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Something To Talk About

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Something to talk about
Researcher emphasizes communication about past trauma is crucial to current relationships

Trauma not only requires healing of the mind and body, but it also requires communication, says a Kansas State University researcher who believes not sharing past traumas, particularly if military-related, may harm relationships.

For nearly 20 years, Briana Nelson Goff, professor of family studies and human services, has researched how traumatic stress or post-traumatic stress disorder affects individuals, couples and families. She also is director of Kansas State University’s Institute for the Health and Security of Military Families.

“Trauma-related triggers can lead to communication problems,” said Nelson Goff. “Even just an argument can trigger traumatic feelings or emotions. Communication is the necessary umbrella in any healthy relationship, especially with the potential vulnerability of trauma. That may be obvious, but now it’s backed by research.”

Nelson Goff and a team of graduate and undergraduate students conducted a series of surveys and interviews to understand how trauma affects not only the person who experienced the trauma, but his or her partner. The team recruited 50 local military couples who had been in a committed relationship for at least a year and in which at least one partner had been deployed.

Both partners participated in a quantitative survey to determine their trauma history and symptoms, involving both military history and other issues. Then, Nelson Goff and her students completed separate interviews with both individuals.

In the interviews, participants were asked if their partner had experienced any sort of trauma. Often, participants would share information about their trauma while compartmentalizing or minimizing their experiences — and not just in traumas related to a deployment, such as witnessing death or experiencing heavy combat.

“Participants would say, ‘I have this experience, but I don’t need to talk about it,’” said Nelson Goff. “However, when they did discuss it, they often found it was having a fairly significant impact on their relationship. You don’t have to share all the details with your partner, but just an awareness of what your partner has experienced is often important.”

Spouses or partners living with someone with post-traumatic stress symptoms can develop symptoms of their own. Nelson Goff said this is known as secondary traumatic stress. These symptoms can combine to create numerous problems in a relationship, like impaired communication, conflict or sexual issues.

“This is the most intimate way a couple can connect,” Nelson Goff said. “When that connection is affected by trauma, often the first place we see it is in intimacy.”

From the original data, Nelson Goff developed the first theoretical model of its kind to identify the effect of trauma on couples, the Couple Adaptation to Traumatic Stress Model, which was published in the Journal of Marital and Family Therapy. Her team is in the process of developing a revised model based on recent research on interpersonal relationships and trauma.

Now, Nelson Goff and several students are taking a second look at the couples in which there was a discrepancy in the knowledge of the other’s trauma. She said her goal is to determine if their level of communication about the trauma affects relationship satisfaction.

“My hypothesis is that couples in which there is a discrepancy or who have not disclosed their trauma experiences with their partner will report more problems,” Nelson Goff said. “In this case, it may be someone dealing with higher trauma symptoms.”

Nelson Goff said participants will be evaluated based on deployment experience and the answers given about their relationship in the previous survey and interview. When preliminary data is completed in summer 2013, Nelson Goff said she hopes it increases public understanding of trauma and helps military programs.

“There are many programs available for military service members and families, but most focus on only the soldiers, and not the whole family,” she said. “Our research is important as more soldiers return home and recognize the long-term effects from their deployments. We want to encourage trauma survivors and their partners to get help, whether they’re in the military or not.”

By Megan Saunders, Communications and Marketing

Undergraduate research gives students a head start

Kali Orrick, a senior in family studies and human services, Overland Park, Kan., has been part of Briana Nelson Goff’s research team for three years. In Nelson Goff’s first round of research, Orrick’s role was to read interviews, then transcribe and code them, meaning she attached key words to certain parts of the interview.

Now, as she wraps up her undergraduate career, Orrick has taken on a leadership role in the research team. She is leading four undergraduate students by showing them the ropes of the research process. Orrick recognizes the opportunities her undergraduate research will afford her.

“When I graduate, I will have been involved in two research publications,” she said. “Dr. Nelson Goff has truly become my mentor through this process. She does her best to incorporate undergraduates through the entire process. The opportunity to research with Dr. Nelson Goff will set me apart from my competitors in my future career or in graduate school.”