

COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR SPOUSES

Returning to Homelife After Deployment

SOURCE: MilitaryOneSource.com

Returning from deployment can sometimes be stressful and disappointing -- what you can do to make the reunion as joyful and stress-free as possible?

A great deal of attention is paid to the separation side of military deployment, when military personnel leave families and partners for overseas operations. We can understand the worry and the feelings of loss and loneliness a military deployment can bring to a family. But the return and reunion with families and partners can be just as stressful -- sometimes more so. The difficulties and strains of return can be surprising and sometimes painfully disappointing to military families. But there are steps you can take to make the transition back 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. Lovers and spouses miss each other and look forward to time together. Children look forward to having a missing parent back at home. The absent 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.

But mixed in with those feelings of excitement and anticipation are also some perfectly normal worries and resentments. Husbands and wives worry that their spouse has changed, that there will be new strains in the relationship. Both partners may dread giving up the independence that being apart has allowed them, and may resent what they imagine as the freedom the other has enjoyed during deployment. While everyone 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. Without these special strains, reunions are generally much less stressful.



The initial reunion often *is* happy. But because expectations on all sides are so high, it can also be disappointing. The list of opportunities for crushed hopes is a long one.

What can make return from deployment an unhappy and stressful time is the mismatch between high expectations and the reality of family life, and the need to change and fit into new family roles and routines. But knowing this is also the key to making the return a happy time with a minimum of stress and disappointment.

Before the reunion

Despite the best of intentions, the service member or the partner at home may be too exhausted, busy, or anxious to prepare the way they would like to for the reunion. Combined with high expectations -- and sometimes unrealistic hopes -- for the reunion, this can lead to disappointment.

Unpredictable timing can also get in the way of happy and relaxed reunions. Both partners need to understand that late flights, bad weather, incorrect passenger lists, family emergencies, and missed phone calls or messages can spoil even the most careful plans.

What you can do

- *Do your best to find out and communicate the details of the return plan, and to keep yourself and your partner updated on any changes to the schedule.*
- *Make backup plans* in case the flight arrives at a time when the partner 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 partner 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 partner at home might plan a welcome-back meal or some other celebration.
- *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 (the service member's adjustment to a change in time zone), 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 partner 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. 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. Try to keep this up for at least the first two days.
- *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 partner 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. 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 or partner at home can do

- *Do something special to welcome the returning service member home.* Make a banner, prepare a meal with your partner'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 spouse 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. Talk about who will do what now that you're both home.

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 partners 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 get involved again more gradually, allowing their partners to make decisions for them for the first few days. The partner 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 or partner.* 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 and 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 next month.

What the spouse or partner 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.
- *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 you both.
- *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 partner'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 partner 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 either of you feel unwanted and unappreciated. It is 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 partner 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.



What you both can do together

- *Keep talking.* Talk can help you get back together as a couple and as a family. Talk through your differences about household responsibilities and decision-making.
- *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. If you do talk about painful experiences as a couple, try hard to listen without judging.
- *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 the children's obedience with unnecessarily strict discipline.
- *Seek professional help if you think there is a problem.* Some anger and some tears can be expected after a long or difficult deployment, but excessive anger, mean-spirited fighting, and violence are signs that you need help. Don't feel that you have to solve serious emotional problems on your own.

Written with the help of Dr. D. Bruce Bell and Dr. Walter R. Schumm.

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