



Military REACH's review of
**COMMUNICATION OF MILITARY COUPLES DURING DEPLOYMENT PREDICTING
GENERALIZED ANXIETY UPON REUNION**

Knobloch, L. K., Knobloch-Fedders, L. M., & Yorgason, J. B. (2018). Communication of military couples during deployment predicting generalized anxiety upon reunion. *Journal of Family Psychology, 32*(1), 12-21. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000344>

BRIEF SUMMARY: The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between communication during deployment and general anxiety (intense worry, fear) upon service members' homecoming from a deployment with a sample of 555 military couples. Constructive (e.g., helpful, satisfying) and destructive (e.g., frustrating, disappointing) communication styles were assessed retrospectively within the first week of homecoming. Anxiety was assessed monthly over a period of eight months post-deployment. Results showed distinct influences of both constructive and destructive communication during deployment on anxiety levels at homecoming and the rate of change in anxiety over the following eight months.

KEY FINDINGS

- Both service members and at-home partners generally reported decreasing anxiety across the eight months post-homecoming. However, at-home partners averaged higher initial anxiety and a greater decline over time than service members.
- At-home partners reported more destructive communication between the couple during deployment than service members.
- More destructive communication was associated with higher initial levels of anxiety and steeper rates of decline in anxiety for both partners. Constructive communication reported by at-home partners was also related to steeper declines in their anxiety over the eight months following reunion.
- Reports of higher relationship satisfaction were associated with lower levels of anxiety at homecoming and less destructive communication during deployment.
- For service members, more combat exposure was related to higher levels of anxiety at homecoming and lower relationship satisfaction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILIES

- Recognize that experiencing some anxiety during times of transition (e.g., homecoming) is normal, and couple members often experience different levels of anxiety.
- Know that feelings of anxiety generally decline over the months following the service member's return.
- Minimizing destructive communication and facilitating constructive communication during deployment can help reduce anxiety upon homecoming.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS

- Normalize anxiety during transitions.
- Educate couples during the pre-deployment stage regarding communication skills to use during deployment.
- Be aware of the stage of deployment an at-home partner is experiencing and its possible impact on anxiety.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

- Offer resources, including clinical services to manage symptoms of anxiety to military families that are relevant to their current stages (i.e., pre, during, and post-deployment).
- Criteria for pre-deployment programs should include the provision of communication skills training, which will likely benefit couples navigating difficult or daily conversations during deployment.
- Provide adequate recovery time for reintegration following deployment; these findings indicate that the decline of anxiety following a deployment is not instantaneous and can continue for months.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ Military couples ($N = 555$); 554 cross-sex couples, 1 same-sex couple
- ✓ Couples; communication, deployment, and anxiety
- ✓ Navy, Marines, Air Force, Army, Army National Guard, Air National Guard, and Coast Guard
- ✓ Longitudinal study

METHODOLOGY

- Longitudinal study collecting data once a month over the course of eight months. The first data collection occurred within a week of homecoming from a deployment for Army National Guard (8%), Air National Guard (2%), Coast Guard (1%), Navy (21%), Marines (18%), Air Force (10%), and Army (40%) service members.
- Data were collected from both the service member and at-home partner using an online questionnaire (81% Caucasian, 88% of at-home partners were civilians).
- A dyadic growth curve model was used within a structural equation modeling framework to understand how communication during deployment (both constructive and destructive communication) predicts the initial level of generalized anxiety at homecoming and the rate of change in anxiety in the eight months following homecoming.
- Relationship satisfaction, combat exposure during deployment, and frequency of communication during deployment were measured to determine their influence on anxiety symptoms in relation to communication valence (covariates).

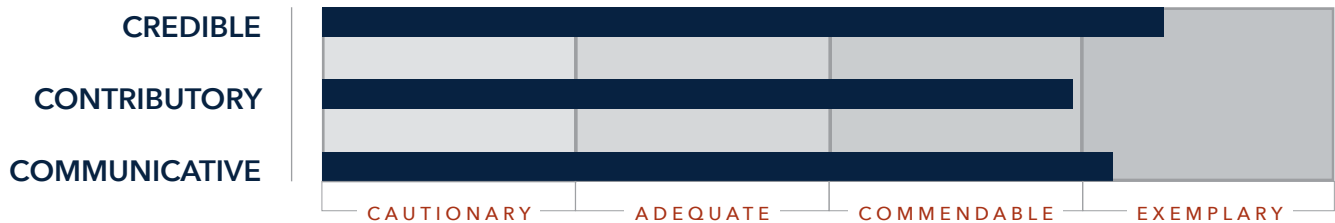
ARTICLE STRENGTHS

- The study assessed the valence of communication as a predictor of the change in anxiety over time filling a gap in the literature.
- Variables were thoroughly described, and a clear explanation of the connection between results and hypotheses was given.
- The emotional cycle of deployment was utilized as a theoretical framework for the study, and results were interpreted in light of the theory.
- This was a relatively large dyadic sample of military couples.

LIMITATIONS

- This study created measures for constructive and destructive communication, rather than using established measures.
- Two different measures of anxiety were used, with about half of the sample completing the Beck Anxiety Inventory and the other half completing the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale.
- Communication during deployment was reported retrospectively.
- There was not any information on couples' mental health and relationship quality prior to deployment.
- Communication after homecoming was not accounted for in this study.

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

PARTNERSHIP

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