

Overseas Relocation and Military Family Resilience Factors

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Abstract

Military families face strenuous circumstances when moving to or from an overseas duty station. Through a qualitative analysis, spirituality, support network, resourcefulness before and after transition, flexibility, core familial dynamic relationships, and preparedness before and after transition, were identified as key resilience factors for this population. The primary emphasis of this paper is to explore these factors along with providing a brief background on resilience literature.

Keywords: military families, resilience, resilience definitions, history of military resilience research.

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Military member resilience factors have been explored for several decades (Kirkland and Katz, 1989; Campbell-Sills, Kessler, Ursano, Taylor, Sun- Xiaoying, Heeringa, and Nock, 2017). Early military resilience research focused on single military members and PTSD resilience factors (Lagrone, 1978). Then, a shift to single military member's resilience suicide factors occurred (Kimhe and Eshel, 2015). Currently, the Families Overcoming Under Stress (FOCUS) approach to military and military family resilience is a leading model for military resilience (Saltzman, Lester, Milbourn, and Woodward, 2016). The FOCUS approach emphasizes problem solving, goal setting, and creating a shared family story as key resilience factors for military families.

Although FOCUS provides important resilience factors for consideration, a qualitative review of clinical notes, interviews, and collaboration with military members stationed overseas, identified additional resilience factors as playing a key role for successfully navigating through the unique problems faced by military families stationed overseas. The presenter's interpretation of qualitative analysis identified spirituality, support network, resourcefulness before and after transition, flexibility, core familial dynamic relationships, and preparedness before and after transition, as resilience factors impacting military families stationed overseas during the COVID pandemic. The purpose of this paper is to define military families stationed overseas, define resilience, briefly review resilience literature, explore the definitions and provide an overview of the identified resilience factors, and provide future research considerations related to working with this population.

Resilience Definitions

The literature on resilience provides several definitions that encompass factors we have when faced with a situation to our ability to adapt to situations (McCubbin, McCubbin, 1996; Walsh, 2016). Research also provides definitions that include individual and family resilience (McCubbin, McCubbin, 1988; Palmer, 2008). One common theme that most researchers agree on is that resilience is difficult to both define and measure (Cramm and Noris, 2018; McCubbin, McCubbin, 1996; Walsh, 2016).

Early and Present Military Resilience Research

PTSD

Early resilience research focused on PTSD as a research focus (Campbell-Sills, Kessler, Ursano, Taylor, Sun-Xiaoying, Heeringa, and Nock, 2017; Kirkland and Katz, 1989; Lagrone, 1978). Researchers focused on resiliency from an individual model and focused primarily on the resilience factors that were prominent among military members who did not experience PTSD after a traumatic experience. After a PTSD focus of resilience factors with this population, a suicide focus was prevalent in the literature.

Suicide

Suicide rates related to various military member circumstances began to rise around the year 2011. At this time researchers focused on the resiliency attributes that prevented suicide in military members (Kimhe and Eshel, 2015; Pangallo, Zibarras, Lewis, and Flaxman 2015). A more family based approach to resilience occurred out of the efforts to support military members using a resilience based platform. Consequently, the Families Overcoming Under Stress (FOCUS) program was developed.

FOCUS

The FOCUS program premise relies on the areas of communication, problem solving, affective responsiveness, involvement, and role clarity, as primary resilience tools (Saltzman, Lester, Milbourn, and Woodward, 2016). These primary resilience factors are emphasized as critical to successful military familial adaptation considering the various roles of which military families find themselves. Of particular importance with the FOCUS approach is the emphasis on family instead of the singly military member. Also, a proactive approach for adapting to stressful situations, rather than an after the fact approach to adaptation was emphasized. The FOCUS approach to resilience takes a widespread approach rather than focusing on specific areas of military families lives. Although the FOCUS program provides important resilience factors to consider for military families, there are several factors that have been identified through qualitative research that are not included within the FOCUS program.

Qualitative Review

A recent qualitative review of note keeping materials, interviews, and discussions, resulted in identified resilience themes that were specifically present in military families who successfully transitioned to or from and overseas duty station. The identified resilience factors are specific to military families transitioning to or from overseas duty stations rather than the general military population. The identified resilience factors include spirituality, support network, resourcefulness before and after transition, flexibility, core familial dynamic relationships, and preparedness.

Important Definitions

A family overseas transition is defined in this paper as a military family transitioning from one overseas location to another overseas location as a result of an active duty family member's orders for deployment. A successful transition is the family's ability to transition without significant interruption to the family unit's communication, interaction, and overall functioning. Resilience is the family's ability to balance the challenges that occur as the result of an overseas move. Resilience indicators noted for successful family overseas transitions include spirituality, support network, resourcefulness, flexibility, prior preparation efforts, and core family relationships.

Resilience Factors

Spirituality

Spirituality is defined as the overall concern with eternal human condition elements of life rather than physical and material elements of life (dictionary.com, 2019). A focus on spirituality was observed by over 75% of the families who demonstrated a successful transition when relocating overseas. Spirituality was observed in various ways among the population including attending religious services, meditation, prayer, and other spiritual practices.

Support Networks

Support networks are defined as the military community, familial, religious, and friendship networks that are available to the transitioning family. In over 70% of the family's observed, strong networks were particularly found in the military community and friendship networking areas. Specifically, families who were able to bond with other families transitioning to the same overseas duty station established strong friendship networks that were maintained throughout the duration of the deployment. Also, family induct provided families the opportunity to establish friendship networks that were still ongoing at the end of the duty time.

Resourcefulness

Resourcefulness is a factor found in over 65% of the observed families. Resourcefulness is defined as the ability for the family to locate and utilize the available programs and assistance provided by the government. For example, resources such as dishes, temporary furniture, claim's related to broken household goods, paperwork for reimbursement purposes, and other resources were not always clearly communicated. Resourceful families were able to successfully identify how to access the available programs and assistance.

Flexibility

Flexibility is demonstrated by 80% of the observed families, and is defined as the ability of the family to fluidly engage with unexpected changes that occur. For example, housing problems, house hold goods delivery delays, temporary housing problems, and other unexpected occurrences present opportunity to respond fluidly. Fluidly implies moving from one concern to another area while maintaining balance in all responsible areas.

Core Family Relationships

Strong core family relationships are identified in over 50% of families with a successful overseas transition. Strong core family relationships are identified as the mother, father, and children maintaining open communication. For example, parents addressing concerns about the move as a unit. In addition, core relationships were deemed strong depending on the core family activity level. For example, families who played games together, engaged in social activities together, and maintained togetherness before, during, and after the transition, demonstrated strong core relationships.

Prior Preparation

Prior preparation efforts refer to the families efforts toward gathering as much information related to the move and expectations of the move. An observed 70% of successful transitioning families actively prepared for the overseas location in advance of the move date. For example, understanding the reimbursement process, housing process, temporary living quarter's process, and many other areas were researched before the relocation. Successfully transitioning families also researched the cultural expectations and other region specific entities they can anticipate after relocation to the overseas duty station.

Conclusion

The recorded observations are resilience factors that have not been scientifically correlated to successful military family overseas transitions. As a result, research identifying the relationship between each identified factor and military family resilience transitioning in an overseas move is needed. A proposed study could utilize a correlational design to identify the statistically significant relationship between each identified resilience factor and successful military family overseas transitions. Identifying successfully transitioned families could be problematic as not only can gaining access to military families be difficult, but determining a successful transition also presents challenges. In addition, the literature is mixed related to defining resilience. As a result, connecting specific factors to the term resilience presents unique challenges to the research.

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