

Voices Project: Military Wives Resource

Health Trends:

The most obvious and pervasive health concerns facing women who marry men in military service relate to their psychological well-being. Social and geographic isolation, financial burdens and a “single parent existence” often leave military wives vulnerable to stress-related illness and depression. In particular, international relocation can increase the risk of anxiety and depression among women who typically encounter significant cultural and language barriers abroad.

Wartime separation is especially detrimental to the psychological health of military wives, 75% of whom are at risk of developing severe stress-related illnesses. Aside from the immediate impact of stress on women’s emotional, social and family life, there are a number of serious chronic illnesses associated with prolonged stress, including immune deficiency and chronic fatigue syndrome.

As a group, military wives are more likely to suffer spousal abuse than their civilian counterparts. In addition, these women often contend with family problems resulting from husbands who, compared to civilian spouses, drink more often, are absent more often and are generally less supportive of their wives developing friendships and outside interests.

Health Determinants:

Historically, the development and structure of military careers was based on a “single male” model. Consequently, adaptation to military life is somewhat difficult and stressful for women, particularly those who are married to service men. More often than not, these women are expected to

accommodate dramatic changes with respect to family mobility, unpredictable work schedules, financial instability as well as barriers to health care, social supports, education and housing.

The determinants of poor mental health among military wives can be traced to the “combat ideology” of unit cohesion. Unit cohesion strategies that condition soldiers to bond more closely to one another than to their wives, create an additional layer to the patriarchal oppression of military wives and the systemic denigration of women within the military. An additional barrier to women’s health, originating within the conventional structure of military life, is the lack of an egalitarian family model as well as women’s recent resistance to the stereotypical “subservient” support role of military wives.

A high degree of mobility prevents military families from establishing community roots and women from developing social support networks or independent careers. In addition to contributing to social isolation, this mobile lifestyle increases women’s risk of poverty during old age. Divorced military wives frequently live in conditions of poverty as a result of a lack of educational or professional development opportunities during their marriage.

Social support appears to be the major determinant of military wife’s health and perceived well-being. These women rely on one another for support to the extent that, women who perceive little social support also experience greater levels of stress. On the other hand, a high degree of perceived support enhances women’s ability to cope with the stress inherent in military life. However, due to high family mobility and a general lack of cohesion among military wives, support networks are often difficult to establish and maintain.

Unfortunately, the influence of military hierarchy extends into the realm of family life to the degree that, among military wives, there exist marginalized groups. In fact, the predictors of social support among military wives include their spouse's rank as well as the type of unit to which they belong. An example of intra-group marginalization can be found in the experiences of non-commissioned officers (NCO) wives who experience less social support and more stress than the wives of other ranks.

Research:

Research related to the health trends and status of military wives has remained limited to social science literature and narrowly focused on the relationship between military life and stress. The Canadian military has made little effort to fund studies that explore other health issues faced by military wives. Nonetheless, the international nature of the military has served as an impetus for research that explores the impact of high job mobility on family function. However, a general lack of regard for the role of wives, as a valuable contribution to successful military service, is evident in the absence of research into the long-term impact of military life in terms of chronic stress-related conditions, poverty and the lack of educational and professional opportunities.