

Preparing for Reunion & Reintegration

Military families look forward to being together after a long deployment with many mixed emotions. Each family member will have different expectations. Every family situation is different. But, it is important to remember the needs and feelings of the returning family member, the adult at home and the children.

The Reunion, the return home after a deployment, seems to receive the most thought but the least preparation; as the Member is preparing to return to the home station so too must the family for their arrival. The homecoming of your loved one, like the initial deployment, will more than likely be another time of mixed emotions.

Did you know? Research by the American Red Cross shows that Reunion can actually be more stressful in the lives of Military families than the deployment!

The Transition

Soldiers will be ready to return and happy to be home, yet they may feel guilty about the things they have missed, especially if they have children. The Member may be proud of his or her family for doing so well without them, but at the same time, now feel unneeded. Some members may also experience feelings of loss or grief for their colleagues or the way of life they have left behind, as they struggle to adapt back to their civilian lifestyle. Patience and communication, by both the family and the Member can help with the transition during this phase.

Preparation

Begin to reflect, before the member returns, on the changes that have taken place for you since you were last together as a couple/family (see worksheet). It is a good idea for this activity to be done by all members of the family, including the person who will be returning.

Also think about the changes you might expect to see in your loved one, try not to be shocked if the member appears different. They may have lost or gained weight, not slept properly for many months or experienced a traumatic or life changing (sometimes positive) event and therefore now view life and the things around them very differently. This is particularly significant for Parents who have a child returning from their first deployment.

Preparation Tips

- If children are involved in the reunion, include them in your planning for the homecoming.
- Avoid scheduling in too many homecoming events.
- Avoid seeing lots of friends or extended family for the first few days. This is particularly important for children with returning parents and siblings, so that they do not feel that have to 'share' the returning member with lots of people. It is recommended that the family unit (parents and children) spend the initial days together, allowing time for the family to re-adjust.
- *Ask the returning member what sort of homecoming they would like!*

Personal Expectations

Think about your own expectations of the homecoming; are they realistic? How would you feel if some or all of these expectations did not happen? What can you do to make the transition easier for you, your partner and your family? (Think about family routines, intimate connections, friendships, independence, control and trust). Also think about the expectations you had at the beginning of the deployment...did all family members follow through on their promises? If not, why not?

A note for families of returning reservists

Many of you will have a returning member that will resume a civilian job once they are home. For these members in particular, it can be difficult for them to adapt back to their previous employment. For instance they may struggle to accept the heroic status they can be labelled with for carrying out such a difficult job overseas, serving their country.

What to Expect

In the run up to the reunion it is possible you will feel a mixture of emotions from joy and excitement to anxiety, apprehension, impatience and restlessness. It is important to share the feelings of apprehension as well as excitement with your returning loved one. At the same time reassure your member of your love, commitment and support.

Once your loved one has returned you may recognise some of the following reactions- disorganization, resentment, frustration and loss of independence. Try to be patient with yourself, partner and children. These feelings are normal and part of the 'Renegotiation' of the relationship contract. Celebrate together the personal growth each other of you has achieved during the separation.

For couples it is common to experience difficulty re-establishing emotional and physical intimacy. Try to accept these feelings as normal and not as a threat to the relationship. It is important to recognise that the hole your member left in the family at the beginning of the deployment has now been filled with other activities, this is also important for the member to understand.

The bottom line is **communication**, talk about your feelings, concerns, expectations. The Reunion Process is not an easy one but if you expect the stress, it will help you prepare for and deal with it when it actually happens!

The Military member may have been exposed to continuous violence, noise and seen events that affected their values and beliefs. Therefore when planning the homecoming, try to avoid any immediate situations where the member may be surrounded by large crowds such as at malls, family gatherings or sporting events. They may also find it difficult to relax after months of constantly having to be aware and on their guard, so try to create a calm and peaceful environment where possible to promote this.

Battlemind Training

Another important thing to understand is the concept of the 'Battlemind'. There are certain skills that are integral to survival when in theatre, but that can be detrimental and isolating when back home. Below are the ten skills that have sometimes become second nature to the returning member, as well as a comparison with how these skills can be inappropriate behaviours back at home.

Accountability vs. Controlling Behavior
Targeted vs. Inappropriate Aggression
Tactical Awareness vs. Hypervigilance
Lethally Armed vs. "Locked and Loaded" at home
Emotional Control vs. Detachment
Mission and OPSEC vs. Secretiveness
Individual Responsibility vs. Guilt
Non-Defensive (combat) vs. Aggressive Driving
Discipline and Ordering vs. Conflict
Buddies (cohesion) vs. Withdrawal

As with all other adjustments after a deployment, most if not all of these behaviours will dissipate within the first 6-10 weeks at home, so an understanding of these behaviours can help families members to remain patient and supportive of the member. Additionally, if these kinds of behaviours are occurring months after their homecoming, it may be important to encourage your family member to seek some additional help.

A Special Note for Parents of Single Members

The majority of the preparation and tips apply if your child has been away on deployment. However, it is important to understand and remember that they will be returning home a little different. Therefore the parent-child expectations will have changed significantly from when they left. They will have survived on their own in very difficult, challenging and new situations.

It is important to consider that the younger returning adults are likely to be the ones who have experienced the most significant changes-physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually; especially if this was their first prolonged absence from the family/home.

- Be patient with them-let them know you are interested in hearing their experiences whenever he/she is ready to talk about it
- Show acceptance and support of the signs of increased independence and maturity even if this is difficult for you as the parent!
- Maintain contact and share experiences whenever possible with other families of deployed personnel.
- It may be that the returning single member experiences a loss in their previous social network.

Understanding the Returning Family Member

- Military deployments, especially in a combat zone, can significantly change an individual's life.
- The deployment involved the loss of many comforts that people back home take for granted: contact with family, comfortable living conditions, a variety of good food, time to relax, etc.
- The deployment involved hard work and enormous responsibility. If in a war zone, there was the constant threat of loss of life or injury. The family member may have witnessed injuries, deaths and destruction.
- What sustains military personnel on a dangerous deployment is devotion to duty, a close connection with fellow soldiers and the desire to return to the comforts of home, family and community.
- The returning family member may seem preoccupied with the experience of their deployment. They may be unable to talk about it or may excessively talk about it.
- The returning family member may have suffered physical or emotional injury or disability.
- The returning family member may expect extra attention and support for some time after their return.
- The returning family member may have serious concerns about their financial or employment future.

Understanding the Adult that Stayed at Home

- Life has gone on and the adult at home has had to keep the family moving forward during the deployment. They may have had to take over many functions normally performed by the deployed family member.
- Often the adult at home has handled many small and not so small crises. These problems are old news at home but may be big surprises for the returning family member.
- The adult at home may expect extra attention and credit regarding the performance during the deployment. They also may expect the returning family members to automatically accept the family as it now exists and begin to

perform a role with which they are uncomfortable or unfamiliar.

Understanding the Children

- Children generally are excited about a reunion with their returning parent. However, the excitement of the reunion is stressful for children. Children may also be anxious and uncertain about the reunion.
- Children's responses are influenced by their developmental level. Toddlers may not remember the parent well and act shy or strange around them. School age children may not understand the returning parent's need to take care of themselves and to spend time with their spouse. Teenagers may seem distant as they continue their activities with friends.
- Children may need a period of time to warm up and readjust to the returning parent. This should not be misinterpreted or taken personally.

Understanding the Family

- Couples may find the deployment has strained their relationship. Time and negotiation will help the couple work toward a new loving relationship.
- Family problems that existed before the deployment frequently reappear after the deployment.
- Extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles may have provided support and service to the family during the deployment. They may have difficulty redefining their role with the family.

Give Everyone Time

- All family members will need time to adjust to the changes that accompany the return of the deployed family member.
- Open discussion of expectations prior to the return home is helpful if possible.
- Families should utilize the help offered by the military and other organizations to readjust to the reunion.
- Most families will change. Children have been born or have grown. An adult at home may have become more independent. The returning family member had a life changing experience. The goal is to form a healthy, new life together.

Reunion of a military family after a long deployment is a cause for celebration. Some patience and understanding will go a long way to help the whole family successfully reunite with a minimum of problems.

Key Points for a Successful Reunion....

- Communicate feelings as openly and honestly as possible
- Allow room for growth and change
- Get to know each other again
- Help each other to adjust to the new dynamics and roles within the family
- Be patient
- Make the homecoming activities appropriate
- Most of all ENJOY being together again!

Continue to participate in the support group network once the member has returned and don't be afraid to seek professional help if necessary.



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