

Retreats with Military Couples

Benefits of the military family lifestyle include stable income, housing, health insurance and built-in support systems. Military families are frequently self-reliant and resourceful. They have a keen appreciation for diversity and global communities and a commitment to a national mission. A service member's desire to return to his or her romantic partner and/or family is often the sustaining factor in his or her deployment. While the honor and benefits of service are considerable, military personnel face circumstances that challenge their ability to maintain happy and healthy romantic relationships.

Military personnel encounter unique obstacles to maintaining their relationships. These trials are often heightened in wartime. Multiple deployments, dangerous missions, and long separations have begun to take their toll on the marriages and families of military personnel. One, or sometimes both spouses, face deployment overseas and a significant number return home suffering from combat stress. Divorce rates have increased and incidences of domestic violence and suicide are high for soldiers who have been deployed. The high suicide rate in the Army has been partially attributed to broken relationships when soldiers return from duty. One strategy to address these negative trends is to offer relationship strengthening and relationship education programs to couples and families in all branches of the military.

The culture in the armed forces differs in some ways from civilian culture. For example, the military culture values brief, direct, simple, and often directive communication (without a lot of room for emotions



or long exchanges of thoughts and feelings). It can be difficult for military members to shift gears and provide supportive listening to a spouse without wanting to problem solve immediately. Furthermore, civilian providers need to be aware of the stress created by training and deployment cycles, long or unpredictable separations (which impact marriage and family relationships), frequent moves, and lack of social support for spouses.

Retreats allow couples to spend time together and have fun away from the structure and constraints of formal military life. Such retreats allow the couple to learn and practice relationship skills without distractions and in a more intimate setting. Additionally, retreats often provide coaching specific to the needs of each couple, which can be very beneficial to military couples experiencing unique challenges. This Tip Sheet will provide civilian community-based organizations some suggestions about providing MRE retreats to military couples.

Outreach – Advertising on or near a military base is a great way to recruit couples. If couples find the retreats helpful, word of mouth will spread. Contacting and forming partnerships with those on the base who work with couples and families, such as military social workers or chaplains, can also be an effective way to recruit couples and advertise your program. Consider inviting those individuals to a retreat so they can see firsthand the work you are doing.

Use good materials – Utilize materials that are evidence-based and fun. Make sure these materials teach core skills like communication techniques and conflict resolution. Think about the unique issues military couples face. Do your materials address these needs somehow? Integrate the following subjects into examples and exercises in class:

- Deployments and long separations
- Maintaining communication and closeness
- Changes in roles and expectations for both spouses
- Preserve commitment
- Social support
- Keeping up relationships with children

Build on the couple's connection and their social support systems – Resilient couples come up with creative ways to stay connected during long separations and rise to the challenges of their new roles. They also find and make good use of social supports wherever they are. Whether through a faith community, family, or other military spouses, social support is an important component in a strong marriage. As an exercise during your retreat, have the couple create lists of their avenues for social support. They can also brainstorm creative ways to stay connected during periods of separation.

Be aware of situations that require specialized care – Programs should be prepared to recognize and deal with domestic violence, suicide risk, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Consult with specialists in all of these areas so you can identify symptoms. Work together with the specialist to create a plan for referrals. You may want to include a protocol for follow-up with the organizations you refer couples to so no one “falls through the cracks.”

Have highly skilled presenters – The marriage educators leading your retreats will be most effective if they have direct experience with military culture. Military culture will vary by the sector, so make sure the educator's experience is relevant. Because you will want to offer the best possible experience to military couples, be sure the facilitators of the retreat are experienced in working with groups, are very familiar with whatever curriculum or materials they'll be using, and are able to respond with appropriate referrals and good resources if other issues come up. A male-female co-presenter pair is optimal.

Pay particular attention to the environment – Whenever possible, hold your retreat at a nice resort in order to provide couples with a safe and relaxing environment. You want to create a true retreat experience for your couples. Pay attention to details such as room amenities and access to good dining and recreational activities. Have quality refreshments available during the workshop. Make the atmosphere casual and relaxing. Encourage civilian dress so service members can feel like they are getting a break from military life.

Know what resources are available – Have both military and civilian resources available as couples or individuals sometimes will be more comfortable accessing civilian resources. These may include support groups, community-based organizations,

and military family support centers, among others. Include brochures that give ideas for fun dates and activities, too!

Understand the specific needs of couples pre-deployment and post-deployment – Couples will have different challenges and needs depending on where they are in the deployment cycle. Pre-deployment, couples will need to talk about expectations and plan for how they will cope as a couple with the separation. After deployment, couples will need to focus on reestablishing family norms and reconnecting in safe ways. Good communication and the ability to give and receive support are critical.

Evaluate your retreat – Have couples rate their experience, the usefulness of the knowledge acquired, and the setting. Ask them to provide feedback on what they would like to see more of in future retreats. This will allow you to refine your retreat model as you go and ensure you are meeting the needs of your participants.

Military couples have unique strengths that community-based programs should keep in mind. While military life can be hard on a couple, there are many strong and resilient military families. To provide the best learning experience, civilian agencies or providers who want to work with military couples should be familiar with military culture and attuned to the unique stresses and strengths of military couples.

Additional Resources

[NHMRC: Managing Your Marriage after Deployment](#)

[NHMRC: Tips for Married Couples Dealing with Deployment](#)

[NHMRC: When One Spouse Returns from Deployment: Tips for MRE Practitioners Working with Military Couples](#)

[Promoting Marriage Resource Packet](#)

Levin, A. (2008). [Suicide Among Soldiers Still Rising as Stress Piles Up](#). *Psychiatric News*, Volume 43, Number 12, Page 1. American Psychiatric Association.

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