

Verbal Abuse: The Invisible Wounds Experienced by Military Wives

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Disclosure

- Presenter: Linda Carman Copel
- Learner Objectives:
 - Describe the experiences of verbal abuse by military spouses.
 - Discuss a proposed model to explain the experience of verbal abuse of military wives.
- Conflict of Interest Statement
 - I have no relationships to disclose.
- Employer: Villanova University
- Sponsorship or Commercial Support
 - I have no support to disclose.

Objectives of the Study

- To describe the experience of verbal abuse by military wives.
- To determine if the experiences of verbal abuse were antecedents to other types of abuse.
- To construct a model which explains the experience of verbal abuse for military wives.

Qualitative Method

Colaizzi's (1978)

Phenomenological Methodology

Population

- Adult women married to spouses currently serving in the United States Armed Forces
- Older than 21 years
- Able to read and write English
- Currently receiving individual or group therapy services from a counseling center during the past two years

Sample

- Convenience sample
- Sample size: 21 women

Setting

- Mid-Atlantic region of the United States
- Interviews were held in an outpatient behavioral health counseling center

Instruments

- Open-ended interview questions:
 - Will you please describe the verbal abuse that you experienced with your spouse?
 - Will you please describe if verbal abuse lead to other types of abuse or violent behavior?
- Demographic data form

Demographic Data

- Age: 24 – 47 years
- Ethnicity: 21 Caucasian
- Marital Status: 21 Married (with 5 contemplating separation)
- Years Married: 2 – 14 years

Demographic Data

- Education: 19 College
2 High School
- Employment: 15 employed full time
3 employed part-time
2 employed as “full time mom”
1 LOA due to an ill child
- All the women had children (range 1 – 3).

Demographic Data

- Women reported:
 - Spouse has been on active duty (n = 21)
 - Branch of the Service
 - 12 Army
 - 3 Marine Corps
 - 3 Navy
 - 2 Air Force
 - 1 Coast Guard
 - Number of times deployed (range 0 to 4)

Demographic Data

- Women reported:
 - All spouses were in good or excellent health.
 - No spouse was officially diagnosed with PTSD.
 - 14 wives thought their spouses had s/s of PTSD
 - 7 wives “didn’t know,” “wondered about it,” or “would like to know if PTSD was a problem”
 - If they felt safe (Yes =16; No = 5)
 - The women who felt unsafe were grabbed, shaken, or pushed. Some of the partners “threw things” or “broke things.”

Demographic Data

- History of abuse
 - No participant reported:
 - Being in any abusive relationship prior to marriage
 - Being physically or sexually abused by their marital partner
 - Verbal Abuse started:
 - Every participant reported that frequent verbal abuse started after the partner returned from the deployment.
 - 9 participants reported infrequent, but “heated arguments,” “screaming matches,” “cursing,” and “yelling at each other” during the marriage and prior to deployment

Demographic Data

- Military Family Advocacy Program
 - Knowledge of Family Advocacy Program (FAP)
 - Yes = 15
 - Yes (“knew a little about it”, “somewhat”) = 4
 - No = 2
 - Would you use the FAP if you experienced partner abuse?
 - No = 21
 - Would you use the FAP if your children experienced abuse?
 - Yes = 19
 - “Probably” = 2

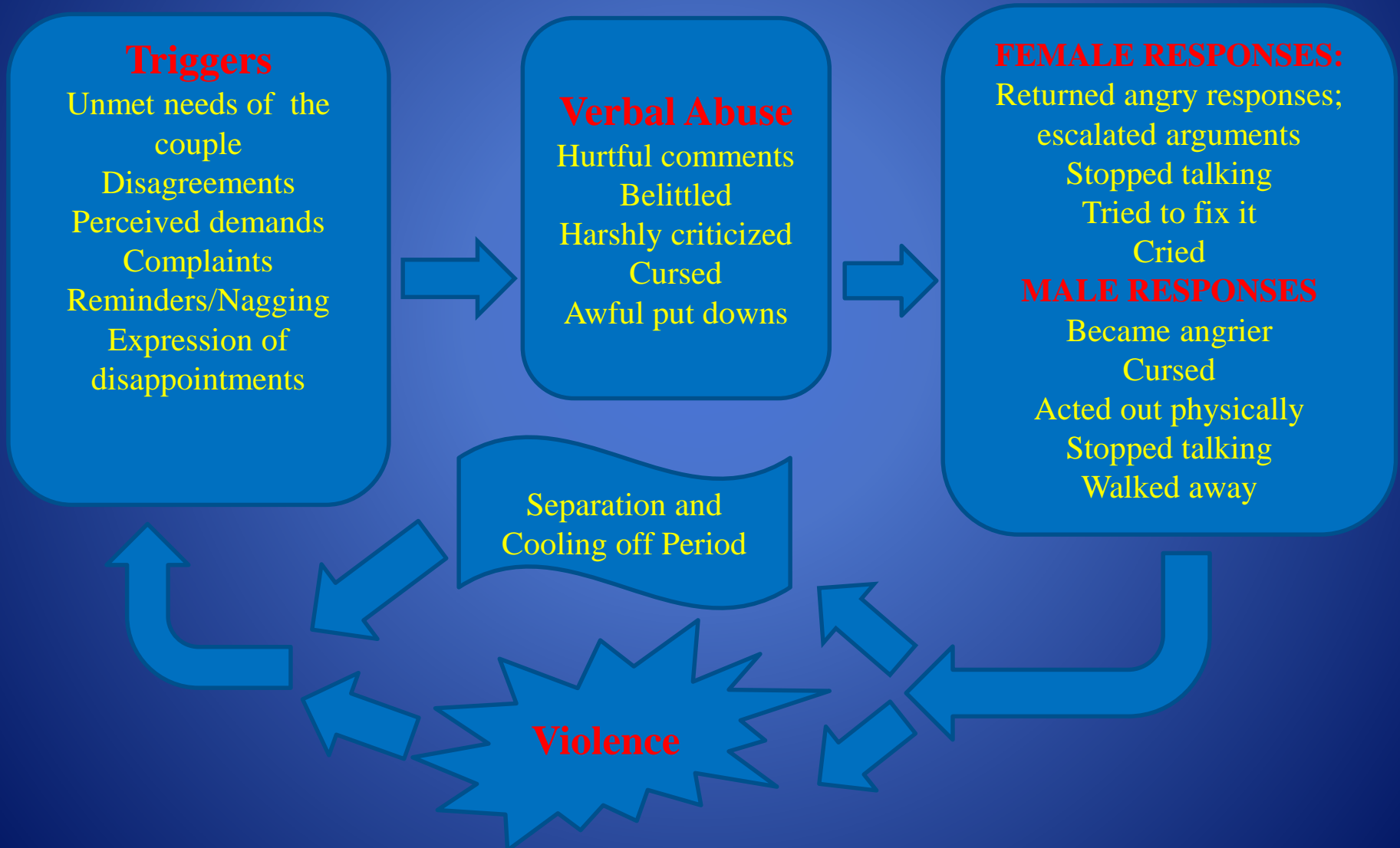
Findings Based on Colaizzi's Methodology

- Significant statements
- Formulated meanings
- Cluster of themes
- Description of the phenomenon

Themes

- Disagreements and arguments
- Outbursts of anger
- Intolerance for the concerns of others
- Emotionally disconnected
- Feeling alone and isolated
- Spouse unwilling to participate in counseling

Experience of Verbal Abuse for Military Wives



Conclusions

- Verbal abuse occurred “in spurts” in the lives of women with military spouses.
- The woman felt “unsure about what was happening,” “unable to handle what was happening,” or questioned, “Why was this happening?”
- Women excused, overlooked, or didn’t recognize the verbal abuse until it “wore me down” or “we started drifting apart” emotionally and physically.

Conclusions

- Verbal abuse was exhausting, isolating, and made the women question their sense of being a competent and capable person.
- The escalation of verbal abuse resulted in “walking away,” physical violence or destruction of property.
- The women felt insecure and vulnerable to additional abuse. Every woman “knows someone” [another military wife] who had a “scary [abuse] experience.”

Conclusions

- After awhile, the women wondered if their spouses were struggling with a physical health or mental health issue, such as PTSD.
- Suggestions by the wives to their partners to “obtain help” or “talk to a counselor” were unheeded or caused couple “conflict.”
- One partner, the wife, attempted to obtain help for the military couple.

Implications

- The initiation of verbal abuse was often unclear to the women, but triggers could be identified by the women as they read their transcripts. Member checks was a useful strategy to use with the women.
- The women questioned their role in the verbal abuse episodes, and related it to dissatisfaction with some aspect of the marital relationship.

Implications

- There was a stigma associated with obtaining mental health couple services by members of the Armed Forces; only the women sought help.
- There is uncertainty, negativity and fear related to service members obtaining mental health services.
- Issues to consider: What does it mean in the military context to utilize mental health services? How does the unit commander's need to know the service member's mental health status conflict with the service member's right to privacy?

Practice Recommendations

- Recognize that verbal abuse is an antecedent to other types of abuse, particularly physical abuse and the destruction of the couple's property.
- Educate women and their partners, families, and health care providers about:
 - Prevention and effective handling of verbal abuse
 - Civilian and military programs, services, and FAP
 - Provide opportunities for evaluation and repeated screening for mental health issues in couples

Research Recommendations

- Determine more details on the dynamics of verbal abuse in the lives of military wives.
- Address how and when the women and other family members become at high risk for abuse.
- Investigate components of the proposed model.
- Evaluate the programs that the military offers.
- Study the concepts of abuse, mental health stigma, deployment, re-deployment, and post-deployment as related to military families.



AND THEIR FAMILIES!