

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^{8,9} experience MST
- People who experience MST often report substantial mental and physical health concerns,^{2,3,6,7} which may persist for many years following the assault⁵
- 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,^{5,6} 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

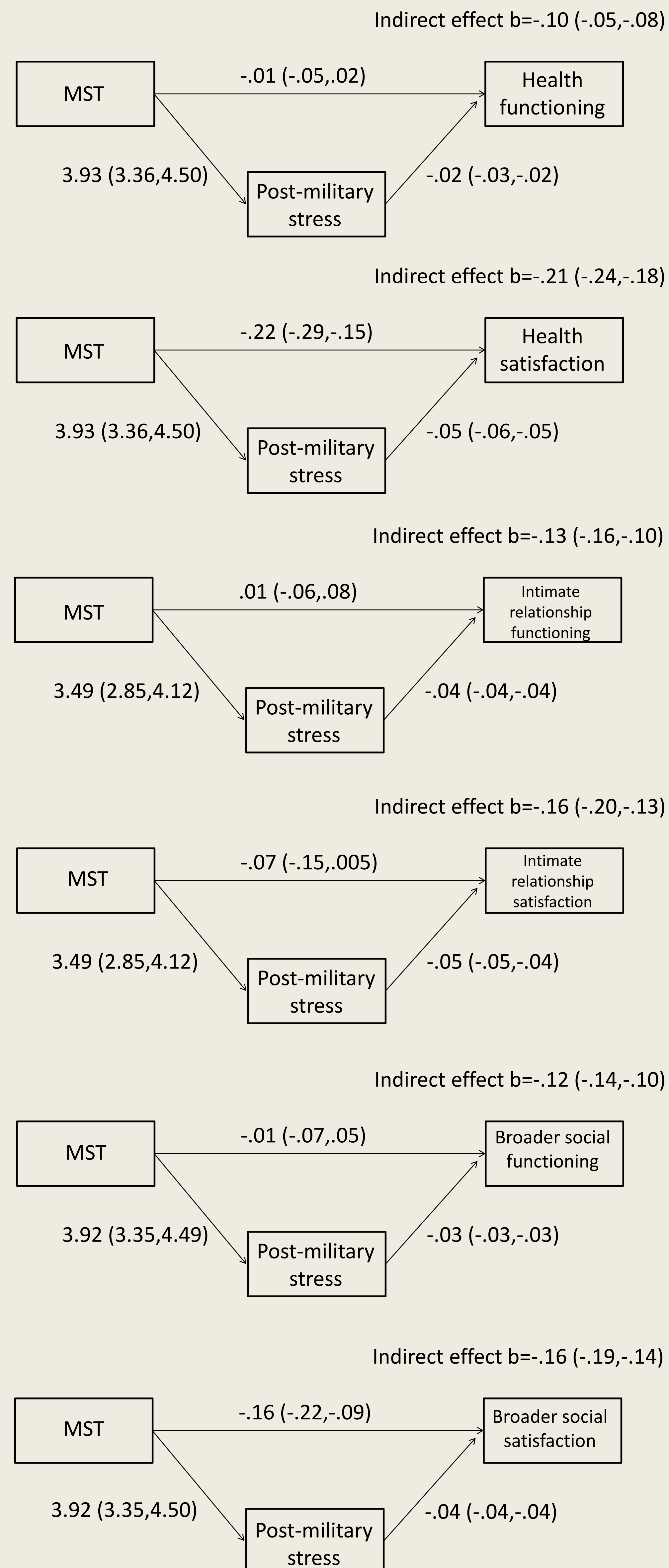
Measures

- *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 TVMI 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



Discussion

- Experiencing 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

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