

DEPRESSION AT SEA

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SUMMARY

Depressive symptoms were significantly higher ($p < 0.01$) in married sailors undergoing a military training voyage compared to their unmarried colleagues. The results are discussed.

RESUMO

Depressão a bordo de um navio de guerra

Os autores relatam a presença de sintomas depressivos, durante uma viagem de treino militar, que foi significativamente mais elevada em marinheiros casados do que nos seus colegas solteiros ($p < 0.01$). Os resultados são discutidos.

INTRODUCTION

Significant life events are known to precipitate psychiatric disorders. Poor social integration increase vulnerability¹⁻³. Most of the life event literature emphasises that an accumulation of recent life events, particularly if of a loss character, is associated with depressive reactions⁴⁻⁷. These loss events are often fortuitous and unanticipated, but anticipated events also take their toll.

Observations on army recruits has shown that the induction period is particularly stressful and associated with complaints such as peptic ulceration⁸.

Support and social involvement are protective^{3,9}. The influential work of Brown et al. on women in North Uist and Camberwell showed the importance of social factors, such as the absence of a close confidante and poor social integration, in creating vulnerability to depression, and Aneshensel and Stone¹⁰ have shown that the absence of social support is itself a source of stress, even when other stressors are absent.

We set out to examine these relationships in the closed environment of a ship, which disrupted the normal social network and imposed altered social roles, which can generate stress¹¹⁻¹³.

METHOD

The study was based on a random sample of 50 male sailors undergoing military training aboard a warship for a 45 day period.

The population was not random, since the recruits and permanent personnel were had been screened for physical and psychiatric problems.

The HARD scale for depression¹⁴ was applied on 3 successive occasions during the duration of the voyage.

Age, civil status, rank and attachment to a naval career were recorded (see table 1).

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TABLE 1—Age, civil status, rank and situation in the total population and in those with depressive symptoms

N.º		Sample 50 (100%)	Hard > 17 18 (36%)
Age		24,8 ± 5,43	26,1
Civil Status	Married	14	9 (58,5%)
	Single	36	9 (25,0%)
Rank	Officers	3	1 (33,3%)
	Sergeants	7	2 (28,5%)
	Plates	40	15 (37,5%)
Situation	Professionals	26	10 (38,4%)
	Conscripts	24	8 (33,3%)

RESULTS

36% of the 50 men revealed some depressive symptoms (HARD > 17), which were generally mild (HARD ≤ 35) but in one case were of moderate severity.

58.5% of the married men had such mild symptoms compared to 25.0% of the single group (see table 2) and this difference was statistically significant ($n = 1$, $p < 0.01$).

All the married men, excepting for one, were professional naval personnel.

TABLE 2—Depressive symptoms according to the civil status

	Married	Single	Total
Hard > 17	9 (58,5%)	9 (25,0%)	18
Hard ≤ 17	5	27	32
Total	14	36	50

$X^2 = 6.75$, $n = 1$, $p < 0.01$

There was a trend, during the voyage, for an increase in the prevalence in depressive symptoms, but this was not statistically significant, and there were no other statistically significant findings.

DISCUSSION

Despite prior screening for psychiatric morbidity, the prevalence of depressive symptoms was high in this population (36%) compared to other surveys, in which the prevalence varied between 6% (New Haven 76) to 16% (Kansas City 71-74)¹⁵.

The discrepancy may result from the use of different rating instruments, and the recording of minor symptoms. On the other hand, moving home¹⁶ and isolation from the social network¹⁻³ are potent factors promoting depression.

The high prevalence of depressive symptoms amongst married men, 58.5% against 25.0% in the single group, is contrary to that found in other studies^{15,17-19}. The interpretation is confounded by the fact that the married men were, excepting for one, permanent naval personnel, where as the unmarried men were recent recruits undergoing a training voyage. However, the recruits were experiencing altered social roles and it might reasonably have been expected that the recruits were exposed to a more threatening and novel experience¹¹⁻¹³. Duodenal ulcers were common during initial training in an analogous American situation⁸.

Separation from the supportive network of the family, seemed to override the protective effect of being married in the population under study. Aneshensel and Stone¹⁰ have shown that the absence of social support is itself a source of stress, even when other stressors are absent, and separation from wives can be conceived as a loss event that outweighed the camaraderie of the men, which, again, would be more highly developed amongst the career sailors. (Nevertheless, such camaraderie is uniquely valuable under the additional stress of combat, when empathetic understanding is high and appreciated)²⁰.

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