

Military Study Finds Benefits in Mental Health Screening

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Soldiers who were screened for mental health problems before deploying to Iraq were less likely to report suicidal thoughts, be evacuated for mental health reasons or require care for combat stress, a study published on Tuesday has found.

The study, published in the [American Journal of Psychiatry](#), looked at six combat brigades — a total of more than 21,000 soldiers — that deployed to central Iraq for 15-month tours starting in 2007. The soldiers were all part of, or attached to, the Third Infantry Division out of Fort Stewart, Ga.

Three of the brigades were asked detailed mental health questions as part of the general health care assessments given to all personnel before they deploy. Those questions included whether the soldier was taking psychiatric medications, was being treated by a mental health professional or had a history of suicidal thoughts.

Soldiers whose answers to those questions raised concerns — a total of 819 people, or 7.7 percent of the total screened — were evaluated further by a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist or licensed clinical social worker. Of those 819 soldiers, 347 were taking psychiatric medications, most often antidepressants. The remainder were under the care of a mental health professional and were not taking medications.

Of those 819 soldiers who received additional assessments, 48 were deemed unfit to deploy, 26 had their deployments delayed and 96 were cleared to deploy with waivers that typically restricted their duties. The remaining 649 were allowed to deploy with no restrictions.

Troops in the other three brigades, making up the control group, did not receive the additional mental health screening.

After tracking the soldiers in both groups for six months, the researchers found that the brigades that received the mental health screening had substantially fewer soldiers who showed symptoms of mental health disorders than the control group — 307 compared with 1,365. The control group had more than twice as many soldiers who needed to be airlifted for mental health reasons, 28 to 13, and who reported suicidal thoughts, 93 to 44.

The authors of the study said mental health problems were lower in the screened group for several major reasons, including the prevention of deployment by some high-risk soldiers.

In addition, they said, the screening identified vulnerable men and women who then received additional care during their deployment.

The study, conducted under the auspices of the Army Medical Command, is considered the first of its type involving American troops. In some ways, it represents science catching up with policy.

After reports in 2006 that the military was deploying mentally unfit troops, the Defense Department established minimum mental health standards that prohibited deployment of men and women who were receiving treatment for psychotic, bipolar and other serious disorders. More recently, Congress required that deploying military personnel be screened for post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal tendencies.