Background

All couples manage stress in their relationships differently. Military couples have the added stress of separation due to deployment or training, the threat of one partner being in harm’s way and the responsibility of managing family and finances while a partner is away. Deployment affects service members and their families in varying ways. For some service members and their families, deployment has negative psychological and physical effects.¹ Combat experience also has been shown to have a more pronounced traumatic effect on service members than other military-related tasks.² These stressors are in addition to any economic, employment, or family-related worries that other couples experience.

When potentially life-altering stress occurs, couples cope and manage the stressors in different ways. Learning to manage and cope with stress effectively can protect the couple relationship. Couples with high levels of stress on their relationship can be at a higher risk for divorce or experience decreased relationship satisfaction. Some forms of coping are better than others for managing stress and preventing potentially negative consequences for couple relationships.³ Generally individuals respond to partners’ stress in one of three ways: 1) becoming affected by the stressor, 2) ignoring the signs of stress entirely, or 3) utilizing strategies to cope with the stressor.⁹ This Fact Sheet summarizes the different coping mechanisms and how they are used by military couples. Although limited research is available, dyadic coping among military couples is a strong predictor of relational stability and quality.

Definitions

People bring along their individual coping strategies or styles when they engage a joint style of coping or “dyadic coping.” Dyadic coping is a form of interpersonal coping during which one partner responds verbally and nonverbally to the stress signals of his or her partner.⁶,⁷ Engaging in dyadic coping is a stress-management process meant to restore balance within the couple, the individuals, and their environment.⁸

Individual Coping

Individuals generally use three main types of coping to manage their own stress.⁵

- **Problem-focused coping**: using logical efforts to define the problem, generating potential solutions, and weighing options to solve the problem, with the goal of bypassing or removing the source of the stress. A person with this style of coping may ask, “How can I solve this stressful problem?”
• **Emotion-focused coping:** employing strategies to regulate and govern the emotions caused by stress, including techniques such as escaping (e.g., reading a favorite book), and support-seeking. An individual guided by this coping strategy may ask, “How can I deal with the feelings this stressor is causing?”

• **Meaning-focused coping** (sometimes called appraisal-focused): reappraising the stressful situation in an attempt to find meaning. The meaning is often shaped by an individual’s spiritual beliefs or philosophy of life. With this coping style a person may ask, “How does this stressor fit into the greater plan for me?”

**Dyadic Coping**

Dyadic coping is typically relationship-focused or empathetic. Generally, relationship-focused and empathic coping are associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction and functioning.  

Below are two well-known dyadic coping concepts that consider how one partner’s coping response incorporates the stress signals of the other partner.

• **Relationship-focused coping:** using techniques (including emotion, problem, or meaning-focused) with the goal of managing, regulating, or preserving a relationship during the stressful period. Couples who use this type of coping may wonder, “What is the best way to deal with this stressor for our relationship?”

• **Empathic coping:** doing things the way the other person in the relationship needs to have them done, even at the expense of one’s own needs or emotions. A spouse may think, “What can I do to best help my partner deal with this stressor?”

Within dyadic coping there are negative and positive techniques that partners use.

**Positive Forms of Dyadic Coping**

• **Supportive dyadic coping:** one partner assists the other in helping him or her deal with the stressful event. This form of coping can include empathy, solidarity with the partner, and advice for solving a problem.

• **Common dyadic coping:** both partners jointly try to resolve the stressful event through problem-solving or information-seeking strategies. Partners may express feelings and find ways to relax together in order to deal with stress experienced individually or as a couple.

• **Delegated dyadic coping:** one partner takes over certain tasks so the other partner can be less burdened to effectively deal with the stressful event.

**Negative Forms of Dyadic Coping**

• **Hostile coping:** partners display overt disinterest, speak disrespectfully, use sarcasm, or minimize one another’s stress.

• **Ambivalent coping:** partners offer support reluctantly or do not believe that their partner needs their support.

• **Superficial dyadic coping:** using any form of coping that is not genuine.

**Headlines/Trends**

There are a variety of well-researched work-related stressors faced by individuals in the military. These are most frequently related to deployment and combat. Deployed service members may experience a variety of stressors including: physical (disease, injury), psychological (trauma, family worries), or moral (concern about military operations).
Deployment-related stressors such as dealing with repetitive tasks and safety concern or other job-related stress may prompt problem-focused coping such as asking for help from a colleague. In instances of combat and violence a person may lose his or her confidence in the belief that the world is a secure and predictable place, which may prompt a meaning-focused style of coping.

Stress in military couples is not just about the service member experiencing work-related stress and the spouse having to cope with it. Military spouses and other family members may experience their own stress which can affect the couple relationship. During deployment, a spouse may experience loneliness, worry, or fear and may face logistical challenges such as determining how to communicate with the service member. Children can also experience feelings such as depression, anxiety, temper tantrums, or bullying when a parent is deployed.

The service member’s own stress about his/her home life and reintegration can also influence the couple relationship. When a service member returns home from deployment, psychological conditions (depression, worry, anxiety, fear) often persist. Some service members experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and others experience post-traumatic stress symptoms not categorized as PTSD. Often spouses and children of service members who experience post-traumatic stress symptoms experience psychological issues (depression, anxiety, hostility) and somatization (pain or illness with no medical cause) themselves.

Although the stress of deployment, combat, reintegration and home life can be prevalent, appropriate coping mechanisms can be effective in protecting the couple relationship. Coping differs considerably for individuals and families, but in both cases may affect marital quality, individual well-being, and the ability to deal well with stressful events.

Data

There is some research on dyadic coping in civilian populations, but so far little about military populations. Research has found that couples who are dealing with PTSD report using dyadic coping skills less frequently than couples who are not. Emotion-focused coping (trying to deal with the feelings caused by PTSD, for example) is more common when a problem cannot be immediately solved but requires acceptance of the situation, which is often the case with PTSD symptoms and when psychological challenges arise within family members.

For many people, stress stirs intense emotions, making it hard to remain calm and effectively resolve a problem. Spouses of deployed service members often use emotion and problem-focused coping in order to manage emotions to alter the source of stress. In one study, spouses of deployed service members used more problem-focused coping than emotion-focused coping.

Dyadic coping is a strong predictor of relational stability and quality. It is a stronger predictor of...
relational stability and quality than individual coping and stress.  

- Positive dyadic coping serves two roles: 1) it reduces stress and 2) increases each partner’s investment in the relationship.\(^9\)\(^{,15}\)
- Negative dyadic coping (e.g., hostile dyadic coping, negative non-verbal interactions) can impair couples’ management of additional daily stressors and create marital discord, depression, and anxiety.\(^4\)
- Negative dyadic and individual coping have been found to be strong predictors of divorce.\(^16\)\(^{,17}\) For example, research on civilian populations where couples reported having low levels of common dyadic coping, were more likely to divorce or separate in five years compared to couples with higher levels of common dyadic coping. Couples classified as stable and satisfied used more emotion- and problem-focused common dyadic coping compared to divorced and stable-distressed couples.\(^8\)

**Additional Resources**


Widmer, K. & Bodenmann, G. Enhancement Training (CCET): **A New Approach to Prevention of Marital Distress Based Upon Stress and Coping.**

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**Data Sources**


