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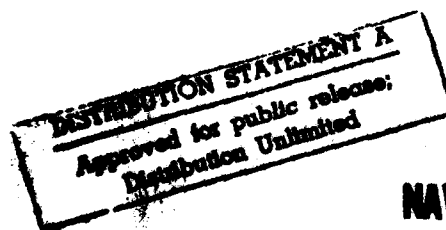
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FEELINGS OF DEPRESSION IN NAVY WIVES
PRIOR TO FAMILY SEPARATION[†]

D. Stephen Nice, Ph.D.*

and

Arne Beck**

Naval Health Research Center
P. O. Box 85122
San Diego, California 92138

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* Research Psychologist, Environmental & Social Medicine. Reprint requests should be directed to Dr. Nice.

** Formerly a Research Assistant at NHRC; is presently at the University of California, San Francisco.

[†]Report No. 79-41, supported by the Naval Medical Research and Development Command, under research work unit ZF51.524.022-0006. Opinions expressed are those of the authors and are not to be construed as necessarily reflecting the official view or endorsement of the Department of the Navy.

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Family Separation- 1

Precis

The mean depression score of 59 wives of naval personnel aboard two ships preparing for an extended overseas deployment was significantly higher than the mean depression score of 29 wives of Navy personnel aboard a ship scheduled to remain in port. Experience derived from previous separations did not significantly affect the depression scores. Preventive and treatment implications of the onset of depressed mood prior to separation are discussed.

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Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Mrs. Benson and Mr. Phelan in the data collection and processing phases of this study.



In the Navy community, separation during ship deployment is an immutable part of family life. The majority of these separations require substantial family adjustments as the wife assimilates new roles, adapts to single parenthood, and adjusts to increased financial strains. Adjustment difficulties are often exacerbated by the concurrent reduction in social support from the absent husband and may become manifest in psychological or physical symptomatology (1, 2).

In a recent study, Beckman et al. (1) examined the effects of separation on the mood of the wives of nuclear submarine personnel. Using a crossover design, Beckman assessed depression levels in the fifth week of both the sea duty and the home leave cycle and empirically documented the presence of depression during the separation period. These results corroborated and extended previous studies of the relationship between separation and depression in military wives in psychiatric outpatient clinics (3-7). The purpose of the present study was to further extend these findings by examining the depression scores of Navy wives prior to an extended separation period. A secondary purpose was to assess the potentially ameliorative effect of prior separation experience on depressed mood associated with naval deployment.

Although the relationship between separation and depression in military wives has been documented, the actual time of onset of the depression vis-a-vis the separation remains

unclear. There is reason to believe, however, that the onset of depression may precede the actual separation. Jaffe (8), for example, contends that anticipation of stressful life events, such as separation, may have pathological effects. Studies of family separations among Army personnel have indicated that the transition periods prior and subsequent to separation are as stressful and potentially deleterious as the separation period itself (9-11). Because stressful life events affect depressive symptomatology (12-13), it was hypothesized that wives of personnel aboard ships preparing to deploy would have higher depression scores than wives of personnel aboard a similar ship scheduled to remain in port.

While Navy wives theoretically constitute a special risk group prior to separation, this risk may be moderated by the individual's ability to cope with stress (14,15). In a study of separated and nonseparated military wives, for example, MacIntosh (6) proposed that separation may be a developmental task which is more difficult early in life and becomes easier with practice. Therefore, it was hypothesized that an interaction would occur between deployment status and previous separation experience. In the deployment group, low experience wives were expected to have higher depression scores than high experience wives while in the non-deployment group no relationship was expected between depression scores and experience.

METHOD

Subjects

The sample consisted of wives of Navy enlisted personnel aboard three similar amphibious assault ships. A separation group included 59 wives of personnel aboard two ships which were preparing to deploy for a seven-month period. A control group consisted of 29 wives of personnel aboard a ship scheduled to remain in port. The wives averaged 30.27 years of age, had been married for an average of 7 years, had an average of two children, and had completed approximately 12 years of education. The racial composition of the wives consisted largely of Caucasians (58%) and Pacific Islanders (21%). The remaining wives were equally distributed among Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics. The differences between the separation and control groups on each of these demographic variables were negligible.

Procedure

Approximately 6 weeks prior to the scheduled departure of the separation group ships, all married men were contacted by mail and introduced to the research project. In subsequent telephone follow-ups, 80 percent of the wives of those men who could be located agreed to participate in the study. The refusal rates did not differ substantially between ships. Informed consent was obtained after the procedures had been fully explained to the subjects. Wives from each ship were divided equally among four

trained interviewers who administered the Mood Questionnaire (16) during a home interview two weeks prior to the departure of the husbands of the separation group. The wives were instructed to complete the Mood Questionnaire by rating their present feelings on a series of 40 adjectives. Each adjective was rated on a three-point scale labeled "Not at All," "Somewhat or Slightly," and "Mostly or Generally." The Depression scale of the Mood Questionnaire was used to assess depression and included the following adjectives: Low, Blue, Miserable, Downcast, Depressed, and Sad. The psychometric properties of this scale are presented in the research literature (16, 17).¹

RESULTS

Across all subjects, the median number of previous major deployments (3 months or longer) was 1.5. In both the separation and control groups, wives were identified as having low separation experience (one or no previous deployments) or high separation experience (two or more previous deployments). Mean depression scores for each of these groups are presented in Table 1.

The influences of the separation condition and the level of separation experience on depression were analyzed using a 2 X 2 analysis of variance. A significant main effect was found for separation condition [$F(1, 84) = 6.69, p < .02$] which confirmed the hypothesis that wives whose husbands were about to deploy

were more depressed than wives whose husbands were scheduled to remain in port. No significant effects were observed for either previous separation experience or the interaction between deployment condition and experience.

DISCUSSION

The results supported the hypothesis that the wives of personnel aboard ships preparing to deploy have higher depression scores than wives of personnel aboard a ship scheduled to remain in port. Such an empirical demonstration of separation related depressive affect among a nonclinical sample of surface Navy wives bolsters similar findings in naval outpatient psychiatric clinics (3-5) and in the submarine community (1) and indicates that depression is a fairly widespread response to periodic separations from their husbands.

Although the temporal course of these feelings of depression was not studied directly, the present results document the onset of depressive affect at least two weeks prior to the departure of the husband. The initial onset of the change in mood may occur earlier. Indirectly, this finding has preventive and treatment implications for both the Navy and the civilian sector. In the Navy, an increasing number of formal, informal, and volunteer programs are being promoted to support Navy families. The recognition that feelings of depression among Navy wives occur prior to the deployment separation may focus attention and resources on this issue. Timely interventions

to increase social support could effectively buffer the adverse effects of a host of life stresses, including separation (18-21). Community based, as well as ship by ship, support efforts should be integrated and focused on the entire family, including the service member, as they identify and train natural leaders and build supportive social networks well before the ships deploy. The importance of this form of supportive intervention is accentuated by the finding that previous separation experience does not have a significant effect on pre-deployment depression. In the civilian community, the expansion of CHAMPUS to cover outpatient psychiatric treatment has served to make problems of military families of more concern to psychotherapists (6). A better understanding of the stresses of Navy life, such as separation, and their relationship to mood may contribute to more effective family therapy and community outreach programs and have an appreciable impact on primary prevention.

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FOOTNOTE

¹Though the items used in this questionnaire are similar to depression scales in clinical use, there are no data for this scale from depressed patients. Depression, as measured by the Mood Questionnaire, thus does not constitute nor imply a diagnostic criterion for clinical use.

TABLE 1

Mean Depression Scores by Deployment
Status and Prior Separation Experience

Deployment Status

Prior Separation

Experience	Pre-Separation			Control			Total		
	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>N</u>
Low	10.6	2.94	29	8.4	2.97	12	9.96	3.09	41
High	9.5	3.08	30	8.2	2.63	17	9.03	2.97	47
Total	10.04	3.04	59	8.28	2.72	29	9.46		88

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM
1. REPORT NUMBER 79-41	2. GOVT ACCESSION NO. AD-A118 119	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER
4. TITLE (and Subtitle) Feelings of Depression in Navy Wives Prior to Family Separation		5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED Final
		6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER
7. AUTHOR(s) D. Stephen Nice and Arne Beck		8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s)
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS Naval Health Research Center P.O. Box 85122 San Diego, California 92138		10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS ZF51.524.022-0006
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS Naval Medical Research and Development Command Bethesda, Maryland 20014		12. REPORT DATE November 1979
		13. NUMBER OF PAGES 12
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office) Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Department of the Navy Washington, DC 20372		15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report) UNCLASSIFIED
		15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE
16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report) Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.		
17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)		
18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) Depression Separation Predeployment Separation experience		
20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) The mean depression score of 59 wives of naval personnel aboard two ships preparing for an extended overseas deployment was significantly higher than the mean depression score of 29 wives of Navy personnel aboard a ship scheduled to remain in port. Experience derived from previous separations did not significantly affect the depression scores. Preventive and treatment implications of the onset of depressed mood prior to separation are discussed.		

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