

## **Risk And Resilience Factors Associated With Mental Health Outcomes In OIF/OEF Veterans**

(Melissa Polusny, PhD)

Over 1.4 million military service personnel have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan with 600,000 OIF/OEF combat veterans already discharged from active duty and eligible for VA care. These veterans are at increased risk for PTSD, depression, and anxiety. Most of what is known about traumatic stress and mental health comes from cross-sectional studies since researchers rarely have the opportunity to collect data from subjects *prior* to their exposure to traumatic events. Thus it is virtually unknown how pre-deployment characteristics might confound and predict post-deployment outcomes.

Dr. Polusny and her research team have developed an unprecedented program of longitudinal risk and resiliency research focused on National Guard soldiers and their families. Currently, over 2,600 Minnesota National Guard soldiers are deployed to OIF with the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade Combat Team of the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (1/34 BCT). Dr. Polusny's team traveled to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, where the 1/34 BCT was preparing for deployment to Iraq and successfully collected baseline measures of risk and resilience from a large, representative cohort of 530 male and female soldiers prior to deployment. Dr. Polusny was recently funded by the Department of Defense (DoD) to follow this well-characterized cohort over time and will be able to identify pre-deployment predictors of post-deployment mental health functioning and reintegration. This team has also received support to conduct an unprecedented in-Iraq assessment of the entire 4,000-person brigade's experiences to date, including exposure to mild concussive shock blasts (that might be missed by the post-deployment DoD screener). Dr. Polusny's team has also received support to conduct initial clinical diagnostic interviews with all surviving soldiers as they return from Iraq. Over the next few years her team will pursue funding to collect critical one-year and two-year follow-up clinical interview data from this cohort.

Dr. Polusny's research program will significantly advance understanding of the natural course of post-deployment adjustment; define factors that predict resilience and recovery; identify veterans most at risk for developing long-term mental health problems in the wake of acute trauma; and reveal critical time points for intervention. Additional initiatives over the next several years will investigate the impact of PTSD and deployment stress on veterans' relationship functioning (a VA/DoD priority area); evaluate the effectiveness of reintegration interventions for resilience in OIF/OEF veterans; measure the health economics of deployment; and describe gene-environment predictors of resilience in combat veterans.