

The Emotional Cycle of Deployment

Getting ready for a deployment starts long before the husbands actually walk out the door. For a period of time, the women tend to ignore the deployment, fantasizing that somehow it will not happen: "Surely the ship will sink or he'll get orders to shore duty." Eventually something happens to trigger recognition of the reality of departure, perhaps a flip of the calendar so that "The Date" is viable. At this point, the Emotional Cycle of Deployment begins.

Stage One-Anticipation of Loss:

This stage occurs four to six weeks before deployment. During this time it is hard for a woman to accept the fact that her husband is going to leave her. She may find herself crying unexpectedly at songs, TV shows and other such "silly things" that would not normally affect her. These incidents allow her to release some of her pent-up emotions. There is a lot of tension during this period as both husband and wife try to cram in a multitude of projects and repair, deadbolts to install, garages to clean, family to visit, neighbours and friends to invite over, etc.

The wife will have some unexpressed anger, and the couple may bicker even though they usually do not. This can be upsetting if it is viewed out of context. Although unenjoyable, these arguments can be functional: They provide one way for the couple to put some emotional distance between themselves in their preparation for living apart. It is hard for a wife to feel warm and loving toward her husband when she is mad at him and, as one woman said, "It's easier to let him go." Other frequent symptoms of this stage include restlessness (productive), depression, and irritability. While women feel angry or resentful ("He's really going to leave me alone with all this"), men tend to feel guilty ("There's no way I can get everything done that I should before I leave").

Stage Two-Detachment and Withdrawal:

In many ways, this is the most difficult stage. It occurs sometime in the final days before departure. Such statements as, "I know I should be enjoying these last few days together but all I want to do is cry" indicate a sense of despair or hopelessness. The marriage is out of the couple's control. Although they push ahead trying to complete the list that never gets any shorter, the wife often feels a lack of energy and is fatigued. Making decisions becomes increasingly difficult.

During this time, the wife may experience some ambivalence about sexual relations. The brain says, "We've got to have sex; this is it for six months" while the heart may rebel, "But I don't want to be that close." Intercourse represents the ultimate intimacy in marriage, yet it is hard to be intimate when husband and wife are separating from each other emotionally. This can be especially difficult if it is seen as rejection rather than as a reaction to trying circumstances. The couple may find, too that they stop sharing their thoughts and feelings with each other. This stage is most evident when departure is delayed for some reason. When asked if they enjoyed the extra time together wives invariably respond, "It was awful!" The detachment and withdrawal stage is an uncomfortable time: emotionally they have separated. Wives think "If you have to go, go," and husbands think, "Let's get on with it!"

Stage Three-Emotional Disorganization:

No matter how prepared Navy wives think they are, the actual deployment still comes as a shock. An initial sense of relief that the pain of saying good-bye is over may be followed by guilt. They worry. "If I really love him why am I relieved that he's gone?" They feel numb, aimless, and without purpose. Old routines have been disrupted and new ones not yet established. Many women are depressed and withdraw from friends and neighbours, especially if the neighbours' husbands are home. They often feel overwhelmed as they face total responsibility for family affairs. Many women have difficulty sleeping, suddenly aware that they are the "security officer", others sleep excessively. A wife may feel some anger at her husband because he did not, say, provide for her physical security by installing deadbolts.

Wives often report feeling restless (though not productive), confused, disorganized, indecisive, and irritable. The unspoken question is, "What am I going to do with this hole in my life?" Whereas wives experience a sense of being overwhelmed, husbands get stuck at being at this stage, either unable or unwilling to move on emotionally; they will both have and cause problems throughout the cruise.

Stage Four-Recovery and Stabilization:

At some point, wives may realize "Hey, I'm doing O.K.!". They have established new family patterns and settled into a routine. They have begun to feel more comfortable with the reorganization of roles and responsibilities. Broken arms have been tended, mowers fixed, cars tuned up, and washing machines bought. Each successful experience adds to their self-confidence. The wives have cultivated new sources of support through friends, church, work, wives' groups, etc. They have often given up real cooking, they may run up higher long-distance phone bills and contact old friends.

Dr. Alice Snyder of Family Services Centre, Norfolk, calls the women "single wives" as they experience both worlds. Being alone brings freedom as well as responsibility. They often unconsciously find themselves referring to "My house, my car, my kids." As a group they are more mature, and they are more outwardly independent. This stage is one of the benefits of being a Navy wife. Each woman has the opportunity to initiate new activities, accept more responsibilities, and stretch herself and her abilities - all while secure in being married.

Nevertheless, all the responsibility can be stressful and wives may find that they are sick more frequently. Many women continue to feel mildly depressed and anxious. Isolation from both their husbands and their own families can leave them feeling vulnerable. There is not much contact with men-by choice or design and women may begin to feel asexual. On the whole though most women have a new sense of independence and freedom and take pride in their ability to cope alone.

Stage Five-Anticipation of Homecoming:

Approximately four to six weeks before the ship is due back wives often find themselves saying "ohmigosh, he's coming home and I'm not ready!" That long list of things to do while he's gone" is still unfinished. The pace picks up. There is a feeling of joy and excitement in anticipation of living together again. Feelings of apprehension surface as well, although they are usually left unexpressed.

This is a time to re-evaluate the marriage. That "hole" that existed when their husbands left did get filled-with tennis classes, church, a new job, new friends, school-and now they instinctively know that they must "clean house" in their lives in order to make room for the men. Most experience an unconscious process of evaluating. "I want him back, but what am I going to have to give up?" Therefore they may feel nervous, tense and apprehensive.

The wives are concerned about the effect the husband's return will have on their lives and their children's: "Will he understand and accept the changes that have occurred in us? Will he approve of the decisions I made? Will he adjust to the fact that I can't go back to being dependent?" The husbands are anxious, too, wondering, "How have we changed? How will I be accepted? Will the kids know me? Does my family still need me?"

Most women bury these concerns in busy work. Once more, there is a sense of restlessness (but productive) and confusion. Decisions become harder to make and may be postponed until the homecoming. Women become irritable again and may experience changes in appetite. At most women it is, "Do I want him back? You bet! I can't wait to see him!"

Stage Six- Renegotiation of the Marriage Contract:

This stage, too, is one in which the husband and wife are together physically but not necessarily emotionally. They will have to have some time together and share experiences and feeling before they feel like a couple again. They both need to be aware of the necessity to refocus on the marriage. For instance: After one of the wives' husbands had been home for a few days, she became aggravated with him when he would telephone his shipboard roommate every time something of importance came up within the family finally declaring, "I'm your wife. Talk to me!" During this stage, the task is to stop being 'single' spouses and start being married again.

Most women sense a loss of freedom and independence while a minority is content to become dependant once more. Routines established during the cruise are disrupted: "I have to cook a real dinner every night?!" This causes the wives to feel disorganized and out of control.

Although most couples never write it down, there is a contract in every marriage - a set of assumptions and expectations on which they base their actions. During this stage, the couple has to make major adjustments in roles and responsibilities; before that can happen, they must undertake an extensive renegotiation of that unwritten contract. The marriage cannot and will not be exactly the same as before the cruise: both spouses have had varied experiences and have grown in different ways, and these changes must be accommodated.

Too much togetherness initially can cause friction after so many months of living apart. More than one wife has had to cope with the fleeting shock of wondering, "who is that man in my bedroom!" Some resent their husbands "making decisions that should be mine." Still others question, "My husband wants me to give up all my activities while he's home. Should I?" On the other hand, the husband may wonder, "Why do I feel like a stranger in my own home?" All of these concerns and pressures require that husband and wife communicate with each other.

Assumptions will not work. Some find that "talking as we go along" works best, while others keep silent until, "We had our first good fight, cleared the air and everything's O.K. now." Sexual relations, ardently desired before the return, may initially seem frightening. Couples need sufficient time together to become reacquainted before they can expect true intimacy.

This stage can be difficult as well as joyful. But it does provide an opportunity offered to few civilian couples: the chance to evaluate what changes have occurred within themselves, to determine what direction they want their growth to take, and to meld all this- into a renewed and refreshed relationship.

Stage Seven - Reintegration and Stabilization:

Sometime within the four to six weeks after the homecoming, wives notice that they have stopped referring to "my car, my house, my bedroom" using instead 'our' or 'we.' Now routines have been established for the family, and the wives feel relaxed and comfortable with their husbands. There is a sense of being a couple and a family. They are back on the same track emotionally and can enjoy the warmth and closeness of being married.

Variations on the Cycle:

Once the basic ECOD model or cycle is understood, we can examine the effects of other kinds of deployments. It takes time to work through each stage; short deployments can be just as disruptive as there is not enough time to get used to the men being gone or home. Certain turnarounds can be especially difficult. For example: after being gone for two months, the USS Midway (CV-41) returned to her home port in Yokosuka, Japan, for two weeks in December, after which she deployed to the Indian Ocean for five months. It was a very stressful time as families attempted to say "Hello, good-bye, and Merry Christmas" all at the same time. Extension of a deployment during Anticipation of Homecoming is more disruptive to the families than if the extension were announced while they were still in Recovery and Stabilization.

Implications for Further Use: ECOD's primary usefulness appears to be in the area of prevention: Many problems in military families could be avoided or minimized simply by understanding the process of adjustment. For instance, lack of sexual intimacy just before deployment could be accepted as a natural reaction to difficult circumstances rather than being viewed as personal rejection. Arguing during that time may be tolerated instead of perceived as evidence of a deteriorating marriage. It also helps to know that it is perfectly normal to feel somewhat strange with each other when the husband first comes home. Almost everyone feels reassured just knowing that their range and fluctuation of emotions are normal.

Another use of the model is in the area of prediction. Key personnel (Social Workers, Commanding Officers, Chaplains, ombudsmen, and MFRC staff) could use the model to be alerted to potential problems at stages or to distinguish between transient situational problems and those requiring more In-depth attention.

In working with wives, someone invariably says, "I wish my husband could hear this, too!" More presentations or workshops involving both the husband and the wife would be very productive.



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