

KEYNOTE



Plain language summary

Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research Forum 2024: Keynote Presentation by Dr. Dawne Vogt

WIDENING THE LENS: SUPPORTING VETERAN MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

OVERVIEW

Invisible. It's a word frequently used to describe the gender gap in military health and well-being research and programming. Forum keynote speaker Dr. Dawne Vogt, Research Scientist with the National Center for PTSD at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Professor of Psychiatry at Boston University, made a strong case for widening the lens in research focused on Veterans to include women's perspectives.

Dr. Vogt and her colleagues are applying a holistic approach to studying military populations while drawing from women's experiences to examine the:

- Impact of deployment stress exposure on the mental health of Veterans
- Success of Veterans in navigating the transition from military service to civilian life

WHY IT MATTERS

The number of women in the military continues to increase in Canada and the U.S. While women represent a priority population, they continue to be underrepresented in the historically male-dominated military culture. Women Veterans are more likely to:

- Be at an increased risk for poor mental health and well-being
- Identify with other minority ethnic and racial identities
- Hold minority sexual identities

These identities introduce unique challenges for women Veterans. Research aims to understand the unique issues women experience to support and improve their outcomes, leveraging the strengths they bring to military service.

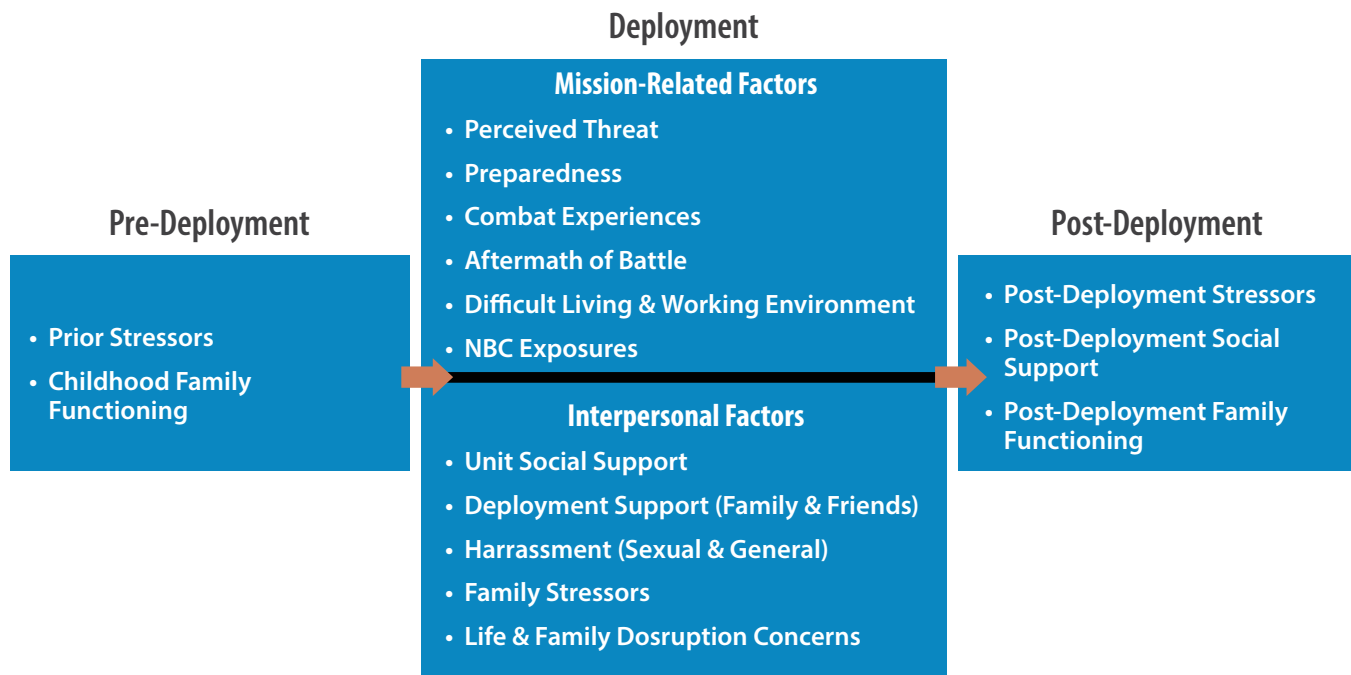
The Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) works to engage academic and government researchers, facilitate new research, increase research capacity, and foster knowledge translation. CIMVHR hosts an annual Forum that brings together thought leaders to present new research, exchange ideas, share insights, learn, and collaborate with the shared objective of serving military and Veteran health needs.

DEPLOYMENT STRESS EXPOSURE AND MENTAL HEALTH

Previous research on deployment stress exposure has focused on the impact of combat on mental health, primarily using male subjects. Dr. Vogt's team is broadening the scope of deployment stress research to address interpersonal risk and protective factors across a lifespan, such as family dynamics and support. The team developed the Deployment Risk and Resilience Inventory Framework, which assesses a series of factors that can impact mental health beyond combat.

The framework draws the line between what happens in a war zone and what occurs at home. A key goal is to understand the factors that uniquely impact minority populations, in particular, women Veterans. For example, sexual harassment is more likely to be experienced by women.

Deployment Risk and Resilience Inventory Framework



Insights from the larger Veteran population

- **Interpersonal context matters.** Combat experience is important; however, interpersonal factors also predict who will be more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- **Combat stress impacts are reduced when families are doing well.** A person's risk for poor mental health problems after combat exposure is reduced when family stress is low.

Insights from women Veterans

- **Harassment is a substantial concern for women.** Women experience sexual harassment and harassment related to their gender identity. This experience impacts women's mental health.
- **Family stress has a more negative impact on women.** Women who experience more family stress during deployment have poorer post-deployment outcomes than men.

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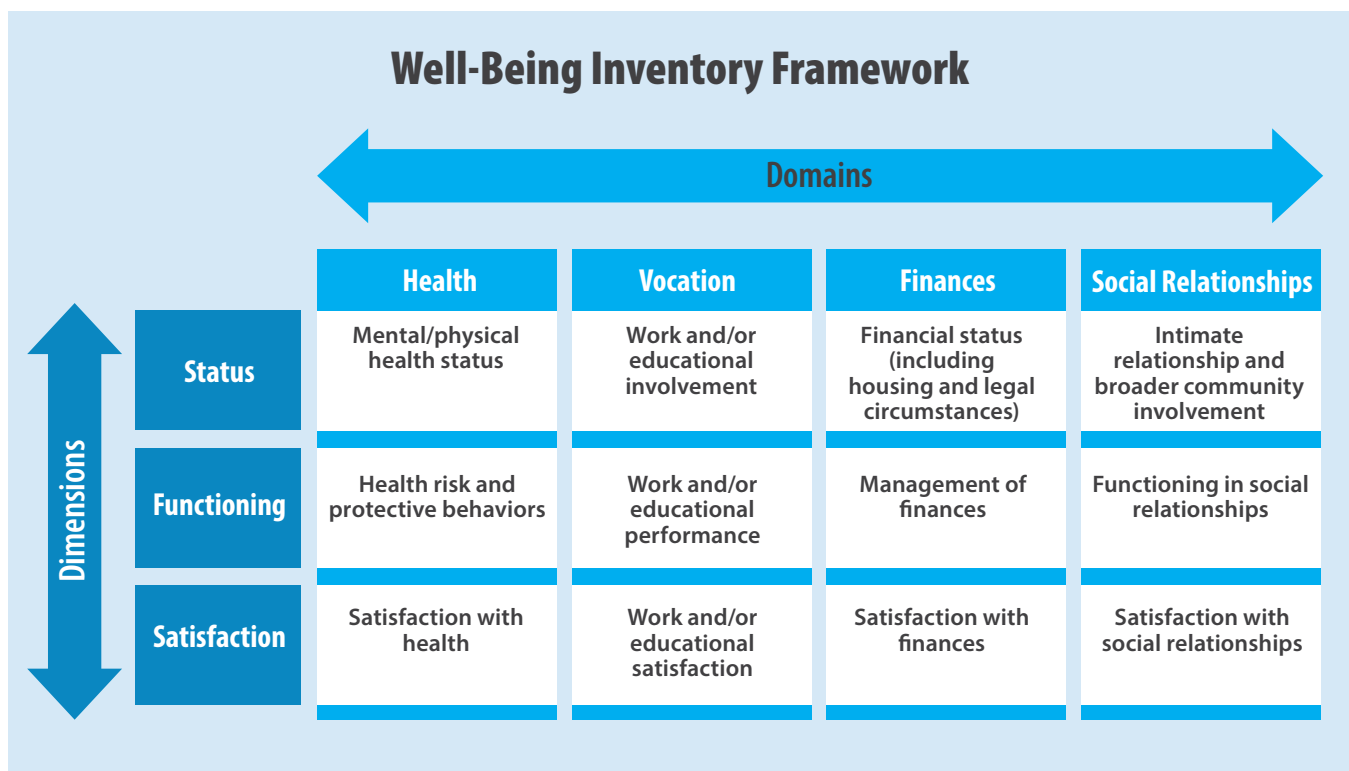
MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TRANSITION

Dr. Vogt and her team are also examining how Veterans navigate the transition from military to civilian life once they leave the service. This is a key intervention point in the VA's mental health and wellness work, where they address questions such as:

- How can we help people better navigate the transition out of service?
- How can we intervene early to get them on a better trajectory?
- What can we do to identify where people are struggling and get them in early to support them towards a better path?

Well-being framework

To encourage healthcare providers to support Veterans across all relevant aspects of their post-military lives, the team introduced the Well-Being Inventory Framework, which considers Veterans' well-being across four domains: health, vocation, finances, and social relationships.



Insights from the larger Veteran population

- **A significant minority of Veterans experience challenges in the transition to civilian life.** Among the challenges they face, health and financial concerns are most common.
- **Most Veterans report at least one area of higher well-being.** It's important to leverage what is going right to improve outcomes for all Veterans at this critical juncture.
- **Veterans with greater challenges have a higher risk of suicidal thoughts.** The risk of suicidal ideation is increased among those who report more challenges in their work, finances, and social relationships in the first year out of service.

Insights from women Veterans

- **Women are at a greater risk of poor mental health outcomes** after they transition to civilian life.
- **Women are more likely to report financial vulnerability** once they leave the service.
- **Women report greater declines in well-being after leaving military service**, particularly their mental health, health behaviour, and their ability to function well at work and in intimate relationships.

MOVING RESEARCH INTO ACTION

Clinicians are applying these findings and frameworks in clinical settings to better serve Veteran populations with expanded clinical care that addresses mental health and well-being. Examples include:

Sexual harassment programs that aim to reduce the problem and support women and men who experience it.

Tailored transition supports and programs to address the unique needs of women Veterans as they transition to civilian life.

Peer support for women Veterans, including [WoVeN](#), a program that helps women navigate their transition to life after military service.

Future research should aim to apply the frameworks to better understand Veterans with other minority identities. This will offer a better understanding of the specific needs of these sub-groups, including women Veterans with other minoritized identities. It is equally important to study the impact of deployment stress exposure and transition experience outcomes over the long term: For veterans who successfully transition to civilian life, what do their outcomes look like 10 years later?

KEYNOTE



KEY MESSAGES FOR LEADERS AND RESEARCHERS

- **Positive interpersonal factors can mitigate the effects of combat.** When things are going well at home, the negative impact of combat exposure on mental health is reduced.
- **After discharge, women report greater declines in health and well-being.** Health programs and services should address this issue with better supports designed for women Veterans.
- **The military is underutilizing the strengths women bring to the service.** With a better understanding of women's unique experiences, the military will be better positioned to support them and leverage their strengths.
- **Suicide prevention and treatment programs must consider how well Veterans are doing in aspects of their life that extend beyond mental health.** These programs should aim to support better financial, social, and vocational outcomes.

This is a plain language summary of the plenary session, "Widening Our Lens to Better Support the Mental Health and Well-Being of both Women and Men Veterans," at the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) Forum on October 23, 2024, in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Speaker: Dawne Vogt, PhD., Research Health Scientist, National Center for PTSD, VA Boston Healthcare System and Professor of Psychiatry, Boston University School of Medicine

See the video: https://youtu.be/9Tf8O80u_v8?si=BiDBWorosXUp_Ykx