

Returning to Family Life After Deployment

Overview

Ways to limit the stresses of return and reunion after deployment.

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Return and reunion after a military deployment can be a time of tremendous happiness and relief. But the transition back to family life can also bring its share of challenges. Fortunately there are steps that both returning service members and their spouses can take to make the return to family life as joyful and stress-free as possible.

Understanding the ups and downs of reunion

Couples who have been separated by military deployment often look forward to a service member's return as a time of happiness, a chance to get back to "normal" life. Children look forward to having a missing parent back at home. The deployed service member looks forward to a joyful reunion and the comforts of home. After a dangerous deployment, families are relieved that the service member is returning home safely.

Perfectly normal feelings

But mixed in with those feelings of excitement and anticipation are also some perfectly normal worries and resentments. Husbands and wives may worry that their spouse has changed -- that there will be new strains in the relationship. They may fear giving up the independence that being apart has allowed them. Or they may resent what they imagine as the freedom the other has enjoyed during deployment. While everyone in the family looks forward happily to getting back together, they may also feel some anger at having been separated in the first place -- a feeling that children sometimes express very openly.

Reunions can be especially challenging if the deployment was longer or more dangerous than usual, if the deployment created serious money problems for the family, if communicating back home was more difficult than expected, if the deployment is just the latest in a series of deployments, or if there are feelings of jealousy or rumors of infidelity.

Initial reunions are often very happy. But because expectations on all sides are so high, they can also be stressful. This is because there can often be a "mismatch" between everyone's high expectations and the reality of family life.

Before the reunion

Despite the best of intentions, the returning service member or the spouse at home may be too exhausted, busy, or anxious to prepare the way they would like to for the reunion. Combined with high expectations for the reunion, this can

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lead to stress. Here are some steps that each of you can take to keep expectations reasonable and the reunion more relaxing:

What you can do

- *Do your best to find out and communicate the details of the return plan*, and to keep yourself and your spouse updated on any changes to the schedule.
- *Make backup plans* in case the flight arrives at a time when the family at home can't be there. This might happen because of a work schedule, children's needs, a family emergency, or simply lack of advance notice. How will the service member get home? Are there phone numbers where the spouse at home can be reached at different times of day and night?
- *Plan something special for each other*. The returning service member might bring gifts for those at home. The spouse at home might plan a simple welcome-back meal.
- *Keep your plans simple and flexible*. Planning a large family gathering the day your service member is scheduled to arrive will be stressful if a flight is delayed or your service member arrives home exhausted.
- *Be ready to be understanding* and forgiving if the reality of the reunion doesn't match your plans and hopes.

The day of the reunion

Be prepared for exhaustion, jet lag, and unpredictability and changes in the return schedule. Be prepared, too, for reactions to the return that aren't what either or both of you may have expected.

The spouse at home may have planned a joyful welcome, for example, with banners, gifts, or favorite foods, only to find the service member too exhausted to notice. A gift from overseas may not be received with the appreciation the returning service member expected. Babies and young children may pull away from or cry at the returning parent's efforts to hold and hug them. (It takes time for young children to get to know a parent again after a long absence.)

What the returning service member can do

- *Be patient if no one is there to meet you when you arrive*. Use your backup plan to call someone or get yourself home. Don't jump to conclusions and take it personally. Understand that changes in your return schedule, a missed message, or family or work responsibilities are probably the reasons, not a lack of desire to see you as soon as possible.
- *Make a conscious effort to make only positive comments* about any changes you notice when you get home. This is extremely important -- you want your family to be glad to have you home. Try to keep this up for at least the first two days.

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- *Look for positive changes*, such as how your children have grown and matured, new skills they have learned, or household improvements your spouse has managed. Tell family members that you are proud of them.
- *Show your appreciation for the extra work your spouse has taken on* while you were away, handling all of the household responsibilities alone. Don't criticize the ways your spouse is handling these added tasks, even if it's very different from how you would do it. Many returning service members feel a little hurt at finding out how well their families have managed without them. Do your best to express this instead as pride in how they've stepped up to new responsibilities.
- *Expect that your children might not welcome you back immediately with smiles and hugs.* Very young children may see you as a stranger at first and be shy or even scared of you. This is nothing personal, it's just the way children are. Be patient as they take the time to get to know you and accept you as a parent again. Older children may be angry at you for being away so long, at least at first. Teenagers may hold back as a way to try on new independence. Try to remember that these are all natural responses for children at different ages.

What the spouse at home can do

- *Do something special to welcome the returning service member home.* Make a banner, prepare a meal with your service member's favorite foods, or have your children make a special homecoming gift. But don't be hurt if your spouse is too tired on first arriving to notice how you've prepared.
- *Expect your returning service member to be a little hurt at seeing how well you have managed on your own.* Explain that while you're proud that you were able to keep things going, you want to get back to sharing those responsibilities. Agree to talk about who will do what now that you're both home -- after your service member has had a chance to rest.

The first week

Husbands and wives often report feeling like strangers to each other in the first hours and days of return, especially after long deployments. Couples sometimes have problems, too, with different expectations about how they'll spend these first few days. A service member looking forward to an escape from the rigid routine of deployment, for example, might not react well to a spouse's tightly scheduled plans for the first few days after return. After an exciting or dangerous deployment, a service member may want quiet time at home. After a dull deployment, the service member may want to get out and do all the activities he or she has been missing.

Both spouses may have trouble with expectations about how quickly the returning service member will take on household tasks. Some service members may want to be included in family decisions right away, while others may want to

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get involved again more gradually, allowing their spouses to make decisions for them for the first few days. The spouse at home may be eager or reluctant to give up some of these decision-making roles.

What the returning service member can do

- *Make time for your family.* Hold off on visits to relatives and limit time with friends until you've settled into a comfortable routine at home.
- *Take time to talk with your spouse.* After a long absence, you need to get to know each other again. You've both had new experiences that may have changed your priorities and your ideas about roles in the marriage and the family. Talking now can help you lay the foundation for a newly strengthened relationship.
- *Expect that intimacy and sexual relations may be awkward at first.* Go slowly. Your time apart really has made you strangers to each other in many ways. Make an effort to be patient and charming, much as you did when you were first dating.
- *Take time to understand how the family has changed while you've been gone.* Don't charge in with your own way of getting things done. Notice how your spouse is dealing with your children's discipline, for example, and restrain yourself from taking over with a tougher or looser approach.
- *Ease back into the relationship and your family.* Understand that your spouse may have grown accustomed to managing more of the household responsibilities, and may not be eager to turn control of them all back to you right away.
- *Spend time alone with each member of your family.* Think of things to do with your children that you each enjoy that will give you time to talk and have fun together in a relaxed way.
- *Watch your spending.* It can be tempting to celebrate your return with dinners out or special gifts. Be careful not to get into debt trouble that could take you months or even years to repay. Time together and attention to each other's needs is far more valuable than anything you can buy -- and you won't have to face the credit card bill the next month.

What the spouse at home can do

- *Don't over-schedule the first days after the return.* The regimentation and strict routine of deployment can leave service members craving unscheduled time and hoping for a relief from constant responsibilities.
- *Don't expect your spouse to jump in and start taking care of household chores and tasks just as before.* The long trip home leaves most service members in need of rest in order to adjust to a change in time zones. Even the change from military food to home-cooked food can be an adjustment. Give it time, talk about what needs to be done, and let your spouse take on household tasks at a pace that's comfortable for both of you.

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- *Spend time talking with each other.* You've both been through separate experiences during your spouse's deployment, and you've both changed in some ways as a result. You've learned how to manage the household on your own and become used to life on your own. Your spouse has faced new experiences, possibly some very intense ones, and has become used to being away from you and the family. Talking can help you get to know each other again, to regain the intimacy you had before, and to rebuild family routines that include both of you.
- *Expect your children to test the rules now that both parents are home.* Whenever there's a change in a family, children work to find out whether it might mean any loosening of limits. Talk with your spouse (when the children can't hear you) to explain any new rules you've set, so that you can present a united front. Together, apply rules fairly and consistently.
- *Watch your spending.* You've managed to a budget during your spouse's deployment. Now that you're back together as a family you'll have some added expenses (another adult mouth to feed, for one thing). Don't lose control of the budget celebrating your spouse's return.
- *Don't give up activities that you enjoy and that help you relax.* If you've adopted an exercise routine, taken up a hobby you like, or joined a regular book group, don't give it up just because your spouse is home. You may need to be flexible to fit these activities into the new family schedule, but do your best to find a way.

Later on

You may have trouble “re-sorting” the way household responsibilities are divided -- who makes which decisions, and who takes care of which household tasks. One of you may want to move more quickly than the other to get back to the way you had split those roles before the deployment, or to change the way those roles are divided now that you have had a chance to try a different way of splitting them. This re-sorting of responsibilities and any other small changes in routine can make one or both of you feel unwanted and unappreciated. Keep in mind that it's common for people to overreact as they readjust to life as a couple.

Differences and problems can arise over children, too. Returning service members sometimes reassert their role as a parent by spoiling the children or by disciplining them too strictly.

If the deployment has caused financial hardship, you and your spouse may react in very different ways now that life is getting back to “normal.” Some people overspend in an effort to catch up with everything they have missed out on during the deployment. Others over-control family spending as they try to get the budget back in balance and cover the extra costs of deployment, such as charges for long-distance phone calls.

Talking through these adjustments can be harder if the service member has seen or experienced violent action during deployment. War is often an ugly business, with many innocent victims, and the experience of war may be hard to talk about, even years later. In time, the service member may want to discuss some of these things if others are willing to listen patiently, without judging.

However, if after several months your service member is still not adjusting well, it may be because of a combat stress injury. Signs include being uncharacteristically angry or depressed, or having trouble sleeping. This can compound any family or relationship problems you may be having. If these symptoms persist, it's important to find a way to get your service member to seek professional help.

What you can do together

There are steps you can take as a couple to help ease the transition or “reintegration” process:

- *Don't force talk about the experience of war, but be open to it when the time is right.* If the service member is not ready to talk about his or her experiences during deployment, don't push it. It's often a better idea for the service member to talk through any tough experiences first with a chaplain, a family service center counselor, or another trusted adviser or friend who has experienced some of the same things. If you do talk about painful experiences as a couple, try hard to listen without judging. The key is to gain your service member's trust, so he or she feels that it's safe to talk with you.
- *Keep talking.* Talk can help you get back together as a couple and as a family. Talk through your differences about expectations, household responsibilities, and decision-making.
- *Keep watching your spending.* Make sure you don't spend more than you're earning.
- *Be patient with each other and with your children.* It takes time to regroup as a family, and you can't rush a natural process. The service member should make a gradual effort to resume his or her role as an engaged parent -- without buying the children's affection through spoiling or forcing their obedience with unnecessarily strict discipline.
- *Seek professional help if you think there is a problem.* Some adjustment problems can be expected after a long or difficult deployment, but if the problems aren't getting better after a few months, it is a sign that you may need some assistance. Don't feel that you have to solve serious problems on your own.

Resources

Remember that talking with a professional can help if you or someone you love is having trouble adjusting to home life after deployment. The problem may heal

on its own, but will usually get better faster with appropriate treatment. This is especially true if a combat stress injury is involved. There is no need to suffer in silence when appropriate treatment can help you get back on track.

The following resources can help:

VA Readjustment Counseling Services

1-800-827-1000

www.va.gov/vcs

Veterans Administration Readjustment Counseling Centers are located in 207 communities around the country. Counselors are knowledgeable veterans who have “been there and done that” and can help with a wide range of issues. Services are free and available to any service member with a campaign ribbon, even if still on active duty.

Your medical provider

Your doctor or medical professional can help determine what may be causing your difficulties and refer you to appropriate specialists for help, as well as prescribe appropriate medications if needed.

Your installation’s support services

Depending on your service branch, your Fleet and Family Support Center, Marine Corps Community Services, Airman and Family Readiness Center, or Army Community Service Center is ready to help you with problems related to returning from deployment, such as relationship problems and combat stress issues.

Military OneSource

This free 24-hour service, provided by the Department of Defense, is available to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve members and their families. Consultants provide information and make referrals on a wide range of issues. You can reach the program by telephone at 1-800-342-9647 or through the Web site at *www.militaryonesource.com*.

Written with the help of Dr. D. Bruce Bell, Dr. Walter R. Schumm, and Dr. Thomas A. Gaskin,