



Military Deployment and Family Reintegration

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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 adjustments 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 maturation. 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 members. 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 volunteering 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

Armstrong, K., Best, S., & Domenici, P. (2005). *Courage after fire: Coping strategies for troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and their families*. St. Paul, MN: Elva Resa (see <http://www.militaryfamilybooks.com>).

Pavlicin, K. M. (2007). *Life after deployment*. St. Paul, MN: Elva Resa (see <http://www.militaryfamilybooks.com>).

Online

Military Homefront: <http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil>

Military OneSource: <http://www.militaryonesource.com>

MilitaryFamilyBooks.com: <http://militaryfamilybooks.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.pd>

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