

# How Communication With Families Can Both Help and Hinder Service Members' Mental Health and Occupational Effectiveness on Deployment

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**ABSTRACT** Communication with home can be beneficial to deployed service members' mental health, morale, and occupational effectiveness. Conversely a lack of communication with home increases the risk of developing mental health problems. Therefore it is important to ensure that communications media is both affordable and accessible while on deployment. However, contact with families can sometimes have negative effects, particularly when problems arise at either end. It can also be difficult for military personnel and their families if the level of contact is lower than they expected. Conversely, too much contact with home may have a negative impact on occupational effectiveness. More research is required to determine the optimal level of communication with home. Additional research is required to determine which types of communications media are most beneficial and whether the benefits of communication with home differ depending on the context of the deployment and the family status of the service member.

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## INTRODUCTION

The mental health of military personnel deployed to operational theaters is affected by the contact they have with their family and friends. During deployment, communication with home is deemed to be critically important for military personnel.<sup>1</sup> The ability of personnel to make regular contact with their family or friends can boost morale,<sup>2</sup> but more importantly, family support while in theater has also been reported to have an effect on personnel's mental health; a lack of support increases personnel's risk of mental health problems.<sup>3,4</sup> Mental health problems can have a negative impact on occupational functioning.<sup>5,6</sup> For example, Hoge et al. showed that mental disorders appear to represent the most important source of occupational morbidity among active duty U.S. military personnel.<sup>5</sup> Thus the ability of deployed personnel to communicate with friends and family may well have a direct effect on occupational functioning.<sup>1,7-9</sup> However, communication with home has also been reported to have negative effects in some cases and may therefore be a "double-edged sword."<sup>7,8,10,11</sup>

There are many differences between the kind of communications media available to service members in theater

today when compared to 10 years ago.<sup>11</sup> Military personnel have come to expect access to a wide range of telecommunications media such as electronic mail, instant messaging, and live video links, as well as access to more conventional media such as telephones (landline and mobile) and postal services.<sup>12</sup> The various options available to military personnel allow those who operate at considerable distances from their home bases to maintain contact with their families. However, the various forms of media are likely to have different perceived benefits dependent on their speed, privacy, ownership, and ease of access.<sup>11</sup> For instance, Schumm et al.<sup>11</sup> reported in 2004 that the telephone was still the preferred means of communication as it is the most effective for communicating time-sensitive and intense messages, and when, for example, involved in decision making or when resolving relationship conflicts. However, this preference may well change as new communications media become available.<sup>8</sup>

The literature indicates various ways in which communication with home, or a lack of it, can affect troops' mental health while on deployment. Furthermore, expectations over access to various types of communications media, from the perspective of the service member and their families, may impact on the method and frequency with which they communicate with each other and on how they cope with being apart.<sup>2,11</sup> This article reviews the literature on the ways in which communication with families can have an impact on mental health and occupation effectiveness of deployed service members. From this literature, policy recommendations are drawn (Table I). In addition, gaps in the literature are identified and further research is suggested.

## ACCESS TO COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA

Service members and their families often have high expectations of the various forms of communications media available to them. For instance, personnel expect that the equipment

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**TABLE I.** Policy Recommendations

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Troops need to be given greater access to communications media and should be subsidized in the use of communications.</li> <li>— The issue of mismatch between expectations and reality concerning what communications facilities are available needs to be addressed with education and preparation for service members and their families so that they have realistic expectations of the level of communication they will have.</li> <li>— Information regarding troops' location and news should be made available to family members to reduce the stress on service members and their families and to avoid clogging the system with requests.</li> </ul>
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provided for them will be both easily accessible and efficient. However, these expectations are not always met once service members are deployed<sup>2,11</sup> and the mismatch between expectations and reality can lead to a great deal of frustration and distress, for both the service member and their family.<sup>2</sup>

The information available to the families of service personnel is not limited to the communication they receive from the service member themselves. Live media reports may exacerbate families' stress and frustration. For instance families might expect that personnel who have not been involved in a media-reported incident, should be able to inform their family that they are safe.<sup>2</sup> However, this is often not possible, both because the number of deployed personnel usually exceeds the number of communication devices available and because military forces often purposely close down communication equipment after incidents in which personnel have been injured or killed. This deliberate deactivation of communications equipment ensures that the families of those who have been killed or injured can be told, in a sensitive manner, by the military rather than being subject to hearsay or anecdotal stories by the families that have been contacted by those who survived the incident. Media coverage of events during deployment can also heighten distress, as families may see reports about a unit's location, mission taskings, or expected length of deployment before service members or the official "chain of communications" have been able to convey such messages to their families.<sup>13</sup>

The literature suggests that issues relating to access to communications media can have a significant effect on the emotional state and occupational functioning of personnel while deployed.<sup>1,8,9</sup> While access to both new and conventional means of communication during deployment has generally improved since the Vietnam War,<sup>8,11</sup> it is often impractical to allow unlimited access to such equipment for all personnel. However, MacDermid<sup>4</sup> reports that personnel desire more than the 15–20 minutes that is often provided by the military once or twice weekly in which to make contact with their families. Due to the limited availability of a nation's defense satellite network, commercial phone networks are used more often for "social communication," but are usually very expensive.<sup>11</sup> The expense of making these calls can place a considerable burden on either the armed forces or the service members and their families. Even though some calls are paid for by the

military, personnel who wish to make additional use of telephone equipment may keep contact to a minimum, worry about the costs and subsequently, when contact is made, may only speak for short periods of time.<sup>4</sup>

However, the telephone is not the only form of instant communication equipment available to personnel. For instance, newer and more sophisticated forms of telecommunications media, such as videoconferencing, may benefit some personnel when they are in theater. However, not all military families, particularly the families of reservists, live near to military facilities at which they might have access to these forms of media.<sup>4,14</sup> Those that are first to deploy to new theaters (often called "expeditionary forces") are likely to have considerably less access to most forms of communications media than those that deploy later, and so can struggle to communicate with home on a regular basis.<sup>15</sup>

The issue of contact with home is often compounded by the communication security needs of the military (often called COMSEC). This issue is important and may have operational implications. For instance, COMSEC was a problem for Israeli troops during the Second Lebanon War (2006) when Hezbollah listened into mobile phone calls made by Israel Defense Force (IDF) soldiers to their families.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, commanders remove mobile phones and other communication devices before major operations to ensure that enemy forces cannot monitor insecure communications between personnel and their loved ones, which might inadvertently contain mission essential information. As discussed earlier, however, limited communications with home can have an impact on mental health and occupational functioning.<sup>1,3–9</sup>

Qualitative research has suggested that, in general, service members desire more access to communications media<sup>4</sup> than is provided for them. This mismatch between expectation and actual use is one of the numerous stressors that are part of deployment and it has been suggested that poor communications may lead to lower morale in troops.<sup>2,10,12</sup> Therefore, the U.S. National Military Family Association<sup>2</sup> proposed that realistic expectations concerning the access and use of communications media should be established for service members and their families by the chain of command through education before deployment.

A study of U.K. peacekeepers reported that of those that decided to speak to someone about stressful deployment experiences, the majority chose to speak to their colleagues (95%) and family (80%) rather than make use of formal support mechanisms (e.g., medical or social services personnel) (8%) or the chain of command (15%).<sup>17</sup> Thus, since it is known that there are mental health benefits from allowing service members to speak to their families about difficulties or concerns during deployment,<sup>3,10,12,18</sup> it is important to focus on how best to increase their access to communications media.

## THE EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATION WITH HOME

The literature on in-theater communications with home strongly points to a mixture of positive and negative effects

of the increasing use of communications media by deployed personnel. Several reports suggest that communication with spouses/partners and family members while on deployment can reduce boredom, maintain morale, and reduce isolation.<sup>8,10,11,15</sup> Service members report being reassured that they are able to contact home if anything goes wrong while they are on deployment.<sup>15</sup> Contact with home for key family events, such as birthdays and wedding anniversaries, also makes dealing with the separation from their families much easier to manage and helps to prevent loss of marital intimacy.<sup>10,19</sup> Married service members appear to have both higher expectations and actual use of communications media,<sup>11</sup> suggesting that contact with home is, perhaps unsurprisingly, particularly important for those who are married.

In a historical context, extreme isolation from family members was reported to be one of the key factors leading a large number of troops to surrender during World War II.<sup>8,9</sup> However, it has also been proposed that too much contact with home can lead to distraction and adversely affect occupational functioning, unit cohesion, and morale.<sup>1,8</sup> Furthermore, while increased contact with loved ones may well result in increased morale it might also make some personnel angrier about being apart from their families.<sup>7</sup> More research is required to determine the optimal frequency of communication with home.

Warner et al.<sup>12</sup> report that, during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, U.S. forces personnel had greater access than ever before to communications media. This appeared to generally ease some of the stress associated with separation. However, when problems arose at either end, contact with home sometimes increased personnel's stress. Indeed, "home-front" stressors were listed by troops as the main contributing factor to their stress while on deployment. The most frequently reported issues leading to such stress were uncertainty over tour length and separation from their families.<sup>12</sup> A direct consequence of these home-front stressors was that, for personnel seen by Deployment Mental Health Services (DMHS), 35.2% stated that home-front stressors had led to their mental health problems (compared to 22.3% for occupational stressors and 15.1% for unit/peer-related stressors).<sup>12</sup> It could be that, for vulnerable personnel, a lack of communication with home may precipitate or perpetuate mental health conditions.<sup>12</sup>

Although easy access to communication with home is beneficial when home relationships are going well, it can have strongly negative effects when problems arise.<sup>10-12</sup> Easy access increases the immediacy and proximity to negative events at home for deployed troops, while highlighting the limited ability that troops have to problem solve or provide effective support because of their physical distance from home.<sup>10</sup> In such circumstances, easy access to communications media can lead to unhelpful expressions of feelings of hurt, anger, loss, and frustration over the phone.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, although service personnel may later desire to "make up" they might not be able to do so because of the relative lack of access to phone calls, and their expense. Thus, easy access to phone calls home

may add to rather than solve problems. It is also reported that troops often feel the need to protect their family and so do not tell the truth about the conditions they are working in while in theater. However, this can lead the family members to become frustrated as they want to know the "real truth," which can subsequently turn a "good call" into a "bad call" and lead to greater stress for both parties.<sup>2,10</sup>

The literature is unclear as to what constitutes a good or bad telephone call, and there is disagreement as to the relative effect of hearing about problems at home on the morale of service members. Several authors report that hearing about family problems can exacerbate troops' stress by highlighting their inability to help or by upsetting them.<sup>10,12</sup> However, some authors report that troops can react ambivalently when hearing of problems at home.<sup>4</sup> Other authors argue that by hearing about these issues, troops have an opportunity to deal with them before they get worse.<sup>15</sup>

One area of relevance to personnel who are parents is maintaining their relationships with their children, which is likely to rely heavily on their ability to communicate with them while away.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, personnel find it helpful to be informed of any issues regarding their children, as it can aid them in reconnecting with their children on their return home, as they were not "left out" of important things happening in their children's lives.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, service members have reported stress on their return home, having found that their families had withheld information from them regarding problems at home while they were on deployment.<sup>4</sup> Hearing about home front problems can be either beneficial or detrimental to troops' mental health, morale, and occupational functioning, depending on the individual and on the context of these problems.

Although this article has addressed the general issue of communication with home, it is important to note it raises different questions in different contexts. A brief analysis of different national armed forces demonstrates this point. For example, the average operational tour of duty for U.K. forces is 6 months<sup>20</sup> whereas for U.S. troops a 12-month operational tour is more usual. With a significantly longer period of deployment, the question of communication with home may hold more importance to U.S. forces as compared to U.K. troops.

The IDF, in contrast to both the U.S. and U.K. armies, does not have what could be described as a "tour of duty." Rather, 18 year olds complete an extended period of compulsory national service, usually in the armed forces.<sup>21</sup> Men serve for around 3 years and women for approximately 2 years. Due to Israel's small size, soldiers are never more than a 7-hour drive away from home while serving and are often rotated in and out of a mission within 4 weeks. The links between the Israeli military and civilian worlds (and understanding of the former by the latter) is much closer than in any of the all-volunteer forces of Europe or North America. The soldiers take their mobile phones with them and can easily speak to their families at little cost. The issues surrounding communication with home in the IDF are less

about increasing access to communications media and frequency of contact. Rather, problems due to excessive contact with home may be more relevant here. In addition, soldiers regularly go back home for overnight visits. The effects of communication with home, both positive and negative, may be magnified when the contact is face to face. Further research is required in this area.

In addition, there has been no research comparing the benefits of communications with home on the mental health of military personnel between the services (Army, Navy, Air Forces) and between all-volunteer and conscript-based systems. The kinds of mission (peacekeeping, counterinsurgency, war operations, etc.) on which service members are deployed, may also impact on the psychological issues regarding communication with home. For example, the benefits of family support may be particularly marked in situations where the operation is particularly stressful or where the service member is in an operation in a more isolated setting.

### DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The variety of communications media and access to them has greatly increased for troops over the last three decades. Yet, there has been little research to determine the advantages and disadvantages of each type of communications media. Not enough is understood regarding how such systems can best be utilized by deployed personnel.<sup>11</sup> Further research should be undertaken to establish which type of communications method is the most beneficial to the mental health of service members.

The published literature notes that there is an emerging tension between expectations of families and service personnel concerning access to communications and what the armed forces are willing and/or able to provide. Families are reported to not only want more communication with their deployed family members, but also with the chain of command. The increased desire of families for information includes knowing about the location of military personnel, how they are faring, and approximately when they are expected to return home.<sup>2</sup> Extended family members have also been reported to “clog” the chain of communications with frequent requests for information, making it harder for troops and their immediate family to communicate.<sup>13</sup> The U.S. organization, the National Military Family Association<sup>2,13</sup> therefore recommends that websites are created and regularly updated to include basic, secure information regarding each unit’s approximate whereabouts and relevant news. They propose that this would allow both close and extended family members to gain relevant information and reduce the stress on the deployed communications systems. This would subsequently free up lines of communication.<sup>2</sup> This may also help reduce the adverse effects that service families experience when listening to high tension, but not always correct, media reports. It may also reduce the pressure on those service members who feel obligated to maintain communications with home to provide information and reassurance to their families.

Several authors<sup>22–24</sup> have reported that separation from family is one of the main reasons that personnel leave the military.

With tour lengths commonly increasing and the time between tours commonly decreasing,<sup>20,25,26</sup> regular communication with home while in theater may become an increasingly important tool for military forces to use to mitigate the operational isolation felt by some military families when personnel are away. It may well be that the extra cost of providing greater access to forms of free or subsidized communications would offset the costs of losing highly experienced personnel who have been encouraged to leave by their families.<sup>2</sup> Married service members both expect and appear to use communications media more than single service members.<sup>11</sup> Further research should be undertaken to establish whether communications with home have a differential benefit on mental health depending on family status.

Qualitative research and feedback on systems employed for communication with home from both service members and their families are reported to have led to many improvements in such systems.<sup>2</sup> A greater emphasis on this type of research is proposed to allow further improvements to be made. This will facilitate a greater understanding of which systems should be enhanced and which may not be cost effective in terms of their perceived benefits.<sup>2</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS

In general, studies have shown that communication with home while on deployment can have a positive effect on troops’ mental health, morale, and occupational functioning. However, the literature also highlights how, in some cases, contact with family members can also have negative effects. While the mismatch between expected and actual use has been found to be one of the main issues raised in the literature, further research is needed to determine not only the specific effects of contact with home but also to identify how the emergent technology might address those effects. We suggest that future research in this area (Table II) should aim to investigate: the different experiences of individual armed forces and the services (Navy, Army, Air Forces), all-volunteer versus conscript-based systems, and the kinds of mission—peacekeeping, peace

TABLE II. Future Research

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>— Comparison of the various types of communications media in terms of frequency of use, quality, and cost to determine which are the most beneficial to troops’ mental health and occupational effectiveness.</li><li>— Evaluation of the optimal level of communication with home to maximize the positive effects and limit the negative effects.</li><li>— Comparisons of individual services, military organization formats, and mission types regarding benefits of communications with home.</li><li>— Investigation into the extent to which family status is a factor in the benefits of communications with home.</li><li>— A longitudinal investigation that controls for baseline mental health for military personnel and families, as well as relationship well-being, to enhance the ability to interpret the helpfulness of communication during deployment.</li></ul>
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enforcement, etc.—on which service members are deployed. We postulate that without such research being undertaken military forces risk merely increasing the ability to communicate without determining whether doing so is, in fact, beneficial.

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