



TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE (TRIP) REPORT

Military REACH's review of STRESS-BUFFERING VERSUS SUPPORT EROSION: COMPARISON OF CAUSAL MODELS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL SUPPORT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IN MILITARY SPOUSES

Ross, A. M., Steketee, G., Emmert-Aronson, B. O., Brown, T. A., Muroff, J., & DeVoe, E. R. (2020). Stress-buffering versus support erosion: Comparison of causal models of the relationship between social support and psychological distress in military spouses. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 90(3), 361-373. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000438>.

BRIEF SUMMARY: Social support can include *social connectedness* (i.e., contact with both formal and informal sources of social support), *dyadic satisfaction* (i.e., satisfaction with the support from one's partner), and *perceived social support* (i.e., the level at which one believes they have someone to turn to in times of need). This study examined the link between social support and psychological well-being (i.e., anxiety and depressive symptoms) for 103 National Guard/Reserve military spouses by testing two competing hypotheses, the stress-buffering hypothesis and social erosion hypothesis. The *stress-buffering hypothesis* posits that social support protects individuals' well-being from the detrimental effects of stress, whereas the *support erosion hypothesis* posits that psychological well-being concerns may reduce available social support. Longitudinal data (i.e., baseline and three-month follow up) were drawn from the Strong Families program. In support of the erosion hypothesis, military spouses' psychological well-being at baseline was associated with their reduced social support three months later.

KEY FINDINGS

- Consistent with the *support erosion hypothesis*, higher levels of both anxiety and depression at baseline predicted decreases in one dimension of social support (i.e., social connectedness) three months later. However, neither anxiety nor depression at baseline predicted perceived social support or dyadic satisfaction three months later.
- There was no support for the *stress-buffering hypothesis*. In general, none of the social support dimensions (i.e., social connectedness, dyadic satisfaction, or perceived social support) at baseline predicted anxiety or depression three months later.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILIES

- **Encourage** family members with anxiety or depression to make efforts to engage with social networks.
- Help loved ones **find** and attend (e.g., providing transportation) professional therapy or support groups if anxiety or depression is interfering with social connectedness.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS

- Assess social connectedness (e.g., time with friends, volunteer or organizational ties) when working with military spouses with depression or anxiety. Discuss how depression or anxiety symptoms may interfere with recognizing social support and engaging in social situations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND MILITARY LEADERSHIP

- Educate military families on how anxiety and depression may adversely impact social support.
- Promote social connectedness amongst military families by increasing resources to organizations that foster connections between military families, such as **Service member and Family Readiness Groups** or **Welfare, Morale, and Recreation Centers**.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ $N = 103$ female military spouses with at least one child five years old or younger, whose Service member spouse had returned from a deployment in the previous year.
- ✓ 89.3% were legally married to a military Service member, and the majority of Service member partners were in the National Guard or Reserves (98.1%), were in the Army (86.4%), and were Enlisted (76.6%).
- ✓ On average, participants were approximately 32 years old and most were White (76%).
- ✓ Spouses were drawn from an intervention study on the Strong Families program.

METHODOLOGY

- This study used **secondary data** from participants in an intervention study investigating the **Strong Families program**. Although the Strong Families intervention was not the focus of this study, approximately half ($n = 50$) of participants received the Strong Families intervention, and the remaining ($n = 53$) were put on a waitlist to receive the intervention later. Participation in the Strong Families program did not influence any of the social support dimensions at the three-month follow up.
- Data on social support, anxiety, and depression were collected via self-report measures from all spouses at two time points: baseline and three months later (after the intervention group received the Strong Families intervention).
- Autoregressive **structural equation models** were used to test the stress-buffering hypothesis (i.e., that social support at baseline predicts lower subsequent anxiety and depression) and the support erosion hypothesis (i.e., that anxiety and depression at baseline predicts lower subsequent social support).

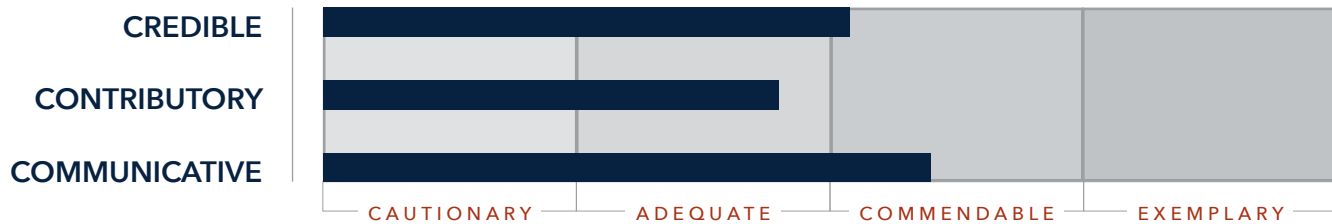
STRENGTHS

- This study used longitudinal data to test competing theories on how social support and anxiety and depressive symptoms are related. Testing competing theories is important because it allows researchers to weigh the evidence in support of various theories and make improved recommendations for treatments.

LIMITATIONS

- The study used a small sample to test a complex model examining *change* in social connectedness and psychological well-being over three months. Consequently, it is likely too soon to conclude that the lack of associations between baseline social support and subsequent psychological well-being is evidence against the stress-buffering hypothesis more generally.

ASSESSMENT OF THE STUDY



DIMENSIONS OF ASSESSMENT

- **CREDIBLE**: Research that is rigorous, transparent, consistent, and generalizable. This dimension reflects an evaluation of the study's scientific methodology.
 - **CONTRIBUTORY**: Research that is original, applicable, and has the potential to enhance the well-being of military families. This dimension examines the impact of the study.
 - **COMMUNICATIVE**: Research that is coherent, understandable, and readable. This dimension assesses how effectively the authors convey the content of the study.
- * These dimensions are adapted from the work of Mårtensson et al. (2016). For more information on the REACH evaluation framework and rubric visit: [MilitaryREACH.org](https://militaryreach.org)

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Terms in **red font** are linked to the definition in the Military REACH Dictionary. To explore more terms visit: <https://militaryreach.auburn.edu/DictionaryResult>. Terms in blue font are linked to additional resources.

PARTNERSHIP

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