Does Post-Military Stress Mediate the Relationship between Military Sexual Trauma and Well-Being?
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Background

Military sexual trauma (MST) describes "experiences of sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment that a Veteran experienced during his or her military service." 1

Recent research suggests approximately 15.1% of women and 0.7% of men in the military experience MST,2 though some studies suggest 13-40% of women in the military3-9 and 4-5% of men,9 experience MST.

People who experience MST often report substantial mental and physical health concerns,3,4,9 which may persist for many years following the assault.

While some studies have found negative consequences of MST on specific domains such as health-related quality of life, family relations, social and daily activities, educational and financial attainment,3,4 few have investigated the broader impact MST has on life functioning and satisfaction.

To our knowledge, limited research has investigated post-military stress as a potential mediator of the negative relationship between MST and functioning and satisfaction in the life domains of health, intimate relationships, and broader social relationships.

Hypotheses

• Post-military stress will mediate the negative relationship between MST and well-being, such that experiencing MST will increase the likelihood of post-military stress, which will decrease subsequent functioning and satisfaction in the domains of health, intimate relationships, and broader social relationships.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

• Longitudinal data collected from a larger study of recently separated veterans assessed for approximately three years after leaving military service.
• Used data from timepoints 1 and 2, which were 3 months and 9 months post-military separation respectively (N= 7284).
• The sample was predominantly white (76%), male (82%) veterans who had served in the army (39%).
• Approximately 3.3% of males and 40.2% of females reported MST.

Measures

• MST (Time 1). Department of Veterans Affairs two-item screen used to create a dichotomous (yes/no) variable reflecting answers to the following two questions:
  1) When you were in the military, did you ever receive unwanted threatening or repeated sexual attention?
  2) When you were in the military, did you have sexual contact against your will or when you were unable to say no?

• Post-military stress (Time 1). 13-item measure of post-military stress developed by members of the TMVI study team. Participants indicated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=does not apply, 5=high stress) how stressed they have felt over the past 3 months as a result of different experiences, such as feeling unsafe in their neighborhood or their own physical or mental health problems.

• Well-Being Inventory (WBI; Time 2). Validated measure of well-being that addresses status, functioning, and satisfaction within 4 key life domains: finances, health, vocation, and social relationships. The functioning and satisfaction scales for health, intimate relationships, and broader social relationships were used in this project.

Analyses

• PROCESS was used to run simple mediation models to test potential indirect relationships between MST and well-being outcomes through post-military stress.

Figures

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<th>MST</th>
<th>Post-military stress</th>
<th>Health functioning</th>
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Discussion

Experience of MST can lead to poorer well-being, and this may be primarily explained by increased exposure to post-military stress.

Unsurprisingly, MST can also directly lead to decreased health satisfaction and broader social relationship satisfaction.

Findings suggest that the effects of MST may be mitigated via interventions that reduce exposure to post-military stressors.

Limitations

• All measures used were self-report.
• Reports of MST were retrospective, and thus, recall bias may be a concern.
• The prevalence of MST reported might not fully represent the true prevalence because of the tendency to underreport trauma of this nature.

Implications/Future Directions

• To our knowledge, this study is the first to examine post-military stress as a mediator to the relationship between MST and poorer functioning and satisfaction in the domains of health, intimate relationships, and broader social relationships.
• Future research should investigate potential gender differences in the experience of MST, post-military stress, and well-being.

References


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