Coping and Psychological Health During Reintegration: A Dyadic Analysis
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Abstract
We evaluated the extent to which service members’ and significant others’ emotion expression and avoidance were associated with their own, and with each other’s, psychological health during reintegration. For both, psychological health was positively associated with one’s own emotion expression and negatively associated with avoidance. Service members’ psychological health was negatively associated with significant others’ emotion expression, but only in the context of high combat exposure.

Introduction
– Reintegration is an integral period to evaluate associations between coping and well-being because it is a potentially stressful time for couples as they cope with the aftermath of deployment and work toward reestablishing closeness (Bowling & Sherman, 2008).
– Coping strategies that involve approaching emotions (i.e., emotion expression) have been positively associated with service members’ well-being, whereas those that involve disengagement (i.e., avoidance) have been negatively associated (Hassija et al., 2012); however, little research in this regard has considered significant others’ well-being.
– In addition, it may be that individuals’ use of these coping strategies has crossover implications for their partners’ well-being. In fact, qualitative research with military couples has indicated that avoidance undermines intimacy building, whereas open communication is beneficial (Henry et al., 2011).
– The efficacy of coping efforts may also depend on service members’ level of combat exposure. Some research has indicated that service members’ avoidance is protective for their well-being in the context of high combat exposure (Rodrigues & Renshaw, 2010).
– We therefore adopted a dyadic coping framework (Bodenmann, 2005) and evaluated actor associations and partner associations between individual coping and well-being with a sample of military couples who recently experienced deployment. We also evaluated whether service members’ combat exposure moderated any of these associations.

Hypotheses & Research Questions
– Actor Associations: Individuals’ psychological health would be positively associated with their own emotion expression and negatively associated with their own avoidance.
– Partner Associations: Individuals’ psychological health would be positively associated with partners’ emotion expression and negatively associated with partners’ avoidance.
– Moderating Role of Combat Exposure: Does the level of service members’ combat exposure moderate any of these actor or partner associations?

Method
– Participants were recruited from an Army National Guard Brigade Combat Team recently returned from deployment to the Middle East in 2008 (M months since return = 9.82).
– Participants filled out online surveys on a variety of topics (e.g., health and well-being).
– The analytical sample consisted of 175 couples in which the service member was male (M age = 33.4 years) and the significant other was female (M age = 32.3 years).
– Most service members were enlisted (82.3%). On average, they had spent 11.4 years in the military and deployed 1.84 times within the previous 5 years.
– Couples had been together an average of 9.70 years and had about 2 (M = 1.49) children.

Key Study Variables | Service Member | Significant Other
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Emotion Expression | 1 – 4 | 2.16 | .88 | 2.91 | .91
Avoidance | 1 – 5 | 3.00 | .88 | 2.67 | 1.02
Psychological Health | 1 – 5 | 3.36 | 1.04 | 3.86 | .98
Combat Exposure | 0 – 4 | 1.07 | .67 | -- | --

Results
– Emotion Expression: Latent variable using items from the Emotional Approach to Coping Scale (Stanton et al., 2000). Sample item “I feel free to express my emotions.”
– Avoidance: Latent variable using items from the Strategic Approach to Coping Scale (Stanton et al., 2000). Sample item: “Focus on something else, let the situation resolve itself.”
– Psychological Health: Single-item adapted from the Post-Deployment Health Reassessment (DoD Deployment Health Clinic Center, 2008). “Rate your psychological health (e.g., feeling happy).”
– Combat Exposure: Mean-scale of items from the 2008 DoD Survey of Health Related Behaviors (Bray et al., 2009). Participants were asked to report the number of times they were exposed to a variety of experiences, such as: “Receiving incoming fire.”

References

Note. Controlled for pay grade and relationship length; Standardized estimates shown; Error terms were allowed to covary, as well as error terms; Dashed lines represent a partner association; *p < .05, **p < .01.