



Resilience in Military Families

As our country has engaged in the Global War on Terrorism, we have seen an increase in the operational tempo for active and reserve servicemen and servicewomen. The increase in activity results in a greater number of deployments in which military family members are geographically separated over prolonged periods of time. This highly stressful separation experience may be one of the most challenging aspects of present-day military life and may contribute to significant family disruption and distress.

Although deployments and family separations are inevitable, there are specific ways for psychologists to assist family members to more effectively cope with the stress that occurs during the deployment cycle, including during the most vulnerable periods of separation, reunion, and postdeployment family readjustment.

The objective of this fact sheet is to provide information to support the psychological resilience of active and reserve military families at all stages of deployment. This fact sheet provides specific examples of ways in which psychologists can assist military family members to more successfully cope with the stress associated with prolonged separation during military operations and campaigns.

Healthy Coping Strategies for Building Resiliency Throughout the Deployment Cycle

Most military families do exceedingly well in handling the demands entailed in military life. Also, even among those who have difficulty for a period, most will make it through trying periods with flying colors. This said, most families will also experience difficulties handling stress at times, and some families will have particularly trying times. The following are some ideas compiled by experts who themselves are part of the military family and who have learned from the experience of others.

- *Relationships*

Encourage family members to stay connected with friends, loved ones, and coworkers. This will enhance communication and provide opportunities to discuss feelings.

- *Energy*

Being resilient is an active and interpersonal process. Examples of active coping strategies people can use to maintain energy

include exercise (e.g., regular walking), eating healthy and nutritious meals, and taking part in outdoor activities (e.g., gardening, going to the park or beach) with others.

- *Spiritual needs*

Promote staying connected or reconnecting with faith-based organizations. Military chaplains can play a vital role in operational or postdeployment adjustment. Quiet meditation and deep breathing exercises can also feel spiritually uplifting and relaxing.

- *Intimacy*

Help the family to share their feelings and concerns with other families and close friends experiencing the stress of separation. Support groups can serve as an especially important social network and safe environment to address the specific needs of military family members.

- *Ways to stay positive*

Assist family members with positive cognitive reframes in order to focus on positive aspects of life. Family members may benefit from being reminded about those areas of life for which they feel most thankful and appreciative, as well as being reminded about maintaining positive expectations (hope and trust) about future events.

- *Family's involvement in health care*

Both during and after deployment, servicemen and servicewomen and family members may be concerned with medical and behavioral issues. It is important that family members discuss these concerns with each other and stay actively involved in seeking out the proper care. Be active in the process of helping the family return to optimal physical and behavioral health and functioning.

- *Reintegration as an evolving process*

Reintegrating into family life after a military deployment can be a long and complex process. Providing a continuum of care over time is the best strategy to help the family to continually incorporate healthy coping and resilience into their life.

- *New ways of coping*

Family members should be encouraged to seek out new and innovative ways of healthy coping that work best for them. Most importantly, family members should continue to use these coping tools throughout the deployment cycle in order to stay relaxed and to minimize their stress.

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- *Caring for needs*

Teach family members that being passive about either their health or emotional needs will not help them. Provide practical information about the many services, resources, and professionals available at your local military hospital that can help the family.

- *Everyday*

Being healthy and resilient requires everyday attention. Help the family to stay active and involved in the process every day.

Special Issues

- *Feeling lonely*

It is a common reaction for both servicemen and servicewomen, as well as their families, to feel lonely during deployment. After all, loved ones are far away. During the deployment, the family member may forget how much his or her partner, father, mother, sister, or brother was also a friend and confidant. What is perhaps surprising is that this loneliness can recur after families are reunited. It's like being at a party, but feeling alone.

Disclosing ideas, thoughts, memories, and feelings is important in preventing and limiting loneliness. The opposite of loneliness is a sense of closeness and attachment, and people achieve this by sharing and communicating. It is just as important to have confidants on the battlefield or at base camp as it is at home.

Finally, remember that loneliness may be accompanied by anger or depression. Expect a little hostility or withdrawal during and following stressful periods and separations. If these feelings become too severe or overwhelming, the family should be encouraged to seek help from a mental health professional.

- *Disclosure and communication*

Oftentimes, servicemen and servicewomen and family members will ask mental health professionals about disclosing information about events and experiences that occur during deployment. For example, "Do I tell them everything that happened? Do I share horrors of war? Do I complain about every problem the teenagers gave me at home while he was away? Do I tell my buddies every detail about my marriage?" The answer is that family members need to use their judgment in order to not overwhelm the other person. Too much, too soon of any difficult information and emotions can overwhelm the teller and the listener. With fellow service personnel, suggest that they share what they feel comfortable with, but also encourage them to have a few people that they feel they can talk with about personal matters. During the period of return and reunion, let the family members know to take time just to be together, reestablish the positives in their relationship, and

then set aside time to talk about problems, to work through difficulties, and to work together.

Family members can also be taught to be active listeners. For example, the listener can be instructed to not get defensive or feel they have to "solve" problems. Often the family member just wants to ventilate, to be heard, to be validated, to be held, to be told that we did something important...for each other, for our family, for our nation. Helping the family to learn effective communication is a crucial aspect of the family's building resilience.

Reunion and Postdeployment Family Readjustment

The Three Rs of Reunion

According to research on military family reunion after a deployment, the three Rs of reunion are return, readjustment, and reintegration.

- *Return is the physical coming together after separation.* It may be a highly stressful experience because it necessitates change. However, homecoming rituals, informal greetings, and formal return celebrations may reduce the stress during the return phase. The important purpose of these rituals is to reinforce for the returning military family member that he or she is no longer at war and needs to readjust to normal family life.

- *Readjustment phase is a time for adaptation or adjusting to the changes that have occurred in each family member during the separation.* This phase can be problematic for the family because of unfulfilled expectations that the family will immediately return to predeployment levels of interaction, intimacy, and communication. Family problems that existed before the deployment may still be present.

- *Reintegration phase is the final step to restoring the family union.* During the separation, family members developed new roles and behaviors, but now as the family comes back together, those changes must be integrated into or rejected from the family structure. Simply going back to the status quo (i.e., old way of doing things) generally results in a dysfunctional union where family members may be dissatisfied. Thus, spending time negotiating what changes will be accepted and what changes will be rejected in the new family system becomes critical for successful reintegration. If this is not accomplished, the quality of the reunion is diminished.

During the entire postdeployment or reunion phase of the deployment cycle, there are actions that may be taken to minimize the effect of the stress of being reunited with family members, whether they are a single service member, a single-

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parent service member, a married service member without children, or a married service member with children. The following are some ideas to help plan the reunion phase.

Plan for the Reunion

The family members may not realize it, but the return home may be as stressful as other phases of deployment, even though they may see this time as a happy homecoming. Oftentimes, family member expectations make the difference between a positive experience and a negative experience. Change is to be expected in all family members. During the separation, everyone experienced changes in emotion, level of independence, and everyday roles. As family members are coming back together, those role changes may not be easily reversed. Family members should expect to make small gradual changes to reestablish or readjust family roles. They should also expect that family problems that existed before deployment will still be there when they return. And, they should expect family members to be anxious about the process of being reunited with their family. Based on the experience of others who have deployed in the past, some actions may be considered to ease the stress of being reunited with loved ones.

All family members

- Actively support and participate in the command's Deployment Cycle Support plan. This is a process managed by unit leaders to make the transition as smooth as possible.
- Get reacquainted by spending time talking with and listening to family members.
- Expect that everyone will need time to readjust to living together.
- Expect everyone to be changed by the experience of being separated.
- Talk about the changes in everyone and discuss what changes should be integrated into the family.

Service members

- Talk about the positive things your family accomplished while you were gone.
- Talk about the various roles and responsibilities that were established within the family while you were gone.
- Delay assuming old family responsibilities and roles until you have talked about them.

- Ask family members if they want to hear about your experiences before sharing them.
- Engage in romantic talk with your spouse.

Spouses

- Temporarily slow down your pace of life.
- Let your spouse know that he or she is still needed within the family.
- Slowly adjust or shift responsibilities between you and your spouse.
- Maintain the family budget until you talk about changes with your spouse.
- Engage in romantic talk with your spouse.

Regarding children

- Allow children to resume their relationship bond with the returning spouse at their own pace.
- Schedule a special time just for children and the service member parent.
- Take your time returning to the old family rules and routines.
- Be encouraging by praising your child more than criticizing him or her.
- Keep in mind that the most change occurs in children.

Postdeployment: Possible Red Flags

It is possible that the psychological effects of combat, prolonged separation, role changes in the family, and reunion may continue over time. Identification of these red flags may indicate that professional assistance is required. What are the important red flags to look for?

- Feeling depressed—the individual feeling down for a week or more where he or she can't seem to get back up
- Marked weight loss or gain
- The individual feeling like he or she can't stop reliving terrible events that occurred
- Anxiety that becomes hard to bear
- Ongoing difficulties falling asleep or staying asleep
- Individuals' avoidance of situations that remind them of terrible events that happened and their starting to limit their lives

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- Avoidance/isolation from others
- Personnel or work problems
- Irritability, angry outbursts
- Blaming others/externalizing
- Substance use
- Marital and family problems
- Inability to reconnect with family and community

Besides the helpful information discussed above, for those individuals near an established military organization (Post, Base, National Guard, or Reserve Unit) joining a support group may be very beneficial. By joining a support group, individuals may learn new coping strategies for successfully managing the deployment process as well as share like experiences with others (Blount, Curry, & Lubin, 1992).

There is a toll-free telephone number (available 24 hours a day) for information and referral services for soldiers, marines, and their families sponsored by the U.S. Army Community and Family Support Center. It is fully operational for Army installations and U.S. Army Reserve components worldwide. From the United States, callers can dial (800) 464-8107. From outside the United States, they can dial the appropriate access code to reach a U.S. number and then (800) 464-81077—all 11 digits must be dialed. Hearing-impaired callers should use (800) 364-9188, and Spanish speakers can dial (888) 732-9020.

Sources of Additional Information for Military Families

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
<http://www.cdc.gov>

Tricare National and Regional toll free contact numbers:
<http://www.tricare.osd.mil>

U.S. Army Center for Health Protection and Preventive Medicine:
<http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil/deployment/deploymentlinks.asp>

U.S. Army Soldier and Family Support Center:
<http://www.armycommunityservice.org>

American Psychological Association: www.apa.org

Additional Resources

Getting help when it is needed is an important aspect of taking care of oneself, and it can also contribute to resilience. In addition to turning to family members and friends for assistance, a person can take other helpful actions, including joining community support or self-help groups, reading books about how others have successfully managed hardships and challenges, and gathering related information on the Internet (though quality can vary by source).

One online resource that may be a good place to start is the **APA Help Center at www.APAHelpCenter.org**.

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