

Shifting Gears: Driving behaviors and driving-related anxieties in United States soldiers post-deployment from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

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Introduction

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom [OIF/OEF]) require extensive land travel. Insurgents' improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have led to specific combat driving maneuvers to minimize exposure to attack. For example, vehicles drive down the middle of the road or off road to avoid road debris that might hide IEDs; speed to reduce exposure; and avoid unplanned stops, including those associated with intersections or yielding right of way. These maneuvers become ingrained and automatic. As troops reintegrated back to US and UK communities, anecdotes emerged describing combat driving carryover. This paper describes the incidence and timeline of driving behaviors and driving-related anxieties in a sample of normal (non-diagnosed) troops.

Objectives

1) Describe timeline, incidence, and predictive factors associated with post-deployment combat driving behaviors and driving-related anxieties, 2) Discuss occupational therapy's role in troops' reintegration to civilian driving.

Methods

A convenience sample of 199 US troops was surveyed (150 post-OIF/OEF; 49 non-OIF/OEF). OIF/OEF troops were surveyed at 30, 60, and 90 days post-deployment. The survey produced scores on driving behaviors, driving anxieties, weapons in vehicle, and driving violations. As an external check, a family or friend rated a troop member's driving (sub-sample n= 48).

Results

OEF/OIF troops reported more frequent combat behaviors ($t=3.87$, $p=.001$) and driving anxieties ($t=5.37$, $p=.001$) than non-OIF/OEF. Twice as many OIF/OEF troops kept weapons in their vehicles. Driving behaviors and anxieties reduced significantly by 90 days post-deployment, but OIF/OEF troops still had more driving anxieties than non-OIF/OEF. Family and friends underestimated OIF/OEF troops' driving behaviors and anxieties. A history of combat driving-related trauma was strongest predictor of post-deployment driving behaviors and anxieties ($R^2 = .09$, $p<.001$).

Conclusion

US OIF/OEF troops have a high incidence of combat driving behaviors and driving-related anxieties that cannot be ascribed to their status as military, and is only partially explained by driving-related trauma during combat. Families do not know the full extent of post-deployment driving behaviors or anxieties.

Contribution to practice

Post-deployment driving problems are common and programs should be developed for families and all returning troops, not just those with diagnoses.

