Military Deployment and Family Reintegration

BY MARK C. PISANO, EDD, NCSP, Fort Bragg Schools, NC

Reintegration as a family after military deployment is not always easy, nor is it something that happens naturally. Because reintegration is a process, not an event, it requires time and effort, as well as an understanding that each individual has changed during the separation. In coping with the deployment, each family member may have developed a new perspective on his or her role in the family. The reunion and reintegration can be surprisingly stressful and sometimes painfully disappointing. While different families will manage deployment and return differently, all will benefit from preparation, realistic expectations, and patience.

To come together again as a family requires a shared sense of purpose that can serve as the catalyst for a healthy life at home and in the community. A shared sense of purpose can help families to stay emotionally connected and focus on the same wants and needs. Successful reintegration does not happen overnight; it takes time (as long as 7 months), mutual compassion, strong motivation, and persistence. This handout provides families with suggestions and strategies they can use to create a shared sense of purpose and successful reunion.

CHANGES DUE TO SEPARATION
Families need to recognize the impact of separation on both deployed and nondeployed members. Each will experience changes in roles and sense of purpose, which may create challenges upon the deployed member’s return and hamper efforts to resume normal family life.

Deployed Service Member’s Sense of Purpose During Separation
Several things have shaped the returning service member’s sense of purpose:

- Identification with and a feeling of closeness with the military unit and peers who have shared similar combat-related experiences
- Traumatic events that can be difficult to process and talk about
- Living in a highly structured and efficient routine that yields feelings of comfort and sometimes safety
- Heightened sensory experiences including sights, sounds, and smells
- Modified identity and expanded sense of self-importance shaped by war events
- Feelings of support or lack of support from either the family or the federal government

Nondeployed Spouse’s Sense of Purpose During Separation
During an extensive separation, the nondeployed spouse learns to cope with many changes. The spouse’s sense of purpose has been shaped by:

- New roles and responsibilities, such as paying bills, being the disciplinarian, starting a job outside the home, or enrolling in college. With these new responsibilities and challenges come a sense of pride and self-respect.
- Loss of connection with the support and familiarity of the military community, if the nondeployed spouse has left the base to live with parents or in-laws while the service member is deployed.
- Emotional changes in response to the demands placed on them during the deployment. Some spouses may have embraced their new independence and thrived on it. Others may have found themselves...
resenting the entire deployment and the federal
government for causing the situation. These feelings
often can lead to depression, anxiety, increased alcohol
or substance abuse, and other symptoms of stress.

COMMON CONCERNS OF REINTEGRATION
All family members experience concerns that they may
share or feel indirectly, and that require mutual adjust-
ments and patience.

Reconnecting With Children
Reconnecting with one’s children is an anticipated event
by service members and their spouses. Children react
differently depending on their age and can be shy, angry,
jealous, or confused. Very young children may not even
recognize their returning mother or father, and may need
time to again show their need and love for the deployed
parent. Teenagers’ reactions may be influenced by their
prior relationship with the deployed parent. If the
relationship was positive before deployment, it is likely
to be positive again when the parent returns.

Expectations and Disappointment
Expectations are often high in anticipating the return of the
military service member. The family looks forward to
getting together so life can return to the way it was before
the deployment. Expectations may not be met, as the
service member is exhausted and needs rest from the
stress of travel and feelings of relief to be finally home. Also,
the home setting does not prompt the high adrenaline rush
associated with a war theater, which can lead to a difficult
transition process. It is typical for families to quickly get
back into old bad habits once the service member returns.
Even though there may be a desire to do things better or
differently once the family member returns, families often
find it difficult to change longstanding patterns.

Dealing With Changes Within the Family
Throughout the deployment and especially upon the
return, there are concerns about family members growing
apart. Over time, people change. Children change not only
in their appearance, but also in their emotional matura-
tion. Family members sometimes have to work together to
get to know each other again. The goal should be to grow
close again without giving up individual growth and new
viewpoints. Difficult issues like marital fidelity, money, and
child discipline should be discussed without raising more
anxiety or anger. It will work best if parents can remain
focused on trying to create a shared sense of purpose.

Public Views of War and Military
The public has many different views of war. Media
coverage can promote feelings of American pride but can
also send mixed messages that may undermine the
purpose military families feel about their involvement.
Community support is integral to reintegrating the
service member successfully into both family and
community.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL REINTEGRATION
There are a number of strategies that can help build a
shared sense of purpose and a stronger family following
deployment.

• Communicate expectations in advance. Before the
returning service member arrives back home, let each
other know how you would like your first days
together to unfold.
• Enjoy life. Find and do things that family members
enjoy such as picnics, movies, bowling, or other fun
activities.
• Set aside time to do things as a family, as well as time
for one-on-one activities between the returning
service member and individual family members.
• Experiment with new hobbies that the family might do
together, such as coin collecting or gardening. Family
members can connect in different ways with similar
interests. Even small activities can build a shared
sense of purpose.
• Prepare for short tempers. During the initial transition
of the returning service member, fatigue, worry,
confusion, and loss of patience can often lead to
outbursts. When tempers flare, agree to take time
away from the discussion and return when everyone
feels more calm and relaxed.
• Reach out as a family to thank those people (family,
friends, coworkers, service members) who helped you
and your family during the deployment. Showing
appreciation through writing notes together, calling
people, or visiting will bring a sense of fulfillment and
shared experience.
• Try to remain positive. Keeping a positive attitude and
appreciating what one has is important for the family
during this time.
• Communicate with each other often. This helps to
build a shared sense of purpose. Some topics, such as
traumatic war stories, may be kept private by the
service member. Some service members prefer to
discuss these issues only with fellow service mem-
bers. Other family members should not be offended
by this, as service members often choose to protect
their family from the realities of wartime events.
Instead, communicate in other ways, such as taking
walks, sharing hobbies, drawing, painting, or volun-
teering together.
• Get help when needed. Some circumstances, such as
a physical injury or psychological trauma, will require
additional support and resources. Service members are often hesitant to seek mental health services for fear that this will be perceived as an admission of weakness and jeopardize their careers. Both service member and spouse have experienced worry, fear, uncertainty, and stress that can negatively impact their physical and mental health. Leaving problems unaddressed can only make things worse. Before they can enjoy each other and their families, they must reclaim their own lives.

SUMMARY
Deployments can keep families separated for up to 14 months, while unaccompanied tours are usually a minimum of 2 years. These months and years of being apart can create change in the family structure and functioning. Simply put, people change over time, and reintegration is a process, not an event. It can take as long as 7 months and require much patience from all family members. The initial adjustment period may take several weeks or longer and can at times be awkward. The establishment of expectations is critical prior to the service member’s return. There will be some relearning in those first days as family members become reacquainted with what it is like to be together. Coming together again as a family, and growing as a family, require a shared sense of purpose and the willingness to work together to be part of each other’s everyday lives.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES
Print

Online
Military Homefront: http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil
Military OneSource: http://www.militaryonesource.com

Publisher of books and resource kits for adults and children about deployment and reintegration.

Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Courage to Care Campaign: http://www.usuhs.mil/psy/courage.html

Wide range of fact sheets on deployment and reintegration including Becoming a couple again: http://www.usuhs.mil/psy/RFSMC.pdf

Mark C. Pisano, EdD, NCSP, has been a school psychologist in the Fort Bragg Schools for 27 years. He is also a psychological associate in private practice in the Fayetteville/Fort Bragg, NC area.

© 2010 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270