Welcome Home: Reintegration of Veterans & Families

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In honor of Colonel & Mrs. Douglas C. Riggs

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UNT Speaks Out: Conversations with Faculty
Changes in U.S. Military Force

• Jan 1973 – became an all volunteer force
• RAND (2006) – “change for the better”
  – Service members
    • Recruits – higher IQ, 92% have HS degree
    • Officers - 95% have BA, 38% advanced degrees
    • Representative of U.S. racial distribution
  – Professional force
    • Increased number of career personnel
    • Greater proficiency at tasks
Changes in U.S. Military Force
2011 Total Force Military Personnel & Family Members (N=5,390,167)

- Historically, military force mostly made up of single men without families
- Today’s military force
  - 15% of active duty force are women
  - More family members (58.1%) than military personnel (41.9%)
  - 43.9% of total force has children
Changes in U.S. Military Practice

- Greater reliance on National Guard and Reserve forces
- Combat Deployments
  - Higher frequency, $M=2.2$
  - Extended duration to 15+ months
  - Less time between
    - 9-12 months
    - Less 3 months pre-deployment training
Deployment Cycle: Military Families

Fit-for-Duty
- Strong leadership
- Maintain bonds
- Adaptive coping
- Flexible roles – able to shift to redistribute or reintegrate military parent
- Open Communication
- Secure family base

Closed Ranks
- Authoritarian
- Disengagement
- Avoidant coping
- Rigid roles –
  - Unable to accommodate exits & entries
  - Resent return & intrusion of military parent
- Poor, closed communication

Open Ranks
- Disorganization
- Overly dependent
- Chaotic coping
- Uncertain roles; weak boundaries
- Ambiguous loss
- Interferes with tasks, decisions
- Parent-child role-reversal
- Inappropriate communication

(Riggs & Riggs, 2011)
Post-deployment: Service Members

• Change, resilience and growth is the norm.

• BUT, some experience reintegration difficulties
  – Physical injuries and rehabilitation
  – Psychological distress (PTSD, depression) – 20%
  – Traumatic brain injury (TBI) – 19%
  – Substance abuse (alcohol, prescription meds)
  – Suicide rate “epidemic”; ages 17-24 = 4X civilian rate

• Marital, parenting and/or family problems
  – Abilities adaptive to combat environment create numerous problems in the family home.
  – Increasing divorce rate since 2001
Post-deployment: Family Experiences

Military member: “I feel like a guest in my own home.”

Spouses: “You left me.” “I don’t know you” “I did OK without you.”
Children and Teens: “There’s a stranger in my house.” “I don’t need you.”

- **Fit-for duty families** reorganize & adapt well
- **Closed & open ranks families** may struggle to adapt
  - Closed ranks families permanently reassigned roles, do not allow reentry of military spouse/parent
- **Veteran symptoms: Possible family experiences**
  - Ambiguous loss: physically present, psychologically absent
  - “Pursuer-distancer” marital pattern
  - May frighten spouse & children
  - Secondary trauma in spouses and children
  - Domestic Violence
Reintegration Challenges

• Reconnecting with family and friends
• Occupational or academic decisions
• Civil-Military Cultural Gap
  – All voluntary force allows most Americans to become detached from military issues.
  – Military vs. Civilian Identity – conflicting values
• Veteran’s interview themes (Demers, 2011)
  – Time travelers
  – “No one understands us”
  – Crisis of identity
Student Veterans

• Post 9/11 GI Bill → More veterans on campus

• Transition from military to academic community
  – Maturity and discipline may be beneficial in studies
  – Challenges
    • Competing demands: family, work
    • Fitting in: Little in common & impatient with younger, inexperienced classmates: “I’m not here to party.”
    • Anti-military biases
    • Physical disabilities
    • Up to 1/3 struggle with “invisible wounds” (e.g., TBI, PTSD, etc.) affecting schoolwork
    • 2010 Survey: 46% students veterans had contemplated suicide, compared to 6% of nonmilitary students
VETS: Veterans’ Experience Transitioning to Students

• Purpose of study:
  – To examine the relational, academic & psychological functioning of college student veterans.
  – To determine how coping strategies, social support, and family attachment relationships may help or interfere with success in these areas.

• Results will inform college programming, facilitate transition from combat to college

For more information, call (940) 369-7309 or e-mail familyattachmentlab@unt.edu
In war, there are no unwounded soldiers.

~José Narosky