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BACKGROUND

- The National Guard is a critical component of disaster response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding mental and behavioral health experiences of service members who activated in support of COVID-19 helps protect the force and optimizes readiness for additional waves of COVID-19 and similar future threats.
- This study provides a descriptive overview of posttraumatic stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms and decreased work productivity in New York National Guard (NYNG) service members who activated in response to COVID-19.

METHODS

Procedures

- A collaborative effort between the National Guard Bureau's Warrior Resilience and Fitness Division and the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
- Self-report surveys distributed via e-mail to all NYNG (Army and Air Force) service members
- Data collected between August and November 2020
- Participation was voluntary and anonymous

Participants: n = 1478 NYNG service members who activated in response to COVID-19

- Gender:** 83% male; 17% female
- Age:** 79% were 39 years old or younger
- Race:** 67% White; 33% non-White
- Marital Status:** 60% not currently married; 40% currently married
- Military Affiliation:** 88% Army NG; 12% Air NG
- Rank:** 80% Enlisted; 20% Officers

Measures

- Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms & Probable PTSD:** 4-item short form of the PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (Weathers et al., 2013)
 - Assessed presence and severity of DSM-5 PTSD symptoms over the past month: 1) Suddenly feeling or acting as if the stressful experience were happening again; 2) Avoidance of external reminders of the stressful experience; 3) Distant or cut off from other people; 4) Irritable or aggressive behavior.
 - Response options ranged from 0) Not at all to 4) Extremely, with a possible total score range of 0-16.
 - Scores of 6+ indicated probable PTSD (Zuromsky et al., 2019).
- Symptoms of anxiety and depression:** 4-item Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-4; Kroenke, Spitzer, & Lowe, 2009)
 - Assessed symptoms of anxiety and depression over the past two weeks.
 - Response options ranged from 0) Not at all to 3) Nearly every day, with a possible total score range of 0-12.
 - Total scores were categorized as none to minimal (0-2), mild (3-5), moderate (6-8), or severe (9-12) anxiety and depression symptoms.
- Decreased work productivity (presenteeism): 2 items**
 - Assessed how often respondents experienced loss of concentration and working more slowly than usual over the past four weeks.
 - Response options ranged from 0) None of the time to 4) All of the time.

Although most New York National Guard service members reported doing well following activation in response to COVID-19, a notable minority identified high levels of posttraumatic stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms and work impairment, which are important targets for post-intervention interventions



Statistical Analyses

Mean levels of psychological symptoms (posttraumatic stress, depression, and anxiety) and lower work productivity and rates of PTSD were computed using descriptive statistics.

RESULTS

Activation

- Most NYNG service members (90%) reported less than one week between notification and activation
- 49% had less than two days to prepare
- Limited preparation time is significant, as 59% had a civilian job

Post-Activation

PTSD

- Mean (SD) total score = 1.50 (2.75); Range = 0-16
- Probable PTSD rate (6+ cut-off score) = 9%

Depression and Anxiety

- 80%** reported **No to Minimal Depression and Anxiety** (total score 0-2 out of a possible 12); Mean (SD) = 0.30 (0.67)
- 7%** reported **Moderate to Severe symptoms** (total score 6-12)
- Probable Anxiety & Depression rates (3+ cut-off score) = 9% and 7%, respectively

Lower Work Productivity

- 6% reported lower work productivity most or all of the time

CONCLUSIONS

- Most NYNG service members reported doing well post-activation.
- A notable minority identified high levels of psychological symptoms and work impairment, which are important targets for post-activation interventions, and inform programs that could be implemented in preparation for disaster activations.
- Further study of NYNG service members before, during, and following activation is needed to better understand the factors that may influence psychological and occupational functioning following disaster response, and to prepare service members for future activations.
- Factors that may influence post-activation psychological and occupational responses:
 - Before activation:** Financial concerns, personal COVID-19 experience/exposure
 - During activation:** Assignment to high stress work tasks
 - Following activation:** Relationship difficulties, financial problems, and health concerns
- The role of social support from family and friends, unit members, and leadership may influence the relationship of disaster activation to post-activation psychological and behavioral functioning, and should be examined in future research.