



Children of military parents suffer fallout from PTSD: study

Alison Auld

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Some children of military members suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder are experiencing their own isolation, depression and trauma because of their parent's condition, according to a preliminary Canadian study.

Researchers looking into the stresses on military children found that some kids struggle with the psychological and physical fallout of their parent's PTSD.

Deborah Harrison, a sociology professor at the University of New Brunswick and co-author of the paper, said adolescents living with parents with PTSD can face physical abuse, emotional neglect and unpredictable rage.

"It changes their life and it completely changes the situation at home," she said Friday, a day before presenting her paper at a conference in Toronto.

"It's a crisis like any other kind of major illness or violence in the home."

Ms. Harrison interviewed students at a Canadian high school in a community near a large military base. She declined to name the base until she and her colleagues present their findings on the wider issue of stress in military families in March.

But her early work looked at the cases of four teenagers whose fathers and stepdads did multiple rotations in Afghanistan, Somalia or Bosnia, or were involved in other missions over the last decade.

Three of the fathers developed PTSD following their tours of duty in Afghanistan three years ago.

The paper, to be presented at the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, suggests parenting suffered for the four kids interviewed, with some having to take on adult responsibilities in the home.

One girl, known only as Rebecca, said her father developed severe PTSD two years after his return from Afghanistan and was hospitalized after attempting suicide.

She described how he became so violent at times that they had to call police and watch him get led away in handcuffs in the family driveway.

The teen said living with a father who has PTSD was akin to watching a stranger.

"It's at times a grieving process. Like at some point you lose that person who's raised you all your life and it's replaced

with someone you don't like at all," she said in interviews with the researchers.

Another girl said her father would become enraged without warning, a common characteristic of PTSD that is usually caused by psychological injury brought on by trauma.

The girl said she has had to become the parent in her home because her mother is affected by frequent fights with her husband and his emotional outbursts.

Greg Lubimiv, a counsellor at the Phoenix Centre in Petawawa, Ont., said he is seeing an increasing number of military kids in his practice who are suffering from the reflected stresses of PTSD.

The therapist said families can go through a range of conflicting emotions, such as guilt, anger, frustration, sorrow and confusion as they come to terms with the fact that their parent has been altered.

"One of the things that does break down when you have a parent with a mental health disorder is the parenting," he said, adding that the number of patients he sees has soared over the last several years and there is a waiting list.

"What the family goes through is very similar to a grief process and yet they're not dead ... they're no longer who they were."

Michelle Edwards of the Canadian Forces' Occupational Stress Injury Social Support centre in Petawawa said there are programs in place for kids looking for help.

Her centre and Military Family Resource Centres aim to provide support to children on most Canadian bases and help educate parents on the behavioural signs of stress linked to a parent's PTSD.

Ms. Edwards has gone through some of the programs herself since her husband developed PTSD after his tour in Kosovo in 1999.

She said her kids have had to get used to their father's changing personality and re-introduce themselves to their old dad since his PTSD has gone into remission.

"It's hard on the kids because they have to get used to a new daddy, you know? He's not yelling at me anymore – 'What's going on?'" she said.

"It's kind of like having two or three different people."

Ms. Harrison said the research could lead to greater visibility of a problem she says has received little attention and hasn't been widely studied, other than some quantitative data.

"When the person is injured, as in the case of PTSD, we don't learn anything and all these people are hidden," she said. "What papers like this bring to light is the enormous amount of suffering that injuries inflict on all the members of the family."

Next year, she plans to sit down with school officials where the research was conducted to come up with recommendations to better help kids deal with the stress of a parent's PTSD.