Paper ID: 70348
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IAF/IAA SPACE LIFE SCIENCES SYMPOSIUM (A1)
Behaviour, Performance and Psychosocial Issues in Space (1)

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ASTRONAUTS GIVING AND RECEIVING FAMILY SUPPORT IN LONG-DURATION SPACE MISSIONS

Abstract

Extended periods of absence are commonly experienced by astronauts and their families over the course of the spacefarer's career. The need to accommodate demanding training and mission schedules and the inherent risk associated with the profession may strain support resources provided by the family to the astronaut. Additionally, work-related demands may affect the astronauts' own perception of the support they provide to their families. In order to better understand the impact of work-related demands on families during different phases of missions to space, the current study measured changes in 13 astronauts' assessments of support provided to their partners and children, as well as the astronauts' assessments of their family unit as a psychosocial resource. Questionnaires were administered once pre-flight, twice on the International Space Station (ISS), and twice post-flight. The astronauts' perception of the support they provided to their spouses declined after the initial on-orbit period. Ratings of the astronauts' family as a psychosocial resource or source of support also decreased over the duration of the study, with ratings being the highest shortly after arrival to the ISS. Gender effects were noted, with female astronauts having significantly lower ratings of perceived support provided to their partners and lower ratings of overall family support received. Open-ended questions revealed themes in astronauts' efforts to maintain spousal relationships at different stages of the mission. The emphasis was on method and frequency of communication, topics discussed, and topics avoided.