

Resources for Educating About Deployment and You

The dictionary states that a reunion is the reuniting of people after a period of separation.

Getting Back Together

Expectations and fantasies are an important part of our lives. It does not matter if expectations are joys or concerns about homecoming and reunion.

No matter what you daydream about, you may not be physically or mentally able to carry out some of your expectations and fantasies.

There is no way to predict what homecoming and reunion will really be like.

One thing to remember is that not only will you have changed, but so will have the people you are returning to.

All the problems you left behind will not have magically disappeared. All the expectations you have about your reunion may not happen.

Thus, it is important to understand and accept that things back home will probably be different from what you expect.

Accepting change is a major factor in reestablishing yourself when you return from a deployment.

Keeping this change factor in mind. Ask the people you'll be returning to about their joys and concerns. Do you think their list would match with yours?

Many of their expectations may be the same, but some may be very different. We are beginning to understand that our expectations and theirs may not coincide.

Ways to Communicate

A key to understanding different expectations is in how well we have communicated during the deployment and how well we will communicate when the deployment has ended.

Letters and cards are the least expensive way to communicate. Sometimes, phone calls are available during a deployment, but phone calls can be very expensive. Cassette tapes and videotapes are also good methods of communication.

What can you say or write besides reporting the current weather conditions, or discussing how tired you are of the food in the mess tent?

Before your return, you can start talking and writing about some of your expectations. Lines of communications should be open and two-way. Encourage your loved ones to communicate their expectations for reunion.

Some **joy** expectations you might share:

- That you would like to go to a movie when you return.
- That you would really like a quiet evening alone.
- In return, ask them what they are looking forward to.

You could also begin to share some of your **concern** expectations.

- Your old job will seem rather tame after the adventure of a deployment.
- You may confide that you are concerned about what your relationship will be like with the children, your spouse, with your mother or father, or with your friends.

Continuous communication during separation plays a critical role in maintaining an emotional bond between the soldier and that back home.

By expressing your expectations before you return and by asking the people you are returning to about **their** expectations, you are establishing a line of communication that will cross many barriers and minimize problems when you return.

Intimate Relationships

Among the major adjustments you face when you return are your intimate and sexual relationships. The best thing you can do is to go slowly. Don't anticipate "normal" sexual relations for a few days.

You and your partner are likely to feel like strangers with each other, and strangers do not have good sexual relations.

Take the time to reestablish your sexual relationship naturally. Rushing sexual relations can create major communication problems.

A few ideas that may be helpful during this period of adjustment are:

- Try not to rush
- Talk a lot about how you feel, and . . .
- Ask how your partner feels regarding intimacy and sexual matters

No matter how well prepared you are or how well you communicated during deployment, there are many adjustments to make upon returning.

Changes that occurred while you were away may cause you to adjust your way of thinking.

Expectations of Change

You can view change in two different ways. One way to view change is as a crisis or threat. The other way is to view change as either a hidden opportunity or as a slight disruption in the way things used to be.

If change is viewed as a crisis or threat, people try to pretend the change did not happen. They may use inappropriate coping strategies. They may avoid or deny the change. They may spend time wishing things were the way they used to be.

Another poor coping mechanism people sometimes use is to blame everyone else and everything else for the change. This negative behavior only leads to a dead end and may cause even more problems.

If change is viewed as a hidden opportunity or merely as a slight disruption in the way things used to be, then it usually is more readily accepted.

People who view change in this positive way acknowledge that change has occurred, and that it can become an accepted part of life. Often, this view of change mobilizes people into new ways of thinking, which leads to a fresh beginning.

What changes might have happened while you were gone?

Ideally, all change should be viewed as hidden opportunity. Remember that no matter how accepting of change you are, it takes time for the impact of change to become integrated into your way of thinking or acting.

There is no definite period for change to begin to feel normal. On average, it takes several weeks or even months, depending on the length of separation, and on your acceptance of change.

Areas of Readjustment

These areas include family, social, environmental, and military and civilian employment.

Family

The first area we will discuss is family. Remember that family can be blood relatives or those people in your life to whom you feel very close.

Reestablishing Intimate and Sexual Relations

One adjustment you may face when military separation occurs is reestablishing your intimate and sexual relationships. Most military couples face the question, "How can two people work together toward achieving intimacy when one of them is often absent from the relationship for extended periods?" Military couples often find that reunion may bring out feelings of uneasiness, and that their personal relationship is strained. Through an understanding of the effects of separation, you can better cope with the stress that accompanies reunion.

The following information about communication barriers and enhancers may help you to reconnect with your partner

Barriers to intimate communication and sexual relations:

- Unrealistic fantasies and expectations.
- Feeling anxiety about engaging in intimacy and sex.
- Feeling that your partner is a stranger.
- Feelings of anger, hostility, stress, or negative feelings about the separation.
- Concern about faithfulness to your relationship.
- Feeling that sexual relations need to be rushed to make up for lost time.

Communication enhancers:

- Communication will help bring you closer together. It gives you time to become reacquainted, and helps to let your partner know how you feel.
- Understand that feelings of anxiety are a very normal part of the reunion process.
- You have been apart from each other and you both have grown. Take time to get to know each other again.
- Discuss your negative feelings and frustrations. Fear of losing your partner plays a major role in developing negative feelings. Listen carefully to what your partner is trying to communicate to you.
- Don't assume the worst about your partner. If you have concerns about fidelity, talk to your chaplain or find a counselor who can help you work through these feelings.
- Besides communication, allow yourself time to readjust to being together again. Go slowly and enjoy your reunion.

Social

The second area of readjustment is social. Soldiers you met during the deployment will be returning to their homes. Others will go on leave to visit family. Still others will be transferred or sent to school. The camaraderie you have experienced may no longer be there.

You may suddenly feel like you're all alone because those you were close to are no longer around. Friends you had before deployment may have moved or established other interests.

Environment

The third area of readjustment is environment. Environment can be everything from getting behind the wheel of your car, to the weather, to what is the latest in music, clothing, or TV shows.

Environment can also mean how well the community will accept you. Keeping these things in mind, complete the third column.

Military And Civilian Employment

The final area of readjustment is your career.

- Have people been transferred?
- Is your old job available, or has someone else taken it over?
- Are there new people in the organization?
- What is your view of how you will be received if you are returning to your military assignment or former employer?
- Are the old familiar faces still there?
- Has the boss changed?
- Is the management style different or the same?

A lot may happen while you are gone. There is always the tendency to take the negative, or crisis, view of change. This is normal.

Some people want to overdo, catch up on time they have missed, spend money, and generally go full speed ahead without much direction. The most important thing to remember is to go slowly.

Reestablish a network of support with your loved ones and try not to let the stress of adjustment overtake you.

The very act of being away from and returning to your loved ones can cause stress.

Stress

A point to remember is that people back home experienced different types of stress than you did. You had the opportunity to focus almost exclusively on your job while you were away.

Your loved ones, on the other hand, not only maintained the day-to-day tasks that already existed, but they may also have had to take on many of your day-to-day tasks.

Children had to cope with stress and uncertainty in their lives due to the separation. A returning soldier must understand that change is often frightening for a child.

Depending upon the duration of the separation, a parent(s) may seem like a stranger, especially to younger children.

Soldiers with children may have to restart their relationship with their children. This can be a very stressful period for the child and the parent. Remember that both you and your children have experienced changes. Work slowly and lovingly to reestablish your bond.

Homecoming and Reunion Stress

Whether you are a single or a married soldier, a single-parent soldier, a spouse, or a child, you will face certain stressors associated with Homecoming and Reunion. Below are some of the normal stressors you may face, along with some hints to help you adjust to the changes in your life.

Stressors

- Emotional letdown
- Restlessness or sleeplessness
- No one understands what I have been through
- Was my spouse faithful?
- Did my spouse miss me?
- My friends seem different
- I didn't expect things to change
- Other people's concerns seem petty

Homecoming and Reunion

- I feel like a stranger at home
- How will the children react?
- Will the role I have filled change?
- Were my children treated well by their guardian?
- Can I make up for lost time?
- Did I handle things the right way?
- When will things feel normal again?
- I am concerned about finances
- I am concerned about future deployments
- The children appear confused and uncertain

Helpful Hints

- Accept that things may be different
- Talk about your experiences
- Go slowly—don't try to make up for lost time
- Spend quality time with your children
- Reassure your children. Change often frightens them
- Curb your desire to take control or to spend money
- Accept that your partner may be different
- Intimate relationships may be awkward at first
- Take time to get reacquainted
- Forget your fantasies. Reality may be quite different
- Take time to readjust
- Communicate with your partner and your family

Stress Symptoms

The following Stress Danger Signals focus on the medical and physical symptoms common to tension stress.

Your physician can best determine your medical condition, but these guidelines will provide you with a general indication of your stress level. Check those signals that you have noticed:

- General irritability, hyper-excitability, depression
- Pounding of the heart
- Dryness of mouth and throat
- Impulsive behavior, emotional instability
- Overpowering urge to cry or run
- Inability to concentrate, flight of thoughts
- Feelings of unreality, weakness, dizziness, fatigue
- Floating anxiety, being afraid and not knowing why
- Emotional tension and alertness
- Trembling, nervous tics, easily startled
- High-pitched, nervous laughter
- Stuttering, other speech difficulties
- Bruxism, or grinding of the teeth
- Insomnia
- Hyperactivity, increased tendency to move about
- Excessive sweating
- Frequent need to urinate
- Diarrhea, indigestion, queasiness, vomiting
- Migraine headaches
- Pain in neck or lower back
- Loss of appetite or excessive appetite

Homecoming and Reunion

- Increased use of prescribed drugs
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Nightmares
- Accident proneness

The more signs that are present, the stronger the likelihood that there is a serious problem. See your physician if you are concerned about these symptoms.

Reunion Stress-Coping Strategies

Most military families find that reunions are at least as stressful as separations. This seems to be true for couples with children, couples without children, single parents, and single soldiers coming back to friends and family. Following are some coping strategies that may help:

- *Expect to have a few doubts and worries.*
 - Your partner may think you don't need them anymore.
 - Anxiety is a natural and normal part of getting back together.
- *Forget your fantasies.*
 - Give up any fantasies or expectations you may have about what homecoming day should be.
 - Take it easy and let things happen naturally.
- *Don't expect things to be exactly they way they were before the separation.*
 - You've changed, your spouse has changed and your children have changed.
 - Don't get upset by things that are done differently.
- *Tips on helping children adjust:*
 - Children can get angry about their parent being gone.
 - Toddlers and preschoolers may act like the homecoming parent is a stranger. They might not understand about "duty" or "mission".
 - Elementary school children and teenagers may understand, but show anger or fear by "acting out."
 - Get reacquainted and take things slowly.
 - Children are resilient.
- *Accept and share your feelings.*
 - Talk a lot about your feelings, and let your partner talk too.
 - Really listen. Make sure you fully understand what your partner is saying before you respond.
 - Communication is they key.
- *See things from the other person's point of view.*
 - Awareness that the soldier no longer feels a part of things helps us to understand why they can be upset by even the smallest changes.
 - Recognition of the pride a partner feels in the way he/she handled everything alone will help the soldier to understand the importance of accepting changes made during separation.
 - Children are people too. Try to understand how they feel. Change and uncertainty is often very frightening for them, so be patient.

Your family relationships should regain normalcy in a few months. However, if you had problems before you left, those problems may still be there when you get back. If you continue having problems adjusting after a few months, seek help through one of the following offices:

- The Army Community Service Center
- Family Program Coordinator
- Family Support Group leader for referrals
- Chaplain—a good source for confidential counseling
- Red Cross
- Social Work Services
- Community Service agencies—see your local phone book (e.g., Mental Health Department, Social Services Department)

If deployment was to a war zone, natural disaster or urban riots, be alert for PostTraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Symptoms of this disorder include:

- Depression—chronic numb or flat feeling.
- Isolation—feeling withdrawn from family and friends.
- Alienation— absence of meaningful contact with others.
- Avoidance of feelings—inability to feel or express feelings.
- Rage—bouts of unexplained anger; may be internal or acted out.
- Anxiety—unexplained nervousness, tension or hyper-alert feelings.
- Sleep disturbances—insomnia, nightmares, etc.
- Intrusive thoughts—recollections of traumatic experiences that appear for no apparent reason.
- Startle responses—unusual, involuntary reactions to loud noises, i.e., and automobile backfire.

PTSD probably won't go away on its own. It needs to be treated. If you or your spouse experience 4 or more of these symptoms regularly, seek professional help through one of the agencies listed above.

Sources of Support and Assistance for Army Soldiers and Families

Army Community Service (ACS): ACS is the mainstay of family assistance for the Army on or near installations. Paid professionals and volunteers staff it. Among the services provided are Financial Management Assistance; Exceptional Family Members Program; Child Support Services; Family Advocacy; Relocation Services; and Information, Referral, and Follow-up.

Army National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve Family Program Coordinator Offices: Although not staffed at ACS levels, these offices provide information and referral services on all of the above-listed services, both military and civilian, for the families of Reserve Component members who normally reside away from Army installations.

Family Assistance Center (FAC): FACs may be established on and off Army installations during periods of lengthy deployment. FACs provides assistance and information and referral on such matters as ID cards and DEERS, health care, legal matters, financial counseling and assistance, and family support.

Rear Detachment: A military unit may create a Rear Detachment when it deploys for extended periods of time. It is the primary point of contact for family members who have questions or who need assistance prior to and during separations.

Family Support Group (FSG): The FSG is organized to provide mutual support for a unit's family members. It is affiliated with a specific military unit, ARNG Armory, or USAR Center. The FSG forms the third component of the Army's family support system during deployment. It operates during periods of normal operations as well, in close coordination with the affiliated unit and, if convenient, with ACS or the Reserve Family Program Coordinator's office.

Installation Chaplain: A good source for confidential counseling.

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No matter what you daydream about, you may not be physically or mentally able to carry out some of your expectations and fantasies.

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One thing to remember is that not only will you have changed, but so will your soldier.

All the problems you had before the deployment will not have magically disappeared. All the expectations you have about your reunion may not happen.

Thus, it is important to understand and accept that things will probably be different from what you expect.

Accepting change is a major factor in reestablishing you and your children's relationship with your soldier after a separation

Keeping this change factor in mind. Ask the soldiers you know about their joys and concerns. Do you think their list would match with yours?

Many of their expectations may be the same, but some may be very different. We are beginning to understand that our expectations and theirs may not coincide.

Ways to Communicate

A key to understanding different expectations is in how well we have communicated during the separation and how well we will communicate when reunited. What are some ways we could communicate during separation?

Letters and cards are the least expensive way to communicate. Sometimes, phone calls are available during a deployment, but phone calls can be very expensive. Cassette tapes and videotapes are also good methods of communication.

What do you say or write besides the "kids are okay," or "I went to work today."

Before your soldier returns, you could start talking and writing about some of your expectations. Lines of communications should be open and two-way. Encourage soldiers to communicate their own expectations for reunion.

Some **joy** expectations you might express:

- You might begin by saying that you would like to go to a movie with your soldier.
- You might tell your soldier that you would really enjoy a quiet evening alone, or a break from the kids.
- In return, ask them what they are looking forward to.

You could also begin to express some of your **concern** expectations.

- You may be concerned about how you handled the children and the household tasks.
- You may confide that you enjoyed certain responsibilities.
- Continuous communication during separation plays a critical role in maintaining an emotional bond between the soldier and those back home.

By expressing your expectations before reunion and by asking your soldier about their expectations, you are establishing a line of communication that could cross many barriers and minimize problems during reunion.

Intimate Relationships

Among the major adjustments you face when your soldier returns is your intimate and sexual relationship. The best thing you can do is to go slowly. Don't anticipate normal sexual relations for a few days. There is no need to rush things.

You and your partner are likely to feel like strangers with each other, and strangers do not have good sexual relations. Take the time to let your sexual relationship reestablish itself naturally. Rushing sexual relations could create major communication problems.

A few ideas that may be helpful during this adjustment period are:

- Try not to rush
- Talk a lot about how you feel, and . . .
- Ask how your partner feels about intimacy and sexual matters

No matter how well prepared you are or how well you communicated during deployment, there are many adjustments that you and your children will face when your soldier returns.

Most military couples face the question, "How can two people work together toward achieving intimacy when one of them is often absent from the relationship for extended periods?"

Military couples often find that reunion may bring out feelings of uneasiness, and that their personal relationship is strained. Through an understanding of the effects of separation, you can better cope with the stress that accompanies reunion.

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Communication enhancers:

- Communication will help bring you closer together. It gives you time to become reacquainted, and helps to let your partner know how you feel.

Homecoming and Reunion

- ❑ Understand that feelings of anxiety are a very normal part of the reunion process.
- ❑ You have been apart from each other and you both have grown. Take time to get to know each other again.
- ❑ Discuss your negative feelings and frustrations. Fear of losing your partner plays a major role in developing negative feelings. Listen carefully to what your partner is trying to communicate to you.
- ❑ Don't assume the worst about your partner. If you have concerns about fidelity, talk to your chaplain or find a counselor who can help you work through these feelings.
- ❑ Besides communication, allow yourself time to readjust to being together again. Go slowly and enjoy your reunion.

Expectations of Change

Let's begin by discussing change. Change can be viewed in two ways. One way to view change is either as a crisis or threat. The other way is to view change either as a hidden opportunity or as a slight disruption in the way things used to be.

If change is viewed as a crisis or threat, people try to pretend the change didn't happen. They may use inappropriate coping strategies. They may avoid or deny the change. They may spend time wishing things were the way they used to be.

Another poor coping mechanism people sometimes use is to blame everyone and everything else for the change. This only leads to a dead end and may cause even more problems.

If change is viewed as a hidden opportunity or merely as a slight disruption in the way things used to be, then it is usually more easily accepted.

People who view change in this positive way acknowledge that change has occurred, and that it can become an accepted part of life. Often, this view of change mobilizes people into new ways of thinking, which leads to a fresh beginning.

Ideally, all change should be viewed as hidden opportunity. Remember that no matter how accepting of change you are, it takes time for the change to become part of your way of thinking or acting.

There is no definite period in which change begins to feel normal. On average, it takes several weeks, or even months, depending on the length of separation and on your ability to accept change.

Adjustments for Family Members

Adjustments may be necessary when your soldier returns. There is always a tendency to take the negative, or crisis, view of change. This is normal.

Some people want to overdo, catch up on time they have missed, spend money, and generally go full speed ahead without much direction.

The most important thing to remember is to go slowly. Reestablish your relationship with your soldier and try not to let the stress of adjustment overtake you.

Reactions	Techniques
Fusses	Hug
Clings to spouse or caregiver	Feed and play
Changes their sleeping and eating habits	Hold
Does not recognize you	Bathe and change
Cries	Relax
Pulls away from you	
Has problems with elimination	
1 to 3 Years	
Clinging	Give them space
Cries	Be gentle and fun
Regresses - no longer toilet trained	Don't force holding, hugging, kissing
Shyness	Give them time to warm up
Does not recognize you	Sit at their level
Has temper tantrums	
3 to 5 Years	
Demonstrates anger	Listen to them
Acts out to get your attention; needs proof you're real	Find out the new things on TV, at preschool, books
Is demanding	Reinforce that you love them
Feels guilty for making parent go away	Accept their feelings
Talks a lot to bring you up to date	Play with them
5 to 12 Years	
Isn't good enough	Review pictures, school work, activities, scrap books
Boasts about Army and parent	Praise what they have done
Dreads your return because of discipline	Try not to criticize
13 to 18 Years	
Is excited	Listen with undivided attention
Feels guilty because they don't live up to standards	Don't tease about fashion, music
Is concerned about rules and responsibilities	Share what has happened with you
Feels too old or is unwilling to change plans to accommodate parent	Don't be judgmental
Is rebellious	Respect privacy and friends

Stress

Everyone involved in the separation, including your soldier, has had to cope with stress. Children also experience stress, and change and uncertainty may often frighten them.

Perhaps those of you with children have had the opportunity to use the Operation R.E.A.D.Y. *Children's Workbooks*, which are designed to help them cope with the effects of being separated from a parent. These workbooks are written for specific age groups and have proven to be very effective.

Symptoms of Stress

You may experience many of these symptoms when the soldier returns. But there is often a period called the "honeymoon period" which you may also experience. Just having your soldier home again can make everything seem exciting. However, the honeymoon period will end. That's when stress often sets in—when you realize things are not living up to your expectations and fantasies. In fact, things have changed and you may become stressed out.

Stress-Coping Skills

If your soldier seems to cut you off for a period, this is a normal reaction. If it continues, and the soldier does not return to their "old self" after several months, it could be caused by stress.

If you notice your soldier becoming too detached, unable to sleep, or if they seem like a different person, it is time to encourage them to seek outside assistance.

Once your soldier feels truly at home and safe, behavior, such as jumpiness, being overprotective, or going to extremes should subside. Patience is the key, so be willing to listen and try to empathize with them.

Finally, do not forget yourself. You, too, will be going through a period of adjustment. If you notice any of the danger signals we have discussed, think about where you could get assistance.

As we have said before, many military families may find the stress experienced during reunion more difficult than the separation itself.

Homecoming and Reunion Stress

Whether you are a single or a married soldier, a single-parent soldier, a spouse, or a child, you will face certain stressors associated with Homecoming and Reunion. Below are some of the normal stressors you may face, along with some hints to help you adjust to the changes in your life.

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- Emotional letdown
- Restlessness or sleeplessness
- No one understands what I have been through
- Was my spouse faithful?
- Did my spouse miss me?
- My friends seem different
- I didn't expect things to change
- Other people's concerns seem petty
- I feel like a stranger at home
- How will the children react?
- Will the role I have filled change?
- Were my children treated well by their guardian?
- Can I make up for lost time?
- Did I handle things the right way?
- When will things feel normal again?
- I am concerned about finances
- I am concerned about future deployments
- The children appear confused and uncertain

Helpful Hints

Homecoming and Reunion

- Accept that things may be different
- Talk about your experiences
- Go slowly—don't try to make up for lost time
- Spend quality time with your children
- Reassure your children. Change often frightens them
- Curb your desire to take control or to spend money
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- Your partner may think you don't need them anymore.
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Forget your fantasies.

Homecoming and Reunion

- Give up any fantasies or expectations you may have about what homecoming day should be.
- Take it easy and let things happen naturally.

Don't expect things to be exactly the way they were before the separation.

- You've changed, your spouse has changed and your children have changed.
- Don't get upset by things that are done differently.

Tips on helping children adjust:

- Children can get angry about their parent being gone.
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- Elementary school children and teenagers may understand, but show anger or fear by "acting out."
- Get reacquainted and take things slowly.
- Children are resilient.

Accept and share your feelings.

- Talk a lot about your feelings, and let your partner talk too.
- Really listen. Make sure you fully understand what your partner is saying before you respond.
- Communication is the key.

See things from the other person's point of view.

- Awareness that the soldier no longer feels a part of things helps us to understand why they can be upset by even the smallest changes.
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- Avoidance of feelings—inability to feel or express feelings.
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PTSD probably won't go away on its own. It needs to be treated. If you or your spouse experience 4 or more of these symptoms regularly, seek professional help through one of the agencies listed above.

Sources of Support and Assistance for Army Soldiers and Families

1. *Army Community Service (ACS)*: ACS is the mainstay of family assistance for the Army on or near installations. Paid professionals and volunteers staff it. Among the services provided are Financial Management Assistance; Exceptional Family Members Program; Child Support Services; Family Advocacy; Relocation Services; and Information, Referral, and Follow-up.
2. *Army National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve Family Program Coordinator Offices*: Although not staffed at ACS levels, these offices provide information and referral services on all of the above-listed services, both military and civilian, for the families of Reserve Component members who normally reside away from Army installations.
3. *Family Assistance Center (FAC)*: FACs may be established on and off Army installations during periods of lengthy deployment. FACs provide assistance and information and referral on such matters as ID cards and DEERS, health care, legal matters, financial counseling and assistance, and family support.
4. *Rear Detachment*: A military unit may create a Rear Detachment when it deploys for extended periods of time. It is the primary point of contact for family members who have questions or who need assistance prior to and during separations.
5. *Family Support Group (FSG)*: The FSG is organized to provide mutual support for a unit's family members. It is affiliated with a specific military unit, ARNG Armory, or USAR Center. The FSG forms the third component of the Army's family support system during deployment. It operates during periods of normal operations as well, in close coordination with the affiliated unit and, if convenient, with ACS or the Reserve Family Program Coordinator's office.
6. *Installation Chaplain*: A good source for confidential counseling.

Conclusion

As we have discussed, reunion can be a challenge. But if you begin right now to communicate your expectations and to encourage your soldier to do the same, the transition may be easier.

Keep in mind that there will be stresses because of the changes that have occurred. Try to look at change as a hidden opportunity or a slight disruption, and not as a crisis or dead end. A positive outlook will make for a smoother adjustment.

When your soldier returns, workshops may be offered which cover such areas as adjusting to relationships with partners and children, positive communication strategies, and resolving interpersonal conflicts.

Check with your commander, first sergeant, or family support group leader for more information about these workshops.

Homecoming and Reunion Communication Techniques

Resources for Educating About Deployment and You

Will homecoming be everything you thought it would be?

Will it live up to your expectations and fantasies? Will *you* live up to your expectations and fantasies? Be honest with yourself.

How many of you discussed your homecoming expectations with your family or soldier before your reunion?

You may have the opportunity to attend homecoming and reunion workshops before the unit returns home. One point of the workshops is to encourage you to express your expectations before your reunion. By doing so, you could understand each other's anticipations.

After a separation, your expectations of each other may have changed. These new expectations may be stumbling blocks, or they may be opportunities for growth.

Our goal is to build constructively and positively on changes that may have occurred in your life during your separation.

Changes

You may have a fantasy that everything will be perfect when the unit returns. This is not necessarily so. You will be going through a period of readjustment. You may experience some readjustment stress. *Stress is a normal, healthy reaction to change.*

You may also experience a time known as the "honeymoon period." This is when everything is wonderful - shortly after a soldier's return.

You may experience a "thunderstorm" period. Problems that occurred before deployment may still be there when you are reunited.

Whether homecoming is a honeymoon, or a thunderstorm, or anything in between, there will come a time when you will need to look at the changes that have taken place in your life. Some of these changes may require renegotiation.

Renegotiation

Renegotiation raises many questions. It relates to the "where do I fit in" syndrome.

For the soldier, renegotiation may involve such questions as:

- Where or how do I fit into my job?
- Where or how do I fit in with my friends?
- Where or how do I fit in with my family?
- Am I still needed?
- What will our intimate relationship be like?
- Will my spouse still love me?

For the family, renegotiation may involve such questions as:

- Do I have to change my way of doing things?
- Do I have to give up paying the bills? I enjoyed it.

- Do I have to start cooking huge meals again?
- What will my relationship be with my spouse? Will my spouse still love me?
- Do we need to change any legal arrangements made before deployment, like powers of attorney, wills, guardianships, or bank accounts?

Children may wonder:

- What will my relationship be with my parents? Will they still love me?
- Do I have to start doing it dad's or mom's way now?
- Will my curfew change?

These are some issues that you will need to discuss in the renegotiation stage.

Intimate Relationships

One issue many of you will face concerns your intimate relationship with your spouse. You may have had fantasies that were really wonderful, but those fantasies may not have been realized when you are together again.

It will take time to get over some of the awkwardness of reestablishing intimacy. Intimacy means closeness, trust and communication. After separation, reestablishing intimacy may not happen immediately. Take things slowly and enjoy your reunion.

Most military couples face the question, "How can two people work together toward achieving intimacy when one of them is often absent from the relationship for extended periods?"

Military couples often find that reunion brings out feelings of uneasiness and that their personal relationship is strained. Through an understanding of the effects of separation, you can better cope with the stress that accompanies reunion.

Barriers to intimate communication and sexual relations:

- ☞ Unrealistic fantasies and expectations.
- ☞ Feeling anxiety about intimacy and sexual relations.
- ☞ Feeling that your partner is a stranger.
- ☞ Feelings of anger, hostility, stress, or negative feelings about the separation.
- ☞ Concern about faithfulness to your relationship.
- ☞ Feeling that sexual relations need to be rushed to make up for lost time.

Communication enhancers:

- ☞ Communication will help to bring you closer together. It gives you time to become reacquainted, and helps to let your partner know how you feel.
- ☞ Understand that feelings of anxiety are a very normal part of the reunion process.
- ☞ You have been apart from each other and you both have grown. Take time to get to know each other again.
- ☞ Discuss your negative feelings and frustrations. Fear of losing your partner plays a major role in the development of negative feelings. Listen carefully to what your partner is trying to communicate to you.
- ☞ Don't assume the worst about your partner. If you have concerns about fidelity, talk to your chaplain, or find a counselor that can help you to work through these feelings.

- ☞ Along with communicating, allow yourself time to readjust to being together again. Go slowly, and enjoy your reunion.

Making the Adjustment

You have looked at some challenges you face in your relationships due to the changes that occur during deployment. Let's talk about ways to make your adjustment easier.

The Importance of Change

It can lead to better interpersonal communication.

Meaningful Communication

Meaningful communication sometimes requires great effort. But at reunion time, it is **very important**.

As we communicate with another person, several things take place. We send a message to someone and hope they receive it the way we intend it. If they do—**success**. If not—**trouble**. The trouble comes when the other person misinterprets what we have said, does not understand the words we have used, or there is much emotion involved in the conversation.

Roadblocks to Communication

If there is a problem in communication, and there are feelings of anger, hurt, or confusion, the process can be difficult, and roadblocks may develop. These roadblocks may lead to interpersonal conflict. Roadblocks are the way people say things, or the words people use that cause you to stop listening or paying attention to the person who is talking.

Communication Skills

By improving our communication skills, we can improve the quality of our relationships with others.

To “tune in” and become a good listener you can:

- ☞ Stop talking and try not to interrupt
- ☞ Get rid of distractions
- ☞ Make eye contact with the other person
- ☞ Concentrate on the message they are sending you

Feedback

Feedback reflects the message, as you understand it. For example, your spouse:

- ☞ Sends a message: “When will you be deployed again?”
- ☞ You receive that message, determine what is meant, and reflect what you heard: “You are concerned about how long we have together.”
- ☞ The sender then responds or clarifies what was actually meant: “Yes” or “No. I was wondering about ____.”

By using feedback, misinterpretation and conflict about what was said can be avoided. **But** you cannot listen effectively if you are too tired, you are rushed, or if you are not accepting of the person or the situation.

Often, if one of these conditions exists, you can tell the other person that you know it is important to them, but you are too tired, or whatever. "Could we talk about it later?" is an honest response.

Conclusion

- The key to returning home and readjusting is to recognize that changes have occurred. These changes may cause conflicts.
- By addressing them in sequence, as you have done here, you can pinpoint which changes are causing you the most concern.
- Readjustment requires patience and skill.

Remember that the way to reunion success is through communication. It is essential not only to communicate how you are feeling, but also to listen to what those around you are saying and feeling. Talk openly, but also listen carefully.

Homecoming and Reunion

There are several things that may trigger stress during the reunion phase.

Some of them are expected. For example:

- trying to do too much;
- trying to make up for lost time;
- noticing how well the other person has done without you;
- negotiating activities and roles;
- determining how to fit in;
- a homecoming letdown;
- whether your intimate relations will work out;
- who is in charge of what;
- who do the kids listen to now - mom or dad?

There are many more—all common areas of stress after deployment. Remember, all these stressors and readjustments will take time to work through. Readjustment does not happen immediately.

One stress after deployment is finding the time needed to work through the stressors and to readjust. There is so much to do, so much to readjust to, and so much to catch up on, that time just flies.

Reunion Priorities

Stress can occur when your priorities do not match with the priorities of people around you.

When this happens, it's time to renegotiate and communicate what we would like to do.

Role Adjustment

Role adjustment is a major stressor for everyone at the end of a deployment. Their spouse and children during deployment did many tasks done by the soldier before deployment. Time schedules, eating habits, and general ways of doing things may have changed. When the soldier returns, does everything automatically return to the way it was before deployment?

Most people say, "No way!"

Let's start with the soldiers who were deployed. How will you adjust to the role changes?

For those of you who remained here, are there any roles you would like to give up once your soldier has returned, or any tasks you would like for them to resume?

How can you assist the soldier in adjusting to the role changes?

Soldiers dream about home and of the stability they had. They build up their expectations of homecoming based upon their past experiences—the way it was. But when they return home, it may not be the same anymore.

Seeing change as positive can assist in the adjustment phase. One way of doing this is through communication and by examining your priorities, as we have just done.

Adjustment Tips

Some hints to make the adjustment easier and reduce stress are to:

- ℞ Think positively (people may look and act differently, but they still care about you)
- ℞ Negotiate activities (the exercise we just completed can assist in doing this)
- ℞ Negotiate roles (don't change things that are working—be flexible and adjust gradually)
- ℞ Make time for all the important people in your life
- ℞ Be patient—it will take weeks, and even months to readjust
- ℞ Support positive changes

Homecoming and Reunion

- ☞ Expect some tension in your intimate relations
- ☞ Expect unusual feelings (Where do I fit in now? Am I still needed?)
- ☞ Talk to your spouse, children, friends, and family members—use effective communication skills
- ☞ Ask for help if you need it

Remember this last tip—ask for help if you need it. There are many resources available to assist you if the adjustment and stresses of homecoming overwhelm you.

Keep in mind that it will take several weeks and even months after a long deployment for things to reach a “normal” state.

Also, remember “normal” does not mean, “what used to be.” Here, it means that the symptoms of stress are reduced. The jumpiness, sleeplessness, fatigue, and other physical signs should stop after a reasonable period.

Helpful Resources

If the signs of stress should continue, seek assistance. Take a moment to list some available resources.

Giving Back To the Community

The final area we will discuss is “giving back” to the community. The homecoming activities that you experience take much planning, coordination, and support from the community. This support often leaves the soldier and family members with a feeling of wanting to “give back” to those who supported them.

Most communities and installations have established programs that would allow you to give of your time and talents.

Several examples of programs that could use your help are:

- ☞ Installation Volunteer Coordinator
- ☞ Guard or Reserve Family Program
- ☞ Family Support Group
- ☞ Civilian Social Service Agencies
- ☞ Voluntary Action Centers
- ☞ United Way or other charitable organizations

Some military communities have soldiers who work shifts. During their “off time,” soldiers from the unit assist underprivileged children. Others work in community projects to assist older citizens.

This very act of giving back can help you readjust to the community and to being home again.

Conclusion

A few closing thoughts:

- ☞ Adjusting to being home, and to having your soldier home, will take time.
- ☞ Be open to the changes that you have experienced in your life. Take it slowly. Do not rush. ☞ Enjoy being together again.