

Coping with Extended Deployment in Military Families

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The emotional cycle of deployment experienced by family members at home can be considered to involve 5 distinct stages that are closely related to the soldier's experience of deployment: predeployment, deployment, sustainment, re-deployment, and post-deployment. What follows is a description of the characteristics of each stage and the different coping strategies needed through each of these stages.

Pre-deployment (length of time varies)

This stage begins with the warning order for deployment and ends when the soldier actually departs. It is characterized alternately by denial and anticipation of loss. As soldiers work on "bonding," which is essential to unit cohesion, it creates an increasing sense of emotional and physical distance for military spouses. It is not unusual to express to your significant other "I wish you were gone already." As the reality of the deployment finally sinks in the family attempts to get their affairs in order, which may include dealing with issues related to home security, child care, finances, and home repairs. Questions are also raised about how the deployment may impact the marriage such as "will we remain faithful and/or will our marriage survive?" It is common to have a significant argument just prior to deployment. This is likely the result of stress caused by the pending separation, so try not to catastrophize or overreact to the argument. To effectively cope with this stage, it may be helpful to discuss in detail your expectations of each other during the deployment such as accepted level of contact with the opposite sex and/or how often letters or care packages might be sent.

Deployment (first month)

Overall this stage is often unpleasant and disorganizing. It is common to experience a roller coaster of mixed emotions from feeling disoriented and overwhelmed, to feeling relieved that you no longer have to appear brave and strong. It is also common to experience residual anger at tasks left undone, and to experience feelings of sadness, numbness, and loneliness from the "hole" created by the soldier's departure. You may have trouble sleeping and have some anxiety about security issues or your ability to cope. Some other issues you may be dealing with are large phone bills, waiting for calls, feeling helpless and unable to support each other and/or being jealous of those on whom your partner is relying or confiding in. These issues can exacerbate the stress and uncertainty of deployment. Most often the ability to stay in close touch (especially during key milestones) is an important source of coping with the separation. On the other hand, you may want to consider seeking out professional help to assist you in coping with "bad" phone calls that are characterized by arguing and poor and ineffective communication.

Sustainment (2 months through the penultimate month)

During this stage you are likely establishing new sources of support and new routines. You may start feeling more confident and in control as you learn that you are able to cope with crises as they arise, and make decisions on your own. A challenge during this stage is that communications with your significant other are much more vulnerable to distortion and/or misperception over long distances and without face-to-face contact. Thus, unless it is an emergency,

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you may want to consider tabling “hot topics” until after the deployment. It is common to feel frustrated during this stage if the contact with your significant other is unidirectional and must be initiated by the soldier. You may even feel “trapped” at home or limited with what you can do, for fear of missing a call. This may be combined with feelings of guilt for continuing on with social activities while your significant other is deployed. While these feelings are completely normal and understandable, it is perfectly okay and even healthy for you to maintain a social life of your own. With the rapid speed of information nowadays, another challenge may be dealing with troubling rumors about infidelity, injuries, changes in the date of return, or even who calls home the most. Try not to spread these rumors, take them with a grain of salt, and if they cannot be resolved you may consider contacting the chain of command to find out the truth or put a stop to them.

Re-deployment (last month or month before scheduled to return home)

This stage is generally characterized by intense anticipation, and yet conflicting emotions. While you are likely to feel excited that your significant other is returning home, you may also be experiencing some apprehension. For example, you may wonder if you will get along or if he/she likes or agrees with any changes you have made while they were away. There may be renewed difficulty in making decisions. You may also experience a burst of energy combined with a rush to complete “to-do” lists before your mate returns. Overall, expectations tend to be high during this stage.

Post-deployment (begins with arrival home and typically lasts 3-6 months)

Although you have reunited physically, it may take some time to reconnect emotionally, and you may experience a sense of awkwardness as you get used to being around each other again. This stage can be characterized by a joyous honeymoon period, as well as feelings of frustration. As soldiers attempt to reassert their role as a member of the family, it can create some tension and requires some patience. Understand that your significant other may feel pressure to make up for lost time and they may want to take back all of the responsibilities they had before. It is important to realize, however, that it is not realistic for either of you to expect everything to be the same as before the deployment. During this stage, you may also be experiencing a loss of independence and/or resentment at having been left at home to take care of everything, and you may feel as if you need your “own space.” At the same time, basic household chores, rules, and routines need to be renegotiated and roles must be reestablished. It will also be essential to practice good communication skills, have patience, go slow, lower expectations, and take the time to get to know each other again. Recognize that you both have grown and changed throughout the deployment and move toward accepting these changes and reuniting.

This handout was adapted from the following reference:

Pincus, S.H., House, R., Christenson, J., & Adler, L.E. The Emotional Cycle of Deployment: A Military Family Perspective. U.S. Army Medical Department Journal April-June 2001.