Military Deployment: Helping Children and Families Cope

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Military deployments have become more frequent for service members. This is having a significant impact on the functioning of service members’ families and on the reintegration process. While deployments for individual service members used to occur about every 20 months, now it is not unusual for the time between deployments to be only 8 months. For special operations soldiers, it can be as little as 4 months. Consequently, the stress on service members and their families can be tremendous. This guide provides descriptions of the cycles of deployment and tips to help families manage their stress.

PREDEPLOYMENT AND THE ANTICIPATION OF DEPARTURE

Notice for deployment can come months in advance or within only a few hours. For example, the 82nd Airborne prides itself on being able to send a battalion of soldiers anywhere in the world within 24 hours. No matter how much time the family has prior to deployment, stress levels are high. If you know what to expect and can develop a plan for taking care of the household and yourself, you will be better prepared to handle the strong emotions that often come with a deployment.

Strong Emotions

During this stage, it is common for family members to feel anger, sadness, fear, confusion, and nervousness as well as pride. At times, the nondeployed spouse may feel anger that often is directed either at the military service or at the spouse to be deployed. In addition, the family may be torn between supporting the service member to be deployed and seeking family time together. As the service member prepares for deployment, his or her time may be limited and the family may feel unimportant. It is not unusual for marital discord to occur due to the emotional distance created by the preparation for deployment. A new deployment may take place before the family completes the reintegration process from the previous deployment.

Easing Stress Before Deployment

To ease the stress during this stage, parents can talk with children about the deployment and share with them as much as possible about where they are going and what they will be doing there. With younger children, it may be helpful to show them on a map where their parent will be and tell them about the area—the weather, the food to eat, who else will be there, how long the deployed parent expects to be there. Children may be fearful during this stage and may wonder things such as: “Will dad or mom be OK?” “Will I be OK?” “Who will protect our home?” (The latter is the most prominent fear in young children.) Do your best to ease your children’s concerns.

Discuss and agree on how to communicate during the deployment (telephone, e-mail, letters) and how often or at what times, keeping in mind that there may be delays. Will you be able to send a letter or e-mail each day or once a week? How soon can you expect to get a response?

COPING DURING DEPLOYMENT

Even though a parent is deployed, it will be very important to maintain consistency in the family’s routines.

Challenges

With routine comes comfort. During deployment, children are faced with more experiences than nonmilitary children that actually can foster maturity and help them learn the importance of flexibility in day-to-day life. Children are able to develop their relationships with the nondeployed parent and with other
adults who are also in the home (sometimes extended family members move in to help with the children). In most cases, however, the nondeployed spouse will be alone, doing the job of both mother and father.

Raising a family alone is hard enough without the constant worry and uncertainty of the deployed loved one’s safety. Daily and/or evening activities often are centered around a phone call that may or may not come, depending on the service member’s situation. Particularly when feeling overwhelmed with the responsibility of running a household, the nondeployed parent may feel isolated. Most spouses are resilient and can cope, and spouses actually can develop increased self-confidence during the deployment. However, the stress of frequent deployments may make it difficult to find the emotional strength needed.

**Strategies for Coping**

There are many things a family can do to cope during a deployment.

**Nightmares.** It is not unusual for children to have nightmares upon the parent’s departure. One defense against nightmares is to put a pair of the deployed parent’s shoes or boots under the bed as “protection.”

**Family records.** Families report that it is very helpful to have the children keep a listing or calendar of events that can be shared with the parent when he or she returns. Record events such as ballgames, classroom activities, report card days, milestones for babies, and anything else that is significant to the children. Take photos and gather keepsakes.

**Magical thinking.** Children may think, “If only I’d had a better report card, daddy would still be here,” or “If I had done a better job with my chores, mommy would not have left.” Be sure children do not think it is their fault that the parent was deployed. Help them understand they have done nothing wrong and they are needed and valued.

**Homecoming and the Adjustment Period**

The return of the service member is generally a happy and hectic time. Prepare children and extended family members for homecoming and involve them in reunion activities. Talk about realistic plans and expectations for the return and reunion. Sometimes, the military family member returns to a situation where things are in order at home and the reintegration is relatively smooth. At other times, even though excitement and anticipation are high, the homecoming does not live up to expectations, causing resentment and hurt feelings.

The difficulties and strains of return can be surprising and sometimes painfully disappointing to military families. There are steps to take to make the transition home as joyful and stress-free as possible.

**Challenges**

It might be most critical that both spouses prepare to be understanding and patient with each other. Reestablishing relationships will take time and communication. The returning service member may need rest, while the nondeployed spouse may be eager to turn over some of the household responsibilities. Both may feel they have done their part and deserve the other’s attention, but there can be obstacles to overcome. The military member may seem like a different person, affected by posttraumatic stress disorder, possibly physically injured, or struggling with other concerns.

Everyone in the family should expect things to be different and prepare to be flexible. During the time of the deployment, the nondeployed spouse has had a chance to gain skills needed to raise the family alone. The return of the service member changes what has been a set routine. There will be some growing pains in establishing a new routine.

It is common for families to want to spend every moment together with the returning parent. Keep in mind that it is normal for the service member to need personal space upon return. Some service members have reported that one of the biggest adjustments in returning to home is coping with household noise from television, children, video games, and so on.

**Helping Children Adjust**

The returning family member should be sure to talk with the children about what is going on in their lives as well as what he or she has been through. Involve the children in planning for the homecoming and encourage them to express their feelings. Children may have many questions about the service member’s return:

- Will everything be the same?
- Does my dad still need me?
- Will I be able to keep seeing my friends?
- Do my parents still love me?
- What will make mom mad now?

**Elementary school children.** Young children may express intense anger as a way of keeping the returning parent at a distance at first, protecting him or herself from disappointment. Parents should accept the child’s feelings and the returning parent should talk with children about things that interest them, such as storybooks, games, toys, and school.
**Adolescents.** Adolescents can have mood swings and will often have mixed reactions over the days following the deployed parent’s return. Adolescents will most likely be very excited to see the parent again but might be self-conscious about expressing their emotions publicly and more concerned about appearances in front of peers.

**REINTEGRATION AND ADAPTATIONS TO CHANGE**

The reintegration of the service member into his or her family and society can take 6 months or longer.

**Debriefing and stabilizing.** Upon returning from combat, military members are required to attend debriefing classes and are followed medically for potential mental health issues for about a month. They might also work only half days during that time to ease them back into their regular work schedule. During this time, families work to stabilize relationships in the home.

**Addressing combat stress.** Combat stress can severely impact the reintegration process. Military studies report that less than half of returning service members with problems seek help, mostly out of fear of being stigmatized or hurting their careers. Reintegration support must be a community-involved process that provides adequate care for military members and their families before, during, and after the deployment cycle. Communities should not wait for military members and their families to seek help; support should be brought to them.

Repeated and ever-longer war zone tours are putting increased pressure on military families, pushing military member’s suicides to a record high. Reportedly, the primary reason is “failed intimate relationships, failed marriages.” Our military service units have been working to overcome the stigma associated with getting therapy for mental health problems after learning that troops were avoiding counseling out of fear it could harm their careers.

**SUMMARY**

Today, an estimated 700,000 children in America have at least one parent deployed. Having a primary caregiver deployed to a war zone for an indeterminate period is among the more stressful events a child and family can experience. It is also an event that can bring a family closer together through increased recognition and support for individual contributions.

**RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**

**Print**

Canfield, J., Hansen, M. V., & Pederson, C. (2005). *Chicken soup for the military wife’s soul: Stories to touch the heart and rekindle the spirit.* Deerfield Beach, FL: HCI.


**Online**

Military Homefront: [http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil](http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil)

Military OneSource: [http://www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com)

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