



The association between perceived social support and mental health in injured and uninjured military personnel

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What is the ADVANCE Study?

The ADVANCE Study investigates the physical and psycho-social outcomes of battlefield casualties in the long-term. The study includes 1,145 male participants who served in the armed forces and were deployed to the conflict in Afghanistan (2002-2014). Half of the cohort have sustained serious battlefield injuries, and the other half are the comparison group of non-injured servicemen.

What does this piece of ADVANCE research look at?

Humans are innately social beings. Throughout life, we form relationships with others and naturally thrive when we feel supported by our social circle. This piece of research aimed to find out whether those who have been physically injured in combat have differences in their social support compared to those who have not been injured, and whether social support is linked to mental health.

Studies in the general population have highlighted the importance of “perceived social support”, defined as “an individual's belief that they are cared for by their family and friends”, for improving health and enhancing recovery from trauma. During the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, combat deployment exposed some military personnel to potentially traumatic events that can have lasting impacts on their health and wellbeing. High levels of perceived social support may help reduce negative outcomes following combat deployment.

What did we measure?

ADVANCE participants completed a range of questionnaires to measure their social support as well as their mental health.

Social support

Participants were asked to rate a series of statements from “very strongly disagree” to “very strongly agree” about how they perceived their social support, for example, “there is a special person around when I am in need” and “I can talk about problems with my friends”.

Mental health

We looked at three different mental health problems: PTSD (repeated, unwanted memories and flashbacks following a traumatic event), anxiety (intense, excessive and persistent worry), and depression (a prolonged period of low mood or loss of interest in activities).



What were the findings?

Our findings showed that...

- Those injured in combat reported the same level of social support as those not injured.
- Those injured with an amputation reported the same level of social support as those injured without an amputation.
- Those who reported higher levels of social support, beyond a certain threshold, had a decreased risk of experiencing PTSD, anxiety or depression

What do the findings mean?

Enhancing people's perceptions of feeling supported by their social circle may be a target for intervention within this population, despite whether they were physically injured in combat or not. Having higher social support, beyond a certain level, may reduce the chance of experiencing mental health difficulties.