

## Mental Health Needs of Soldiers Returning from Iraq Identified Through Two Army Medical Surveys

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BY U.S. Army*

A new Army medical study published in the Nov. 14 issue of "JAMA," The Journal of the American Medical Association, reports on results from 88,235 post-Operation Iraq Freedom returning Soldiers who completed post deployment health reassessment surveys months after their return, as well as initial surveys as they were departing Iraq for home. The study shows that the follow-on process of a second survey is working well to identify Soldiers returning from Iraq with mental health concerns. The second survey is an important effort by the U.S. Army to assess the effectiveness of mental health programs and provide the best mental health care to Soldiers and their Family members.

"With regard to the study findings, most importantly, we found that the second screen is working," said study author Army Dr. (Col.) Charles S. Milliken, principal investigator, Division of Psychiatry and Neuroscience at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. The second medical survey "was created because a preliminary study, also done by Army medicine, suggested that we were missing Soldiers by only screening as they were coming home, Milliken said. "The study showed that if you screen a second time, you uncover a large group of Soldiers who were not detected to have health concerns on the first screen."

"We understand deployments place stress on our Soldiers," said Brig. Gen. Stephen L. Jones, Assistant Surgeon General for Force Protection, U.S. Army Medical Command. "The purpose of the post deployment health assessment and reassessment is to reach out to them, bring them in, educate them, ask them if they have any physical or psychological concerns, and get them the care they need. This is about reducing stigma and breaking down barriers to getting care, and it's working."

"The study demonstrates that we're using a valid scientific approach to advance our knowledge," Jones said. "We're submitting our findings to leading medical journals not only to be transparent, but also to involve the entire medical community in this effort. We're taking better care of the physical and psychological health of our Soldiers than in any other war. We didn't conduct health assessments after World War II, Vietnam, or the Gulf War," Jones said. "Our goal is to ensure every returning Soldier receives the health care they need, the earlier, the better. Our post deployment health assessments and reassessments are the way we do that, and we're continually improving the process."

Other findings include:

\*The new study results demonstrated that many Soldiers sought care within 30 days of the screening even if they were not referred, suggesting that the Army's three-part process of self-identification, provider interview, and BATTLEMIND education and awareness training promotes seeking mental health care.

\*As preliminary studies anticipated, Soldiers reported higher rates of mental-health concerns several months after returning home on the second survey than they did at redeployment on the first survey.

\*Reserve Component Soldiers report higher rates of mental health concerns on the second medical survey than Active Component Soldiers.

\*Reports of interpersonal conflict increased the most from redeployment among the two medical surveys, highlighting the mental health impact on Families, a finding also noted in the recent DoD Mental Health Task Force Report.

\*Soldiers reported alcohol misuse on the screens at rates similar to other problems. It is encouraging that Soldiers were willing to report alcohol concerns on a non-anonymous screening tool. This is important because alcohol overuse is a potential problem for many Soldiers after returning from combat.

\*Findings suggest opportunities exist for early intervention by the military health care system to prevent alcohol problems, relationship problems, or to prevent PTSD or depressive symptoms from becoming chronic.

The Army is committed to taking care of our Soldiers and Families. "In our Army Family Covenant we promise to provide a quality of life commensurate with the Soldier's voluntary service and the Families' daily sacrifices," Jones said. "Studies like this help us determine where we can best apply our resources. Our Soldiers are strong and well trained. They're resilient and upon return home most develop stronger bonds with loved ones, re-establish relationships, and show more compassion. Some need assistance, and through this screening process we're teaching our Soldiers that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. This is part of our efforts to reduce the stigma traditionally associated with seeking medical or psychological care."

This study is a follow-up to a March 2006 JAMA article on post deployment health assessment findings-- part of the Army's on-going effort to better understand the impact combat has on Soldiers, both mentally and physically.

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