



Tip Sheet

Tips for Understanding Military Couple Relationships After Deployment

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Research suggests that having a positive relationship with a significant other can improve health and well-being.¹ However, for service members who are sent overseas on deployment missions, there can be many challenges to establishing and maintaining positive couple relationships.

In the last decade over 2,000,000 troops have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan in service of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, often for periods of six months to one year, and possibly even longer.^{2,3} However, many have experienced multiple deployments over the years.⁴ It is not surprising, then, that returning service members are showing difficulties re-engaging and maintaining healthy couple relationships. The purpose of this tip sheet is to summarize what is known about the couple relationships of service members after deployment, and to recommend ways in which providers can offer support in order for them to maintain a successful couple relationship.



What Can Happen During and After Deployment to Impact the Couple Relationship

Changes in family roles.

An important issue that arises with deployment is that family roles can change during deployment.⁵ Those left behind often need to take on new roles when a spouse or significant other departs for such a long period of time, and responsibilities that are taken care of by or shared with the departing service member are usually assumed by the person left behind. This could include small tasks such as taking out the garbage or tucking a child into bed but could also include larger roles such as managing the bills and finances, or maintaining the home. Service members might expect that everything has remained the same while they were away but, upon return, they may perceive that they are no longer needed in the family because someone else has taken on their roles.⁶ It can also be challenging for the spouse or partner to give up any new roles that he or she has taken on.⁷

Recommendations for providers include:

- Discuss role changes that have occurred.
- Emphasize that these changes are expected.
- Help couples renegotiate household roles to the satisfaction of all.

Need to recognize sacrifices of both partners.

The hardships of deployment are undeniable; soldiers are away from their homes and families, often in uncomfortable living conditions with little freedom, and face danger on a frequent basis. However, it is important to remember that those left behind also experience sacrifices.⁸ They must work hard to keep the household running and, if there are children involved, partners may suddenly find themselves living as single parents. It can be lonely and exhausting, and spouses or significant others may also worry a lot about the health and survival of the service member. There may also be additional pressures to keep distressing information from the servicemember in order to protect them from worry and prevent distraction during the mission. This can further increase the sense of loneliness and isolation.

Recommendations for providers include:

- **Help couples process difficulties encountered while apart.**
- **Recognize that there may be information or issues that are military secrets and cannot be shared with partners.**
- **It may also be challenging for service members to discuss some emotionally difficult events and they may want to protect their partners and/or spare themselves from the pain of revisiting these events. These events may be better to process individually and at a pace that is comfortable for the service member.**
- **Encourage spouses to recognize the difficulties encountered by the other in order to obtain better appreciation for the sacrifices made, and to increase connection and understanding.**

Need to re-establish connection.

It is fortunate for today's service members that a high level of technology is available to help keep up communication during deployment. The increased availability of virtual communication via cell phones (e.g., texting) and via the Internet (e.g., video, Skype), make it easier to stay in touch with loved ones during deployment. However, the time and distance apart, along with a large number of intense experiences during the deployment period, can leave couples feeling somewhat emotionally disconnected.⁹ It takes time to re-establish emotional connections and intimacy.¹⁰

Recommendations for providers include:

- **Help partners recognize that it is normal to feel less connected after deployment.**
- **Encourage partners to take small steps to increase their level of intimacy.**
- **Remind partners that this process will likely take time, so encourage patience.**
- **Recommend mental health professionals or clergy members to assist with this process, if needed.**

Special Circumstances Impacting Service Members and Couple Relationships

In addition to the challenges listed above that are fairly common for most couples who experience deployment, there are some special challenges that service members and their significant others may face during the re-adjustment period.

Infidelity.

Unfortunately, the long separations and accompanying sense of loneliness can increase couples' vulnerability to infidelity. This can be further compounded by the young age of many couples experiencing their first deployment, some of whom may not have established a strong connection or may have only known each other a short time before deployment. While men are statistically more likely to be unfaithful to the relationship, it is possible that either the deployed service member or the significant other remaining behind, male or female, could engage in infidelity.¹¹ Infidelity is extremely toxic to couple relationships and many couples break up when one (or more) party is unfaithful.

Recommendations for providers include:

- **Inform the couple that a high level of commitment by both partners will be needed in order to save the relationship.**
- **Intensive, specialized therapy for couples is recommended.**
- **If one partner is unwilling to attend therapy, the other partner should be encouraged to attend therapy alone.**

Injury.

Due to the often dangerous nature of deployment missions, some soldiers return from deployment with physical injuries.¹² While some wounds may heal, many types of physical injuries such as loss of limb, traumatic brain injury, and spinal cord injury entail permanent life changes.¹³ Day-to-day living can be painful and challenging and there will be many things to learn and adjustments to make. It may be necessary to separate from the military, meaning that the career many have worked so hard for is over. Moreover, in a culture that values strength and duty, needing to depend on

help from others, whether it be nurses, spouses, or attendants, can be particularly difficult.¹⁴ While the injured service member may be the focus, significant others also need to make many adjustments to the new situation as well as to any accompanying emotional difficulties that may arise. Both members of the couple relationship may face a grieving process for the life that existed prior to the injury.¹⁵ There may also be new financial stressors that arise for the couple, and changes in family roles. Injury provides many challenges to the service member and couple relationship and it is not uncommon for the challenges to lead to coping in ways that are detrimental including increased substance use and abuse, increased family violence, and reduced communication and intimacy between partners.¹⁶

Recommendations for providers include:

- **Assist both partners with the grieving process associated with the loss of function.**
- **Help the service member to find new areas of strength and new ways to contribute to the household and relationship.**
- **Recognize changes in roles that have occurred as a result of injury and help partners adjust to these changes.**
- **Encourage the couple to seek additional resources to help them: financial resources, social support, and help completing nursing care and household tasks. These resources may come from family, friends, and/or official military or governmental sources.**
- **Provide referrals for services associated with substance abuse and family violence as needed.**

Mental and emotional wounds.

While physical injury can provide some very real challenges, it is important to remember that many service members return from combat with emotional wounds. It is common for service members to experience post-combat stress and it may require some time to adjust to life after deployment.¹⁷⁻²⁰ However, some service members may have more significant and longer lasting emotional challenges, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety.²¹ While less obvious than physical wounds, these emotional injuries can cause significant impairment to the service member and to the couple relationship.²² Left untreated, these emotional difficulties can lead to increased distance in the relationship and poor coping by the service member, which would increase the likelihood of divorce, suicide, substance abuse, and family violence. It is important for both physical and emotional injuries to be treated and to include the needs of the significant other in treatment. Not only will these wounds need medical and psychological attention but, similar to physical wounds, there will be a need for couples to receive material and emotional support from both within and outside the relationship.^{23,24}

Recommendations for providers include:

- **Help educate the service member and partner regarding the expected emotional reactions post-deployment, as well as signs of more significant and longer lasting mental health issues.**
- **Emphasize that seeking help for mental health issues is a sign of strength, not weakness.**
- **Provide referrals for appropriate mental health treatment, as well as for services associated with substance abuse and family violence as needed.**

Roles of Others in Readjustment

While the focus of this tip sheet has been on the couple relationship, it is important to recognize others who have the potential to impact readjustment for the service member and significant other. First, “battle buddies” can play a significant role in readjustment. These are the people who worked closely with the deployed service member and who likely shared many intense moments during deployment.²⁵ These close bonds of friendship can help with readjustment, but sometimes a significant other can feel left out, particularly when a lot of time is spent with these friends. There may also be children, siblings, and parents who are anxious to spend time with a newly returned service member, and these close family members can provide important support to both the service member and significant other. However, it will be important to find a balance between spending time with friends and family members and spending time together as a couple, investing in the couple relationship. It is also important to remember that service members and their partners do not need to work through this readjustment period alone. In addition to family and friends, there are many community and military-based services available to assist with the readjustment process.²⁶

Some potential resources for returning service members include:

- Base services
- Community health and mental health providers
- Veteran’s Administration and VA Hospitals
- Vet Centers
- Military chaplains and community clergy members

- Military One Source
- Yellow Ribbon events
- Wounded Warriors and other veteran-focused programs

Conclusions and Recommendations

Deployment can present many challenges for the returning service member and the couple relationship. Communication, understanding of each others' needs, allowing time for needed adjustment, and seeking resources and professional help when needed will all increase the likelihood that the couple relationship will not only survive but also thrive after deployment.

Key points to remember:

- During deployment, roles at home need to change, and it might take time and effort to negotiate new roles after the service member's return from deployment.
- Both the military service member and partner experience hardship and make sacrifices during the deployment period, and this needs to be recognized by both partners.
- It is expected that connection and intimacy will need to be re-established after a deployment separation and this takes time.
- Infidelity, injury, and emotional wounds can be detrimental to the service member and partner, as well as their relationship.
- Other military service members, family, and friends can also help the service member adjust to life post-deployment. However, it is also important to spend time and energy re-establishing the couple relationship and spending too

much time with others could create conflicts.

- Service members and their partners do not need to go through the readjustment period alone; military bases, the civilian community, and veterans' services and groups offer resources that can provide needed support.

Recommendations:

- Educate service members and their partners regarding the common and expected difficulties related to post-deployment adjustment. Encourage service members and their partners to view the adjustment period as a process and to give each other needed time to work these issues.
- Provide support and encouragement to couples facing challenges associated with deployment.
- Encourage communication between partners and spending time together as a couple.
- Discuss hardships encountered during deployment and encourage appreciation of each partners' efforts.
- Help partners re-establish satisfying roles in the relationship and home.
- Help military service members and partners identify additional sources of support (financial, social, and physical).
- Recommend intensive, specialized services when needed to address mental health difficulties, substance abuse, family violence, and infidelity.
- Emphasize that seeking help when needed is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Notes

- ¹ Holt-Lunstad, J., Birmingham, W., & Jones, B. Q. (2008). Is there something unique about marriage? The relative impact of marital status, relationship quality, and network social support on ambulatory blood pressure and mental health. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine, 35*(2), 239-244.
- ² Martinez, L., & Bingham, A. (2011, November 11). U.S. Veterans: By the Numbers. *ABC News*. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-veterans-numbers/story?id=14928136>
- ³ Hall, L. K. (2008). *Counseling military families: What mental health practitioners need to know*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- ⁴ U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, Office of Research and Development, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Health, National Institute of Mental Health, & U.S. Army Medical Department, Medical Research and Material Command. (2006). *Mapping the landscape of deployment related adjustment and mental disorders: A meeting summary of a working group to inform research*. Retrieved from <http://www.research.va.gov/programs/OIF-OEF/deployment-related-adjustment-may06-report.pdf>
- ⁵ Bowling, U. B., & Sherman, M D. (2008). Welcoming them home: Supporting service members and their families in navigating the tasks of reintegration. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 39*(4), 451-458.
- ⁶ See note 3 above.
- ⁷ See note 5 above.
- ⁸ Doyle, M. E., & Peterson, K. A. (2005). Re-entry and reintegration: Returning home after combat. *Psychiatric Quarterly, 76*(4), 361-370.
- ⁹ See note 5 above.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ See note 3 above.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ See note 4 above.
- ¹⁴ See note 3 above.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ See note 4 above.
- ¹⁷ See note 5 above.
- ¹⁸ See note 3 above.
- ¹⁹ See note 4 above.
- ²⁰ See note 8 above.
- ²¹ See note 8 above.
- ²² See note 3 above.
- ²³ See note 5 above.
- ²⁴ See note 3 above.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ See note 8 above.

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