

Not just TV, "Army Wives" eases stress on spouses

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NEW YORK (Reuters) - When "Army Wives" begins a new season on TV this weekend, it will offer fans not only good drama, but an outlet to lessen stress on military spouses, some of whom host viewing parties for the hit show.

Longer, more frequent and more dangerous deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan are increasingly heaping ever more anxiety on U.S. military families, and experts say the same stigma that stops soldiers from seeking help -- it is at odds with the military's macho culture -- also afflicts spouses.

But informal support groups, including some hatched around the Lifetime channel show that has its fourth season premiere on Sunday, are helping to relieve stress by giving overwhelmed wives, and a handful of husbands, a safe, understanding place to vent.

"I think the show makes people feel a little bit more comfortable talking about it, and not necessarily like complainers," said Kristle Helmuth, 23, who hosts "Army Wives" viewing parties at her home near Fort Riley in Kansas.

The show is set on a fictional South Carolina army post and follows four army wives and an army husband who bond over daily challenges and the deployments of their loved ones.

Helmuth, whose husband retired after being injured in a 2007 explosion in Iraq, said she has developed friendships with other army wives in California and New York whom she met online and whose husbands suffered injuries similar to her spouse.

More than 1 million active duty and reserve soldiers serve the U.S. Army, which has done the brunt of the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan with extended duty and repeated deployments.

In Iraq, the percentage of soldiers with marital problems has increased every year since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, according to the Army's 2009 mental health survey.

A study published in the New England Journal of Medicine in January found that army wives whose husbands deployed for one to 11 months were 18 percent more likely to experience depression than women whose husbands stayed home.

When soldiers deployed for longer than 11 months, their wives were 24 percent more likely to suffer depression.

"A PRETTY COOL THING"

While military families with mental health issues can access services such as the Military OneSource program, experts say spouses often resist treatment for fear of appearing weak or harming their spouse's career.

"Mental health is stigmatized and it's hard to get people to access services," said Jaine Darwin, a psychologist and co-founder of Strategic Outreach for Families of All Reservists, which provides free mental health services.

A show like "Army Wives" allows military spouses to see their anxieties mirrored and legitimized, said Darwin.

The show has overcome mixed reviews to earn a loyal following, and it is the highest-rated program in the history of Lifetime, which targets mostly female audiences.

Army spouses say it gives them an excuse to bond with other people going through a similar, highly stressful experiences.

They also appreciate the way it celebrates their sacrifices in front of a civilian audience, given that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have faded somewhat from the public's consciousness, newspaper headlines and nightly TV broadcasts.

"It makes us feel like our life really is unique and this is a pretty cool thing that we do and that we've dedicated our lives to," said Jan Wesner Childs, 42, whose husband is stationed in Iraq and who watches episodes with fellow army wives as well as with her husband.

"A lot of people in the civilian world, or the real world, don't really understand what our life is like and have sometimes a skewed version of it," she said.