report
  - Respond re: “stressful military experience”
  - Total score or cluster score
  - High internal consistency in our sample

Measures (Time 2)

- **Likelihood of Disclosure Scale (LDS)** (Hoyt et al., 2010)
  - **10-item** self-report
    - How likely to disclose *emotions about deployment-related events* to target person (e.g., romantic partner)
    - **Partner-perception version** of scale (e.g. “How likely would your partner be to discuss times from his deployment when he felt _____” with you?)
  - High internal consistency in our sample for both versions

Measures (Time 2)

- **Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS)** (Hendrick, 1988)
  - 7-item self-report
    - Assesses relationship satisfaction
    - E.g. “In general, how satisfied are you in your relationship?”
    - High internal consistency in our sample

Study Hypotheses: Total PTSD

Study Hypotheses: PTSD Clusters

Study Hypotheses: Mediation

T1 Emotional Numbing

T2 SM Disclosure

T2 Partner Report of Disclosure

T2 SM Relationship Satisfaction

T2 Partner Relationship Satisfaction

Analytic Plan

- Bivariate correlations
- Path analyses to test broader model
  - Total PTSD
  - PTSD Clusters
  - Mediation
    - Followed up mediation with bootstrapping

Time 1 PTSD Clusters \( \rightarrow \) Time 2 Relationship Satisfaction

Standardized Path Estimates

Service Members’ T1
Reexperiencing Symptoms

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{Service Members’ T1 Avoidance Symptoms} & \quad 0.75*** \\
\text{Service Members’ T1 Emotional Numbing Symptoms} & \quad 0.61*** \\
\text{Service Members’ T1 Dysphoric Arousal Symptoms} & \quad 0.59*** \\
\text{Service Members’ T1 Anxious Arousal Symptoms} & \quad 0.56*** \\
\end{align*} \]

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{Partners’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction} & \quad -0.02 \\
\text{Service Members’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction} & \quad -0.21 \\
\text{Partners’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction} & \quad -0.23 \\
\text{Service Members’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction} & \quad -0.13 \\
\text{Partners’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction} & \quad -0.39* \\
\text{Service Members’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction} & \quad -0.19 \\
\text{Partners’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction} & \quad 0.22 \\
\text{Service Members’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction} & \quad -0.21 \\
\text{Partners’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction} & \quad 0.00 \\
\text{Service Members’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction} & \quad 0.11 \\
\text{Partners’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction} & \quad 0.60***
\end{align*} \]

\[ * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001. \]

Time 1 PTSD Clusters → Time 2 Relationship Satisfaction
Standardized Path Estimates

Service Members’ T1
Reexperiencing
 Symptoms

Service Members’ T1
Avoidance Symptoms

Service Members’ T1
Emotional Numbing
 Symptoms

Service Members’ T1
Dysphoric Arousing
 Symptoms

Service Members’ T1
Anxious Arousing
 Symptoms

Service Members’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction

Partners’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction

Service Members’ T1 Emotional Numbing → T2 Disclosure → T2 RS

Standardized Path Estimates

- Service Members’ T2 Emotional Disclosure
  - -.13
  - -.22*
  - -.27**
  - -.01

- Partners’ T2 Perceptions of Disclosure
  - .45***
  - .30**
  - .18
  - .42***

- Partners’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction
  - .48***

- Service Members’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction
  - .48***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Standardized Path Estimates

Indirect Effect via SM report = -.04
Indirect Effect via Partner report = -.11
Total Indirect Effect = -.15

Service Members’ T1 Emotional Numbing
- .22*
- .27**
- .01

Service Members’ T2 Emotional Disclosure

Partners’ T2 Perceptions of Disclosure

Service Members’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction

Partners’ T2 Relationship Satisfaction

- .13

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

Conclusions

- PTSD has **lasting negative effects** on relationships
- Emotional numbing exerts strongest effect on relationship satisfaction over time
- Association of emotional numbing with relationship satisfaction partially mediated by emotional disclosure
  - Partners’ perceptions of disclosure matter!!

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- Emotional numbing exerts strongest effect on relationship satisfaction over time
- Association of emotional numbing with relationship satisfaction partially mediated by emotional disclosure
  - **Partners’ perceptions of disclosure matter!!**
    - In line with previous research on partner perceptions/attribution and relationship dysfunction

Limitations

- Confounded by gender?
  - Nearly all Male SM/Female Partner couples
  - Women more negatively affected by communication avoidance than men (Afifi, Joseph, & Aldeis, 2012; Afifi, McManus, Steuber, & Coho, 2009).

- Disclosure only measured at Time 2
  - No analysis of change

- Attrition from Time 1 to Time 2
  - Limited power

- Racially homogenous

- All NG/Reserves

Implications/Future Directions

- Include partners’ perspectives of relationship behaviors!
- Communication training during deployment
  - Caution about level of combat-related disclosure (Campbell & Renshaw, 2012)
- Communication training in Conjoint Tx for PTSD
  - Post-deployment conjoint Tx such as CBCT (Monson & Fredman, 2012)
- Continue working to strengthen and support spouses/partners!!