

# Managing Your Marriage After Deployment

Welcome home from your military deployment! For the next few months, you may feel as if you are on an emotional rollercoaster, full of both excitement and anxiety. You may also experience feelings of resentment, disappointment, and frustration. Don't worry—this emotional cycle is *normal*. The most important thing to keep in mind is that getting back into a positive routine with your spouse will take time. Things won't be like they were before the deployment—you both have grown and changed as a result of this challenge—but you can be an even stronger couple.

After a deployment, it is common to have trouble communicating, balancing new friends, sharing control and responsibilities, and feeling emotionally close to one another. Some service members may experience mental health problems like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), so it is important to be aware of the symptoms of PTSD. As a military spouse, you may be one of the first people to notice when your loved one needs help. This Tip Sheet is intended to help you understand the issues couples often struggle with after a deployment and provide insights to help you grow even closer as a couple.

## Skills to Use:

**COMMUNICATION:** Building honest and open communication is one of the most important things in relationships. During the deployment, service members may not have opened up about their feelings and may have shared only mission-specific information. Back on the home front, it can be daunting to discuss inner emotions. Spouses, you may have lots of questions about the deployment and may also want to



share your own experiences. Service members, you may want to protect your spouse from deployment stories—or think no one but your battle buddies can understand. However, not sharing with your spouse can trigger his/her imagination and cause unnecessary worry and stress.

- **What You Can Do:** Practice good communication skills with your spouse in all situations. It may be helpful to try communicating in different ways, like writing notes or sharing music. Healthy couples communicate a range of feelings, both positive and negative, every day with each other. The more you practice, the more connected you will feel. Couples often only want to talk things out when something goes wrong. Instead, try to notice one positive thing your partner does for you each day and let him/her know you appreciate it. A little kindness goes a long way!

**FRIENDS & FAMILY TIME:** It can be hard to find that happy balance between your friends and your spouse after deployment. Service members, you have a whole new set of battle buddies. Spouses, you have

a new group of people you grew closer to for support during the deployment. Problems may occur when there is not agreement on the amount of time you each spend with your new friends and how much time you spend together as a family.

- **What You Can Do:** Sit down and discuss the new bonds you've each made. Brainstorm a list of new friendships and ways you can bring everyone together. Be honest about what these people mean to you and the role they played in your deployment journey. Plan how to introduce your spouse to your new friends and plan time to spend with your new friends alone. Don't forget to make special time just for the two of you; this fuels the fire that keeps your relationship going.

#### **DECISION MAKING AND RESPONSIBILITIES:**

Couples often struggle with how to share responsibilities—whether financial, familial, or social—after a deployment. Spouses, you had to become more independent during the deployment and make family decisions on your own. Service members, you may be used to maintaining strict control of your environment for survival during the deployment. On the home front, it may be difficult to let your spouse take the lead on certain things.

- **What You Can Do:** Talk openly and calmly about what household tasks are most important to each of you and how you can share them. Try to let the little things slide. No one in the relationship can have total control of every detail. Service members, remember your spouse didn't sign up for the military so try not to "give orders." Spouses, understand that at first your spouse may need the environment to be very orderly to feel safe or comfortable. Remember you can shift tasks around if something isn't working out. Be sure to prepare your children for any changes in the routine.

**EMOTIONAL BALANCING:** Finding a healthy emotional balance after a deployment will take time. Service members, during the deployment you likely had to keep your emotions in check. On the home front, it may be hard to "thaw out" these feelings or to feel close to your spouse. You may feel numb, angry, or irritable at first. Spouses, you may feel nervous, happy, relieved, or a combination of these emotions in connection with the homecoming. You may also feel frustrated if your spouse seems distant or cold. You probably have a lot of expectations about the homecoming process; don't be disappointed if it isn't how you thought it would be.

- **What You Can Do:** Be patient with each other and recognize that, with effort and care, you will eventually reconnect. Also, keep up to date about common mental health problems service members and their spouses may experience after a deployment so you can find help if needed.
- Make your mental health a priority. Stay attuned to your feelings; don't stuff them down inside. Practice healthy coping skills, like talking to your spouse or a friend, working out at the gym, or other pursuing hobbies like writing or music. Remember, no feeling is permanent; no matter how upsetting or uncomfortable the emotion, it will pass. Also, be aware that physical intimacy is different than emotional intimacy. In your marriage, one may come faster than the other.

#### **RECOGNIZING POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS**

**DISORDER:** PTSD symptoms can develop after someone experiences a traumatic event (such as combat or warfare) in which they or someone close to them was seriously injured or their life was in danger. Sometimes the symptoms emerge immediately after the trauma. In other cases, the symptoms may develop months later. These symptoms can be

overwhelming and frightening. PTSD can make it hard to continue your regular routine and can also be tough on your relationship.

PTSD involves four symptoms: reliving the event, avoidance, numbing, and feeling “keyed up.” Warning signs include frequent nightmares; drug or alcohol abuse; lack of interest in hobbies enjoyed before the deployment; lack of interest in seeing friends or family; problems falling or staying asleep; feelings of hopelessness; lack of planning for the future; problems concentrating; excessive concern for safety (like patrolling the home, checking locks repeatedly, sleeping with or near a weapon); increased risk-taking behavior like dangerous driving; excessive anger, irritability or acting on a “really short fuse;” feeling emotionally “shut off;” and problems expressing emotions. Look out for these symptoms and consult with a PTSD expert should you have any concerns. In some cases, PTSD can lead to intimate partner violence. Seek help immediately if you are experiencing any violence within your home.

- **What You Can Do:** It is important to keep in mind that PTSD is not permanent. There are treatments out there that work and many ways you can support your spouse through recovery. First, get informed about PTSD, the warning signs, and treatment options in your area. Offer to go to doctor’s appointments with your spouse and let your spouse know you always are available to talk. The more you do to improve communication and build social support, the more you can strengthen your relationship.

You may also want to take a marriage and relationship education (MRE) class or participate in a couples retreat. The relationship skills learned through these experiences—and integrating these skills into your day-to-day interactions with your spouse—will help during

this transition. Keep your expectations in check. Both of you have experienced intense levels of stress during the deployment, albeit because of very different circumstances. A sense of normalcy and intimacy will not likely be restored immediately upon your partner’s return.

## Key Takeaway Points:

- It will take time to reconnect with one another. You won’t be the same couple you were before the deployment, but you can be an even stronger couple.
- Practice good communication skills, emotional expression, and active listening as a couple.
- Work to build up your social support networks.
- Be aware of the resources available to you as a military couple for healthcare and specific mental health issues like PTSD.

## Additional Resources for Military Couples:

Veteran’s Administration: [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov)

Vet Centers: [www.vetcenter.va.gov](http://www.vetcenter.va.gov)

NCPTSD: <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/>

Military One Source: [www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com)

Give an Hour: [www.giveanhour.org](http://www.giveanhour.org)

Suicide Hotline: 1-800-273-8255

VA PTSD Program Locator: [http://www2.va.gov/directory/guide/ptsd\\_fish.asp](http://www2.va.gov/directory/guide/ptsd_fish.asp)

Traumatic Brain Injury and PTSD: [http://www2.va.gov/directory/guide/ptsd\\_fish.asp](http://www2.va.gov/directory/guide/ptsd_fish.asp)

Helping a Family Member who has PTSD: <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/helping-family-member.asp>

PTSD and Your Family (including talking with children about PTSD): <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/ptsd-and-your-family.asp>

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