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Goldstein 15

Impact of Military Trauma Exposures on Posttraumatic Stress and Depression in Female Veterans

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Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated the deleterious effects of traumatic military experiences on symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression in female veterans. However, more research is needed to identify the unique predictors of distressing psychological symptoms when both combat-related and sexual trauma are considered, particularly as women's combat exposure in the military increases. Female veterans who had attended at least one appointment at a large Veterans Health Administration medical center were invited to complete questionnaires about traumatic military exposures and psychiatric symptoms. A total of 403 veterans responded, with 383 respondents' data used in analyses. Multiple regression analyses were conducted with relevant covariates and trauma exposure items predicting symptoms of PTSD and depression. Sexual assault was the strongest predictor of both posttraumatic and depressive symptoms. Sexual assault, sexual harassment, feeling in danger of being killed, and seeing others killed or injured uniquely predicted symptoms of PTSD, but only sexual assault and sexual harassment predicted symptoms of depression, even when accounting for several aspects of combat exposure. Improving assessment for trauma exposure and developing treatments personalized to type of trauma experienced may be important clinical research priorities as female service members' roles in the military expand.

Keywords: Combat; Military sexual trauma; PTSD; Women

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