

HOMECOMING AND REUNION



OPERATION
READY
Resources for Educating About Deployment and You



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Family Deployment Readiness for the Active Army, the Army National Guard, and the Army Reserve

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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 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.

Parents and Siblings and Friends also have a special bond with their soldiers. Although not romantic, these relationships still include a unique type and degree of intimacy and familiarity. As you review this information, note the many ways in which the hints and tips apply to your situation.

Adjustments for Families

Directions: Take a few minutes to look at the following questions. Write out your answers in the space provided.

1. How will it feel to have your soldier back in the house? Be honest about the good and the not-so-good aspects.

2. How do you think your children will react?

3. How will your soldier's return affect your work schedule, cooking habits, cleaning habits, free time, and general way of doing things?

4. Have you developed new interests or friendships? Will these change when your soldier returns?

5. What do you think will be the biggest change in your life when your soldier returns?

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.
- 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.
- Don't press your soldier to talk immediately, or in great detail, about his/her experiences. Let your soldier open up at his/her own pace. Be supportive and non-judgmental.
- 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 soldier may be different.
- Intimate relationships may be awkward at first. You and your soldier may not feel the same degree of need or desire for physical contact (e.g. hugs & kisses), especially at first. Your soldier may want more (or less) "pampering" than you used to offer. "Normal" is different for each person. If there is a change, don't take it personally. Be patient and understanding as things level out to the "new normal".
- Take time to readjust.
- Take time to get reacquainted.
- Forget your fantasies. Reality may be quite different.
- Communicate with your soldier and your family.

Stress Symptoms

The following stress danger signals focus on the medical and physical symptoms common to tension stress. These symptoms may be experienced/displayed by either the soldiers or other members of the family. 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, hyperexcitability, 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
- 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.

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 may include:

- 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; and
- 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 it 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.

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 reunion.

Forget your fantasies.

- Give up any fantasies or expectations you may have about what reunion 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 soldier has changed, and your children have changed.
- Don't get upset by things that are done differently.

Tips on helping children adjust:

- Children are people too. Try to understand how they feel. Change and uncertainty is often very frightening for them, so be patient.
- Children can get angry about their parent being gone.
- Toddlers and preschoolers may act like the returning 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 the key.

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

- An 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.

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 Readiness Group leader for referrals
- Chaplain—a good source for confidential counseling, community contacts, and family support programs
- 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 **Post Traumatic 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 hyperalert 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., automobile backfires

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

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

Sources of Support and Assistance for Army Soldiers and Families

1. *Army Community Service (ACS)*: ACS is principle source of family readiness for the Army on or near installations. It is staffed by paid professionals and volunteers.

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 Readiness Group (FRG)*: The FRG 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 FRG 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, community contacts, and family support programs.

Army Community Service: www.goacs.org

Army Family Action Plan: <http://www.armymwr.com/mwr/afap/>

Army Family Liaison Home Page:

<http://www.hqda.army.mil/acsimweb/family/family.htm>

Army Family Readiness Group Information: <http://www.armypouse.com>

Army Family Team Building Home Page: <http://www.aftb.org/home.asp>

DoD Dictionary of Military Terms: <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict>