



BARBARA THOMPSON

*EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH*

ON MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILIES AWARD

The Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University established the *Excellence in Research on Military and Veteran Families Award* in 2015.

The goals of the award are to:

- » bring visibility to issues of military and veteran families generally, and to outstanding new research specifically;
- » increase the impact of rigorous scientific evidence on programs, policies and practices affecting military and veteran families;
- » strengthen connections between researchers and practitioners interested in military and veteran families; and
- » raise awareness of research about military and veteran families across many disciplines.

The winning paper is selected through a rigorous process. No nominations or applications are accepted, and authors have no idea their work is being considered. Instead, a panel of accomplished scholars examines every relevant article published during the eligible year. Multiple rounds of review include standardized quantitative assessments. In this way, the panel arrives at the final selection.

In 2019, MFRI named the Excellence in Research on Military and Family Veteran Award after Barbara Thompson, who has served military and veteran families for more than 30 years.

MFRI thanks Military REACH for supporting this award, and joining us in our mission to advance important research about and for military and veteran families.



## 2020 **RESEARCH AWARD** WINNER

Carter, S. P., Renshaw, K. D., Allen, E. S., Markman, H. J., & Stanley, S. M. (2019). Everything here is fine: Protective buffering by military spouses during a deployment. *Family Process*, 59(3), 1261-1274. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12457>

### Study Takeaways

- 1** Nearly all military spouses (96%) reported that while their partner was deployed, they engaged in at least some protective buffering, which is intentionally withholding information or concerns from a romantic partner in an attempt to protect them from distress.
- 2** Previous studies found that military spouses largely engage in protective buffering to prevent service members from becoming distracted while deployed. However, this study found no relationship between protective buffering and family-related distraction among deployed service members.
- 3** Higher protective buffering by military spouses during a deployment was associated with higher psychological distress and lower marital satisfaction for both deployed service members and military spouses.
- 4** Protective buffering by military spouses during a deployment did not predict psychological distress or marital satisfaction after deployment.

### Biographies

**Sarah Carter** is a research assistant professor and research scientist at the Suicide CPR Initiative at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences. Her research explores how interpersonal interactions relate to mental health symptoms and suicide with the aim of advancing clinical interventions that target interpersonal and relationship factors related to psychological distress and suicide. This work has primarily focused on military and veteran populations and members of diverse and marginalized communities, such as transgender individuals.

**Keith Renshaw** is department chair and professor of psychology at George Mason University. His research focuses on individual and interpersonal reactions to stress, trauma, and anxiety. The bulk of his research in this area has been devoted to understanding individuals' and couples' reactions to deployment in general, and to symptoms of combat-related, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in military couples. Dr. Renshaw is also the director of the Military, Veterans, & Families Initiative at George Mason University which offers direct services and education opportunities for service members, veterans, and their families; training of future professionals who will work with service members, veterans, and their families; and research dedicated to improving the lives of service members, veterans, and their families.

**Elizabeth Allen** is a professor in the department of psychology at the University of Colorado-Denver. Her research focuses on a range of issues related to couple functioning, including relationship interventions, extradyadic involvements, military marriages, and associations between relationship factors and mental health. She teaches undergraduate courses in military clinical psychology and family psychology.

**Howard Markman** is a Distinguished University Professor of psychology at the University of Denver and co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies. He is the developer of the internationally known evidence-based couples relationship education program, the Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP), which is listed in the Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) registry of evidence-based programs and practices. He has had multiple grants to support his research and has written more than 100 books and scientific articles in the couples and family field, including the best-selling couples relationship education book, *Fighting For Your Marriage*.

**Scott Stanley** is a research professor at the University of Denver. His core research interests include commitment, couple development, and the prevention of marital distress, and has worked for decades on the development and testing of interventions to reduce divorce and relationship distress. He has authored or co-authored numerous books including *Fighting for Your Marriage* and *The Power of Commitment*, and he writes a popular blog on relationship success at [www.slidingvsdeciding.com](http://www.slidingvsdeciding.com).

## 2020 FINALISTS: TAKEAWAYS

Eliezer, D., Hilbert, A. J., Davis, L. H., Hylton, K., Klauberg, W. X., Hurley, M. M., Gitlin, Z. J., Dyches, K. D., & Galbreath, N. W. (2019). Sexual assault experiences vary for active duty military women depending on their relationship to the perpetrator. *Journal of Family Violence*, 35(8), 325–338. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-019-00085-9>

- 1** According to a 2016 survey of active duty service members, military women sexually assaulted by intimate partners experienced more chronic patterns of abuse than those assaulted by all other relationship types. They were also more likely to indicate multiple incidents of sexual assault in the past year, a history of sexual assault in their lifetime, and stalking by the perpetrator before and after the incident.
- 2** Among those who reported sexual assault to a military authority, women sexually assaulted by intimate partners indicated greater dissatisfaction with responses from their leadership and victim advocates than military women assaulted by all other relationship types. It was unclear if leadership and response services are less prepared to address the ongoing needs of intimate partner victims and/or that intimate partner victims face a variety of uniquely stressful and difficult circumstances that affect their overall perceptions and responses to sexual assault.
- 3** The current research supports the need for a targeted and multifaceted approach to sexual assault prevention and response:
  - » Bystander intervention methods may be insufficient to prevent sexual assault perpetrated by intimate partners and acquaintances as over half of these assaults occur in private residence. Interventions aimed at reducing risk associated with alcohol use may be relatively less likely to prevent sexual assault for women assaulted by intimate partners since alcohol use is comparatively lower in these contexts.
  - » Women assaulted by intimate partners require highly skilled and trained professionals who can coordinate comprehensive family care and are well-equipped to address the higher morbidity and mortality rates associated with domestic violence.

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Knobloch, L. K., Knobloch-Fedders, L. M., & Yorgason, J. B. (2019). Mental health symptoms and the reintegration difficulty of military couples following deployment: A longitudinal application of the relational turbulence model. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 75(4), 742–765. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22734>

- 1** Military couples reported experiencing the most difficulty with reintegration approximately four to five weeks after homecoming. Support for military couples thus may be especially helpful soon after homecoming, after returning service members and their families settle in but before problems become entrenched. In contrast, relationship programming offered immediately after homecoming or several months into the transition may be less relevant to military couples.
- 2** At-home partners reported more difficulty with reintegration than returning service members. Services for spouses are important for preserving military family resilience. Prevention and intervention programs should include outreach efforts tailored to the needs of at-home partners in addition to returning service members during the transition from deployment to reintegration.
- 3** Military couples fared better during the transition when they had strong mental health, experienced less uncertainty about their relationship, and interfered less in each other's daily routines. Mental health services and relationship support may enhance the resilience of military couples upon homecoming. In particular, military couple well-being may be enriched by providing accessible mental health services, helping them address unresolved questions, and helping them minimize disruptions to everyday goals.

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Meis, L., Noorbaloochi, S., Hagel Campbell, E., Erbes, C., Polusny, M., Velasquez, T., Bangerter, A., Cutting, A., Eftekhari, A., Rosen, C., Tuerk, P., Burmeister, L., & Spoont, M. (2019). Sticking it out in trauma-focused treatment for PTSD: It takes a village. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 87(3), 246–256. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000386>

- 1** Trauma-focused treatments (TFTs) for PTSD are effective for many patients. The VA has committed time and resources to ensure that these therapies are widely available. TFTs conceptualize PTSD as a disorder of avoidance and focus on facing — versus avoiding — trauma-related distress. Delivering these therapies in VA has been a major challenge as many veterans drop out before fully completing them.
- 2** Family factors may be especially important to understanding these dropout rates, yet when and how family relationships influence PTSD treatment dropout remains unknown.
- 3** Veterans who were encouraged by loved ones to face distress were twice as likely to remain in PTSD treatment than veterans who did not have such encouragement. This was true even after accounting for veterans' characteristics such as symptom severity, attitudes about treatment, and the quality of relationship with the therapist.
- 4** Clinicians should consider routinely assessing to what degree veterans entering TFTs for PTSD have encouragement by a close loved one to participate in activities that may be distressing.

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Zhang, N., Piehler, T. F., Gewirtz, A. H., Zamir, O., & Snyder, J. J. (2019). Trait mindfulness and anger in the family: A dyadic analysis of male service members and their female partners. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 46(1), 15–29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12384>

- 1** Although anger is a common emotion, its frequent expression can contribute to mental health problems and poor family relationships. Deployed service members often report difficulties with anger. This study found that when discussing stressful parenting-related topics, non-deployed mothers expressed anger more frequently than deployed fathers.
- 2** Individuals who report high levels of “nonreactivity mindfulness” tend to hold an open attitude towards their experiences, notice and accept their feelings and thoughts as they are. This study found that deployed fathers who report higher non-reactivity mindfulness expressed less anger during stressful family communication. This association between non-reactivity and mindfulness was also found among non-deployed mothers whose partner had been deployed.
- 3** This study found an interpersonal effect of non-reactivity mindfulness. Specifically, non-deployed mothers' non-reactivity was associated with their deployed partner's decreased anger expression, but not vice versa.






### ***ABOUT BARBARA THOMPSON***

Barbara Thompson assumed the duties of director for the Office of Military Family Readiness Policy, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy in 2006 and retired in 2017. She was responsible for programs and policies that promote military families' well-being, readiness and quality of life. In this capacity, she had oversight for Department of Defense child development and youth programs, serving 700,000 children daily at more than 300 locations worldwide. Thompson had purview over military family readiness program, including spouse career advancement, military family life cycle and transition support, community capacity building supporting geographically dispersed military members and their families, the Family Advocacy Program, and Exceptional Family Member Program. She also coordinated support programs for the severely injured and supported the rebuilding of the Ministry of Education in Iraq. Thompson is continuing her leadership in the military community by advising multiple national organizations including MFRI.




### ***ABOUT MFRI***

The Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University conducts research on issues that affect military and veteran families and works to shape policies, programs and practices that improve their well-being. Founded in 2000, MFRI envisions a diverse support community that understands the most pressing needs of military and veteran families. To achieve this, MFRI collaborates to create meaningful solutions for them. This internationally-recognized organization is located at Purdue University's College of Health and Human Sciences, in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies.

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### ***ABOUT MILITARY REACH***

The purpose of Military REACH, a partnership between Auburn University and the DoD-USDA Partnership for Military Families, is to bridge the gap between military family research and practice. To facilitate the DoD's provision of high-quality support to military families, our objective is to make research practical and accessible. We do this by producing research summaries with action-oriented implications for our target audiences: families, helping professionals, and those who work on behalf of military families. Our team critically evaluates and synthesizes military family research related to issues of family support, resilience, and readiness. We identify meaningful trends and practical applications of that research, and then, we deliver research summaries and action-oriented implications to our target audiences.

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