

Coping with Emotional Aspects of Military Deployment

Deployment and separation is a part of military life. Even when you know a deployment is coming, having to separate emotionally and physically from loved ones often makes this situation extremely stressful. Each stage of military activity has unique stresses, as outlined below.

Pre-Deployment

As you prepare for departure, you may experience anxiety, fear, uncertainty, increased emotional distance, and family conflicts. Some of those being deployed may emotionally distance themselves from family and friends, either unconsciously or consciously, to create a psychological "buffer" against feelings of loss and sadness. People who are close to a withdrawn individual may feel cut off, resulting in hard feelings, resentments, or conflicts. These kinds of "emotional snowball effects" may become quite large and complicated.

Deployment

This is commonly an adjustment phase. At first, new activities and surroundings may keep you occupied. However, in quieter moments, it is common to have emotional reactions, including sadness, uncertainty, and difficulty concentrating, and physical reactions like sleep and appetite disturbances, headaches, and increased vulnerability to colds and flu. Over time, these normal stress reactions usually diminish or disappear, and will be replaced by a growing sense of competence



as you adjust to your new environment and responsibilities. It is not unusual, however, to feel a persistent "homesickness," especially if you have young children, a spouse, or a significant other.

It is particularly difficult for a deployed person to leave a loved one with problems, such as an elderly parent who is sick or a child with behavior problems. Being unable to quickly intervene in the situation should it deteriorate is a common cause of chronic worry and stress for deployed personnel.

Re-Deployment

Anticipatory anxiety and energy at the thought of returning home may be most prominent during this time. Often, deployed personnel become fixated on returning, resulting in a certain nervous agitation about "getting home." This is a normal part of the process of disengaging from one situation and preparing to re-engage in another.

Post-Deployment

After the initial joy and celebration of the homecoming, reality sets in. It may be challenging to settle into old routines and re-connect with family and friends. You may have to deal with problems and family situations that have been on hold in your absence. It may also be difficult to talk with loved ones about your experiences, especially if you have been involved in intense or traumatic events, including combat. It is easier to talk with others who have gone through similar experiences.

Many post-deployed personnel talk about the unreality of being back in “normal” life. This is particularly true when the transition time from active duty has been very rapid. Usually, this sense of “not being quite all there” goes away quickly.



The Stress of Deployment

Being called to duty can be stressful. There seems to be no end to the things that one has to complete prior to departure. Also, as departure nears, loved ones and friends will begin having their own emotional reactions. Take steps to understand and cope with stressful emotions.

- Carve out some brief interludes to relax or engage in a favorite activity.
- Realize that you are not alone, that others are going through the same stresses, and that most people find a way to cope effectively.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible. Familiar routines are often comforting, particularly when facing a period of change and uncertainty.
- Establish a support system of friends, family, and other military personnel/families.
- Practice good self-care: eat healthy, exercise, get enough sleep, and avoid excessive use of alcohol.
- If you are feeling overwhelmed, talk it out with a trusted friend.

Understanding Separations

Often, your family members will not know how long you'll be gone or where you'll be (and sometimes, neither will you). It can be a scary time for your children, spouse, and parents. Here's how you can help family members cope:



- Talk about the situation with trusted family members and friends to make it less of an unknown for everyone.
- Maintain regular contact during your deployment through phone calls, e-mails, or letters.
- Encourage children to express their emotions and ask questions. Give realistic reassurance by responding to their concerns and reminding them that family members, caregivers, and friends are there to support them.
- Spend quality time with your loved ones prior to departure. Communicate your feelings and demonstrate your care and concern for them.
- Involve family members in planning for your departure.

Taking Care of Business

The more the logistics of your life are squared away when you leave, the less

worry and stress you'll have. Create a pre-deployment checklist to ensure a family member will be taking responsibility for:

- Monthly budget and banking decisions such as bills and debts.
- Vehicle paperwork and how to remedy car problems.
- Legal issues such as guardianship, wills, and location of important documents.
- Contact information and important dates.
- Special needs such as medications, after-school care, caring for pets, etc.
- Child and adult dependent care arrangements.



Available Resources

There are many resources available to assist you and your family with the difficulties of separation due to military duty. You do not have to go it alone. These resources include:

Armed forces affiliated groups:

US Air Force: www.af.mil/

US Army: www.army.mil/

US Army Reserve:
www.army.mil/usar/

US Coast Guard: www.uscg.mil/

US Dept. of Defense Link:
www.defenselink.mil/

US Marine Corps: www.usmc.mil/

US Navy: www.navy.mil/

Other military-related resources:

- Family Separation and Readiness Guide: www.afcrossroads.com/famseparation/
- US Army Community and Family Support Center:
www.armymwr.com



- Army Emergency Relief (provides emergency financial assistance to reservists and family members): 200 Stovall St., Alexandria, VA.22332. Phone: 703-428-0000 email: www.aerhq.org
- The Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society (provides financial, educational & other assistance to navy personnel and their family members): www.nmcrs.org
- Air Force Aid Society: www.afas.org
- Coast Guard Mutual Assistance: www.cgmahq.org