



Exploring the Lived Experiences of Pain in Military Families

What this research is about

Military families exist within a unique culture and context. Veterans and serving members of the military see themselves as a distinct and tight-knit group, formed by their military training. The military mindset ingrained in Veterans/military members can carry over to their families, shaping family culture, norms, experiences, and beliefs. In military life, expression of physical pain and emotions is associated with weakness or inferiority. But suppressing these can lead to mental health issues and chronic pain. This, in turn, can create a cycle affecting the spouses and children of Veterans/military members and how they deal with pain and related mental health issues.

This study looked at the lived experiences of chronic pain among Veterans/members of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), their spouses, and children. The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the pain experiences of military families. Military culture and identity was found to be a key theme influencing their experiences of pain.

What the researchers did

This research was part of a larger study that recruited participants via word of mouth, social media, and community partners. Thirty-five persons consented to participate in this study, including 12 Veterans/CAF members (nine men and three women), six spouses, and 17 children aged 10 to 36 years. Most of the Veterans/CAF members (92%) reported living with chronic pain.

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. The interviews had three focus areas: 1) understanding the interview's narrative of their pain experience broadly; 2) exploring how the interviewee

What you need to know

Military training and culture permeate the life of Veterans and active members. The "mission, men, self" mindset can influence interactions with family members and how children are raised. This military mindset encourages the suppression of pain and associated emotions to avoid appearing "weak" resulting in a cycle of mental health issues and chronic physical conditions. Veterans/military members often live with chronic pain stemming from their service. This study examined the lived experiences of chronic pain among Canadian Armed Forces Veterans/members, their spouses, and children. The findings provide insight into how pain is experienced and perceived within military families.

understood or experienced a family member's pain; and 3) understanding pain in the family context. Interview data were analyzed, coded, and compared to discover overarching themes and sub-themes.

What the researchers found

Four main themes emerged from the interview data:

1. **"Military mindset"—herd culture and soldier identity.** Veterans/military members described how military training taught them that pain should be endured or ignored. Admission of pain was seen as a weakness. Being "broken" enough to be discharged carried the stigma of being weak and inferior. This often resulted in negative mental and social impacts, as military members lost their sense of identity and belonging in a very familial, special, tight-knit group.

2. **The culture of pain within military families.** Military members are taught the priorities of “mission, men, self,” in that order. The Veterans/military members in this study described continuing in that mindset when it came to making family decisions regarding whether and how a pain experience (e.g., an injury or illness) should be reacted to and managed. The mentality of “pushing through the pain” and suppressing emotions was also adopted by their spouses and children.
3. **Inseparability of mental health and pain.** Mental and emotional pain can manifest as physical pain, such as muscle tension, nausea, and headaches. Suppression of emotions, stoicism in the face of pain, and other forms of trauma contributed to many children growing up with undiagnosed mental and physical health issues. Some Veterans/military members expressed suicidal thoughts, which became a source of emotional pain for their families.
4. **Breaking the cycle and shifting the military mindset.** When Veterans/military members reached out for support for their mental and physical health issues, this could resonate with the whole family. Seeing their parents asking for help could enable children to express their own emotional and physical pain. This could help break the military mindset of “mission, men, self” that was so ingrained in the family. The military culture and identity, as well as the hardship that military families had gone through, also had positive impacts, including enhanced sibling support and resilience within the family unit.

How you can use this research

Understanding how military culture and identity is embedded in the family unit is essential to delivering pain care and social programs to military families. Healthcare and social workers could be trained to identify and understand the unique needs of Veterans/military members and families. Trauma-informed and chronic pain-related family programs could be implemented. Intervention programs aimed at breaking the pain and co-occurring mental health cycles could be created for children and youth.

About the researchers

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Research Snapshot by Erika Cao

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The Vanier Institute of the Family has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots.

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