



# EVERYONE SERVES

**A Handbook for Family & Friends of Service Members  
During Pre-Deployment, Deployment, and Reintegration**

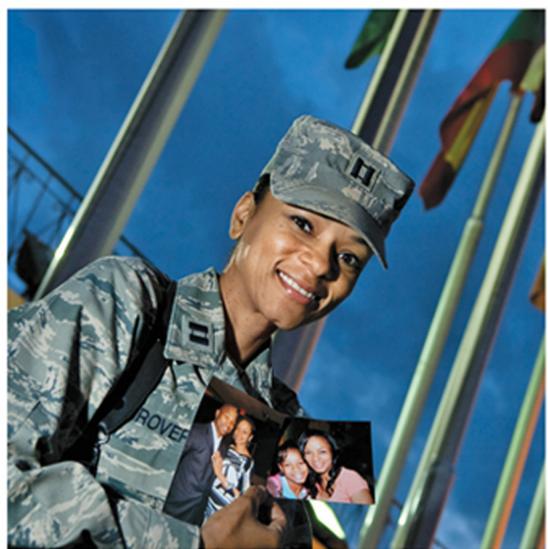


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# Table of Contents

## Getting Started

Using This Handbook

Introduction to the Emotions of Deployment

Self-Care

Worksheet #1: Assess and Respond: Coping with the Stress of Deployment

## Pre-Deployment

Relationships

Communication

Self-Care

Being Informed

Worksheet #2: Pre-Deployment Checklists

Worksheet #3: Useful Contact Information

## Deployment

Relationships

Communication

Self-Care

Being Informed

Worksheet #4: Coping during a Deployment: A Checklist

Worksheet #5: Getting Help

## **Reunion**

Relationships

Communication

Self-Care

## **Reintegration**

Relationships

Communication

Self-Care

Being Informed

Health after Deployment

Sleep Problems

Pain

Posttraumatic Stress (PTS) and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

Depression

Suicide

Substance Abuse

Anger and Violence

Repeated Deployment

Reintegration into the Civilian Lifestyle

Education, Employment, and Benefits

Timeline for Preparing to Transition Out of the Military

## **Caregiving**

Beginning the Journey

Relationships and Communication

Caregiving for Visible and Invisible Injuries

Continuing the Journey: The Official Support System

Self-Care

Being Informed

Worksheet #6: Preparation Guide

## **Conclusion**

## **Resources**

## **Acknowledgements**

## **Photo Credits**

## **Credits**

# GETTING STARTED

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Your spouse walks in and gives you the news you've been expecting but secretly hoped wouldn't actually come: His unit is deploying in two months. Sure, you knew this was pending, but finally having a deployment date triggers feelings that you've been keeping at bay for weeks. Now a wave of emotions washes over you: fear, stress, loneliness, anticipation, and pride. It's hard to make sense of it all.

Your buddy tells you that he's heading overseas. You're at a loss for words. You're proud of him, and a little jealous—suddenly wishing that you had joined the military. You wonder how you can be there for him, realizing that what he probably wants most from you is help looking after his family while he's gone.

You're having dinner with your daughter and she struggles to get the words out—she's heading to Iraq. Panic seizes you. Of course you knew that deployment came with the territory of being a service member, but it's all suddenly very real. While you want to support her, you can't help but wonder how you're going to get through each day of her deployment without being consumed by worry.

You're an old hand at deployment. People turn to you for advice and expertise. While you're aware of the risks and dangers involved, you also know that your spouse is well trained and will do everything in his power to come home safely. Repeat deployments have made you more

independent, and you feel prepared to handle it all on the home front. Still, living in this “new normal” is exhausting. You know from experience that setting some goals to accomplish during this deployment and focusing on yourself and your family will help you work through the separation from your loved one.

Your dad is heading out for yet another deployment, which means he won't be around for your basketball games or for your sister's soccer games. Plus, you'll have more chores and more responsibilities. You're struggling with a range of emotions: dread, pride, sadness, and maybe even a little resentment.

Welcome to the emotional rollercoaster called  
the deployment cycle.



While most service members spend their entire careers training for deployments, their families and friends usually do not.

Typically, family, friends, and even supportive community members and service providers are not trained to handle the emotional challenges of the deployment experience.

This handbook has been designed to address a subject that's not discussed enough: the full spectrum of emotions that accompany a military deployment life cycle. That means not just looking at post-deployment reintegration but also examining other parts of the equation: pre-deployment, deployment, and reunion periods.

The goal of this handbook is to help you—the family, friends, and support network of our country's service members—understand what to expect from a deployment life cycle, enhance the skills to strengthen or repair your relationships, and gain the tools to keep your family and personal community strong throughout the duration of your separation.

### This handbook will help you:

- Increase awareness of the stressors and feelings you may encounter throughout the deployment life cycle
- Develop skills to increase resilience
- Improve your quality of life and satisfaction
- Identify outside resources that may be useful to you, your family, and your friends throughout the deployment life cycle
- Prepare for the unique challenges that service members and their families encounter during reintegration with the family and their community





## Using This Handbook

Deployments can be seen as negative or positive life experiences. While you will certainly have your share of difficult days, this handbook is designed to help you increase resilience, manage stress, and access resources available to military families throughout the deployment life cycle.

### This handbook is:

- A relatable “kitchen table” conversation about the emotional challenges of the deployment cycle
- A collection of helpful skills and tips based on real-world experiences, backed by subject-matter expertise and the latest science
- A tool to create awareness, increase knowledge, and encourage reaching out for help

## This handbook is not:

- An all-inclusive guide that addresses every aspect of deployment—logistical, legal, and financial (many existing resources address these sorts of issues; you might refer to our **resources chapter** at the end of this handbook for suggestions)
- A clinical solution to the range of psychological health and emotional needs that might require professional assistance

## How this handbook works:

*Everyone Serves: A Handbook for Family & Friends of Service Members During Pre-Deployment, Deployment, and Reintegration* is designed as a reference guide to help you navigate the deployment life cycle as it unfolds. You may browse any chapter of the handbook at any time for support as you experience the deployment life cycle. You do not need to read this handbook from cover to cover in order to benefit from the information it contains.

## Six Chapters



Key topics in each chapter:



**Relationships**



**Communication**



**Self-Care**



**Health Care**



**Being Informed**

We hope that you, your family, and other support network members find this handbook to be a valuable resource. Refer back to it as you manage life's stressors and draw upon your own resilience to provide a solid foundation for an emotionally healthy life throughout all stages of deployment.



## Introduction to the Emotions of Deployment

When your loved one is called to deploy into harm's way, it is a stressful time for everyone. Stress is a natural and even useful reaction to the fear and frustration that we experience in life. Some military families experience the complete grieving cycle—fear, anger, denial, and acceptance—when preparing for a deployment. Other military families take deployments as they come, accepting them as part of modern military life. There is no “right reaction”; we are all different and it is the way we react to these challenges and conquer and grow from stressful situations that is important.

*“I have thought about what I would do if I lost him, but I don't think about it much because I work hard to stay positive during deployments.”*

*I want to be an example for other spouses. It is okay to have bad days, but in order to take care of ourselves and our families we have to try and have a positive front.”*

*—Army spouse*

*“I know people think I’m crazy, but, for us, deployment only helped to strengthen our marriage. We were only married for seven months before he was deployed. Being apart forced us to talk about anything and everything to stay connected. As much as I missed him and worried about his safety, I am grateful for the ways that it enhanced our marriage and helped us grow stronger together.”*

*—Army spouse*

For family and friends, it’s important to understand and prepare for the emotional challenges of the deployment life cycle so that you can not only take care of yourself but also be as supportive as possible to the deploying service member.

*“I try to stay positive and be around people that are going through the same thing.”*

*—National Guard parent*

Getting word about a loved one’s deployment is just the beginning of an emotional journey that you’ll travel over the many months ahead. You may experience anxiety,

sadness, frustration, resentment, exhilaration, fear, pride, and even periods of relief. Indeed, many military spouses who are fearful during pre-deployment learn to bask in their independence during a deployment. We can learn a lot about how strong and resilient we are when we overcome challenges presented by a deployment.

*“I can’t live off fear. We live off faith. I prepare as best I can but there is always something we could have prepared better; we just roll with it. It will all work out. If I have fear, my spouse will sense it in my voice, and I trust my soldier. He is an amazing soldier and he knows his job. I don’t have to worry about that.”*

*—Army spouse*

Now is the time to focus on keeping yourself healthy, your family stable, and your relationship with your service member secure. There are steps that families, spouses, and friends can take before, during, and after deployment to help alleviate stress, enhance resiliency, and come out of the deployment experience stronger—as a person, as a family, and as a community. Awareness about the challenges of deployment and applying a degree of resilience to cope with the experience enables you to be as supportive as possible to your service member before and after a deployment.

This period can also present an opportunity for increased maturity and growth. Service members and their families often find a renewed sense of purpose and meaning during deployment and emerge with improved self-sufficiency

and self-identity. You can capitalize on this time by setting personal goals during the deployment.

## Self-Care

The best way to take care of your service member and your family starts with taking care of yourself.

One of the important things you can do to take care of yourself during the deployment life cycle is to learn to harness your emotions into positive outlets. In order to do this, you must be able to assess how you feel and determine how you can effectively cope with the feelings.

- ASSESS how you feel; name the emotion.
- IDENTIFY how you can effectively cope with that feeling; make a plan to manage the experience.





## Self-Care

### Resiliency

Life can be full of challenges and stress. We all have a choice to make when faced with a difficult situation: we can choose to see it as an opportunity for growth and self-improvement, or we can allow ourselves to become overwhelmed and victimized by our circumstances.

When we decide to view a challenge or obstacle as an opportunity for growth and resolve to handle our emotions in a healthy way, we are choosing a path of resiliency. For military families, in particular, this decision can make all the difference in the world.



## If you're a spouse:

*Remember:* the resiliency that has kept your family together through multiple deployments, temporary training missions or schools, and the rigors of military life can also help you through this current deployment. If this is your first deployment, within the challenges presented there also lie opportunities for personal growth. Many spouses, in particular, learn that they are even more capable, creative, decisive, and independent than they ever fully realized they were before.

## If you're a family member or friend of a service member:

*Remember:* your love and friendship have probably already been tested by your service member's decision to join the service. Perhaps his or her military obligations prevented him or her from being at social or family functions, and it was the strength of your devotion, patience, and understanding that has allowed your relationship to continue to be as strong as it is today. This deployment can enable your relationship to strengthen, not weaken; it's merely a continuation of your existing journey of resilience as family members or friends. The best way to demonstrate your support and friendship is to help the spouse, partner, and close family members who are left behind.

## What Is Resiliency?

Resiliency is the ability to withstand, recover, and grow in the face of stressors and changing demands.\* Psychologists have long recognized the capabilities of humans to adapt and overcome risk and adversity. Individuals and communities are able to rebuild their lives even after devastating tragedies.

Being resilient doesn't mean going through life without experiencing stress and pain, however. Resilience is not a static state; people feel grief, sadness, and a range of other emotions both during and after adversity and loss. We might struggle with one challenge, such as a deployment, while easily handling another challenge. And some challenges are difficult for even the most resilient person to cope with. We can all be overwhelmed at times, but the road to resilience lies in working through the emotions and effects of these stressful and painful events.

Personal resilience is not something that you're either born with or without. Rather, resilience develops as people grow, become more knowledgeable, and strengthen coping and self-management skills. Most important, resiliency can be learned and increased over time.

\* **CJCS Instructions at [www.dtic.mil/cjcs\\_directives](http://www.dtic.mil/cjcs_directives).**



## Factors that enhance resilience include:

### *Internal*

- Having a positive view of yourself and others
- Showing confidence in your strengths and abilities
- Being able to manage strong feelings and impulses
- Developing good problem-solving and communication skills
- Feeling in control
- Seeing yourself as empowered rather than victimized
- Coping with stress in healthy ways like exercising, as opposed to unhealthy ways like substance abuse
- Finding positive meaning in your life despite difficult or traumatic events
- Expressing gratitude
- Being optimistic and realistic
- Focusing on the present
- Reconnecting with your faith and religious traditions
- Creating plans and goals

## *External*

- Maintaining close relationships with your family and friends
- Seeking help and accessing resources
- Helping others

Yes, a prolonged deployment can be challenging, but with the right tools it's nothing that you can't handle. You may not have realized it before, but you have the power within you to become resilient, to master your emotions, and to achieve positive outcomes.

During a deployment, part of that resilience is going to come from identifying your emotions and handling them in a positive, healthy manner. Try to shift your thinking from “surviving” a deployment to “thriving” during the experience by learning and growing.

*“When you are going through this you learn to not sweat the small stuff. The important things in life really do come to the forefront when you are in this situation.”*

*—Coast Guard spouse*



## **Self-Care**

### Managing stress

The stress response—often referred to as the “fight-or-flight response”—is your body’s rapid and automatic switch

into high gear when faced with a threat or challenge in the environment. These stressors set off a complex alarm system to communicate with regions of the brain that control mood, motivation, and fear. It's easy to imagine how this reaction helps a service member deal with a physical threat, particularly when in combat. Service members need the energy, speed, concentration, and agility to protect themselves or to escape danger.

The problem, however, is that this automatic stress response is activated by factors that create stress.

**The good news about stress:** it can alert you to danger, orient you to meet deadlines, and motivate you to get things done.

**The bad news about stress:** chronic stress can create problems in your body and your relationships.

While stress is something that we all live with, the stress of military deployments should not be minimized as ordinary.

The fears that loved ones have for the safety and well-being of their service members, as well as for their families, are very real. Those fears create an extraordinary amount of stress for everyone affected. After the extended period of war that modern-day military families have experienced, including multiple deployments, it is hard for those families not to feel isolated, overwhelmed, and stressed out.

*“Of course you fear the worst, that you won’t see them again. And honestly, I feel there isn’t a way to prepare for those feelings. As a military spouse, you know that’s their job and it’s part of*

## What Happens During Prolonged Stress

<b>Thoughts</b>	<p><b>Thought process:</b> narrow focus, poor concentration, poor memory, rapidly shifting from thought to thought or activity to activity until becoming too tired to deal with anything, and then becoming numb and avoidant</p> <p><b>Thought content:</b> overfocusing on problems, losing perspective, starting to identify with life as a series of problems, and inability to focus on other, more positive aspects of life</p>
<b>Emotional</b>	Worried, depressed, frustrated, angry, irritable, sad, and then not able to feel much at all
<b>Physical</b>	Discomfort in the stomach, chest, muscles, or head; eyes tired and strained; poor sleep and tired most of the time (or sleeping too much, but not feeling rested); frequently sick; changes in appetite; low sexual interest or responsiveness
<b>Behavioral</b>	Less motivation and less interest in things that used to be interesting; unable to “get going”
<b>Social</b>	Less interested in social activity, more withdrawn (or sometimes clingy), more apt to snap at others more self-absorbed, and less able to be empathetic

*the risk but you can never fully grasp that feeling until your loved one is deployed.”*

*—Army spouse*

One of the best ways to counter deployment stress is to focus on what you can control as opposed to all the things you can't control.

Stress is a part of life's experiences. It can mobilize us when it's temporary and focused, and can immobilize us when it has no immediate purpose and becomes chronic. Therefore, learning how to cope with stress is an essential skill to develop.

## Looking forward

In the following pages, we'll talk about common emotions related to the deployment experience—like stress. Then we'll help you identify your feelings and offer some positive thoughts and actions you can take in response to those feelings.



Don't think for one minute that you have to do all of this alone. Open yourself up to accepting help from others—friends, family, members of your spouse group or community network, people at your children's school, colleagues at work, or those in your faith community.

*“I have learned that you have to be willing to ask for help. There are usually a few people that offer to help with ‘anything’ but they need me to suggest something specific. I used to just say, ‘Oh, we’re fine,’ but now I’m happy to suggest that they bring over a meal or take the kids for an afternoon or come mow the lawn. Accepting help can be hard, but you have to do it if you want to make it through.”*

*—National Guard spouse*

We know that there are many guides and websites with information about helping you through deployment that delve into local and national resources, special programs, and other functional aspects. That's why we're interested in looking at deployment from a purely emotional standpoint.

If you start developing strategies now, you'll pave the way for a less stressful deployment and better mental health and wellness for your entire family. Another benefit of developing routines is that you will focus less on your worries and more on all the things you would like to get done.

The service member isn't the only one with a mission to

accomplish during this deployment. You have a mission, too: understanding and educating yourself on the distinctive demands of military deployments. Whether this is your first deployment or your fifth, each deployment experience is unique and introduces new and different challenges; maybe you didn't have children previously, maybe you've started or changed a job, or maybe you're adapting to some other change. Dedicating yourself to your own important job of maintaining mental health and wellness will help everyone around you—your service member, your family, your friends, and, of course, you.



## Assess and Respond: Coping with the Stress of Deployment

A common approach to confronting stress is to 1) identify how you are feeling; and then 2) identify how those feelings impact your thoughts and behavior. This information can help you find the best ways to respond to stressful situations as they arise.

To start, use this worksheet during the pre-deployment stage to help you manage your feelings and develop personal coping behaviors. Continue to use the worksheet throughout the deployment cycle. And use what you've learned to communicate with your service member, family, and friends about your feelings, thoughts, and reactions around deployment.

Write down responses or complete the exercise mentally. If needed, you can print the worksheet. If needed, you can and should complete this worksheet multiple times throughout deployment.

### STEP 1: ASSESS

Identify a major stressor that you're coping with right now. This is usually something stressful in your life that you are trying to manage.

Identify your reactions to the stressor you identified above.

Consider your automatic responses in each of the following areas:

- How does your thinking change?
- How do your emotions change?

- How do you change physically? (e.g., increased tension, headaches, stomach problems, sleeplessness, etc.)
- How does your behavior change? (e.g., drinking, smoking, etc.)

## STEP 2: RESPOND

Think about the healthiest and most positive responses in the face of this stressor. If you can change the stressor so that it no longer bothers you, that's great. If you cannot, then the best response would be to react in a way that is healthy for you and others around you. Sometimes, it's useful to consider how someone you admire might respond to this stressor, or to think about what has worked for you in the past. Try to understand what the optimal response in each area of your life might be.

- What would you need to help you react in a healthier way? (e.g., Are you resorting to old habits? Are you using the resources you have?)
- Who can you get assistance from? Sometimes, it helps to get assistance from others (e.g., talk to your spouse or practice role-playing with a friend before going into the actual situation).
- Are there any skills you could learn to help yourself cope better with the situation? Sometimes it helps to learn a coping skill (e.g., anger management or relaxation training).
- Is there anything you are not doing now that would help you in this situation? (e.g., relaxation techniques, exercise, talking to friends or relatives, keeping a journal)

# PRE-DEPLOYMENT



## Introduction

The amount of time we are given to prepare for deployment can vary widely. Some families know a year in advance where other families might be given a few days' notice. In some branches, the preparations a command makes for deployment (work ups, training, and schooling) can create a disruptive cycle of coming and going. No matter what, getting ready for deployment can be emotionally draining. The good news is that sound knowledge and solid planning can alleviate many of the stressors associated with gearing up for a deployment.

*“First, we prepare logistically: power of attorney, update the will, do a family care plan. Then we take care of making sure the house is in order, including cars and all those things I rely on my husband to be better at than I am. Then comes the quality time; we start planning family activities that will allow us some extra time together before we have an empty seat at the table.”*

*—Marine spouse*

*“My husband and I work together on ensuring all physical things are in place, up-to-date, and taken care of, such as finances, household items, vehicles, as well as legal (insurance, POA, etc.). We notify family and friends and look to establish connections that will help support the family physically and emotionally. We try to take it one day at a time and not focus on it so much so it does not become overwhelming.”*

*—Army spouse*



## **Relationships: Spouse/Partner**

### **Emotional distancing**

The deployment experience can be particularly taxing on personal relationships. Pre-deployment presents its own unique challenges, as this is the time when service

members and their families are anticipating and preparing for the deployment, often with little clarity on specifics of the deployment. While nearly all service members find this time hectic as their units engage in extensive training and unit preparation, some service members end up focusing more on bonding with their colleagues than on connecting with their partners or spouses. In these cases, the service member may be emotionally and physically distancing himself or herself from his or her loved ones in order to make leaving easier. The spouse, partner, or loved ones might also employ the same strategy for the same reason.



*“I begin to detach. By that, I mean that I start to live my day-to-day life as if he is already gone and do things on my own.”*

*—Navy spouse*

Some spouses resist or resent the emphasis on the unit rather than on their own relationship, while other spouses find themselves equally preoccupied with finding and creating relationships that will help them deal with their service member’s absence.

For spouses and partners of service members, it’s normal to have concerns about how you’ll remain connected to your service member when he or she is about to leave for a lengthy period of time. Will your relationship survive this separation? What happens if he is injured? Try to communicate with your spouse as much as possible during this time and remember that distancing is a natural tendency during the pre-deployment phase.

## Pre-deployment tension

It’s not a reflection of the quality of your relationship if you and your service member find this time challenging and tense. In fact, it’s common for couples to have at least one major argument before the service member actually deploys. Consciously or unconsciously, some spouses find it easier to say goodbye if they’re less connected to their service member emotionally.

*“I try to be supportive to my spouse. They’re more stressed than I am when it comes to preparation.”*

*—Air Force spouse*

On top of everything else, this is also when many couples need to get their legal, personal, banking, and housing affairs in order. Some of these activities can trigger a great deal of stress, particularly those issues relating to the possibility of the service member’s injury, illness, or death. Here’s where your network of extended family and friends is invaluable, so lean on them for support.

*“We argued a lot. We picked fights with each other. I think part of me just wanted him to get emotional about leaving. I needed reassurance that I could press his buttons and that he would know how much his leaving was hurting me.”*

*—Marine Corps spouse*

It’s important for your relationship that you try to carve out some special time together as a couple when you are engaged in activities unrelated to the nuts-and-bolts of the deployment. Here are a few ideas to decrease pre-deployment stress and strengthen your relationship:

## **Make time to connect**

Establishing a sense of intimacy can sometimes be a challenge for couples as they prepare for the deployment. If you can make being together and being intimate a priority

for you before the deployment, it can be easier to maintain that intimacy during the deployment. And if you foster that closeness during the deployment, it may be easier to reconnect emotionally when your service member returns.

***“I try to spend as much time with my husband as I can. We try to just enjoy doing things together, rather than focusing on him deploying.”***

**—Army spouse**

If you have children, seek babysitting services so that you can spend a few hours together alone. Some couples reserve “date nights” as a regular part of their relationship. If you don’t already do this, now would be a good time to start. Yes, babysitters are an added expense, but you can save money by working with neighbors and fellow spouses or by using the time to go for a walk or a less expensive restaurant.

***“I cook him his favorite dinner, and we also make sure to have a date night, where we focus on being together.”***

**—Army spouse**

Some military installations offer pre-deployment couples classes. Find out whether your service member’s unit is offering something similar. For National Guard/ Reserve families, you may want to ascertain whether your unit’s chaplain (or family readiness group) has made arrangements for any pre-deployment couples activities or marriage retreats. You can also refer to the **resources**

**chapter** to find free military-specific marriage counseling resources, or you can look for family programs in your state either through branch-specific resources or your social network online. If nothing like this is available, consider a local marriage counselor, making it clear that the purpose of your sessions is to prepare for deployment in a healthy, constructive way.

## Get creative with appreciation exercises

Buy a digital recorder and use it to say what you and your partner appreciate about each other every day. The result is a priceless gift of 365 different recordings of your loved one's devotion. Buy stationery and cards so that when your spouse leaves you are prepared to start sending them letters and notes. Better yet, ask them to do the same! Emails are a wonderful addition to the way military families can communicate during deployments, but consider writing old-fashioned love letters as well. An extra bonus of a handwritten letter is that it makes wonderfully romantic artwork when framed!

*“My husband bought a bunch of small presents and cards for me. He wrapped them all up and labeled them ‘for when you are feeling sad’ or ‘need a break?’ I got to open them throughout deployment. It was really nice to read the notes he’d written. They helped get me through the hard days.”*

—Air Force spouse

## Express your love in little ways

Take time to remind one another that your love is strong. Human touch is a powerful tool for maintaining an emotional connection, so give each other baths, foot rubs, and body massages, and find any reason at all to hold hands or cuddle. Now is the time to build memories that both you and your service member can draw upon during the deployment.

### Already Experienced a Deployment Cycle?

Consider reaching out to a spouse who has never gone through a deployment before. She or he could probably benefit a great deal from your insight and perspective.

NOTE: Do not overextend yourself.

Remember, you should always tend to your own needs first.



## Relationships: Child

Note: Families can take many forms. For the purposes of this handbook, “family” is a service member parent and his or her child.

## Making family memories

Many families plan trips, vacations, or other activities that they can do together before the service member leaves. Creating family memories before the service member departs may add to the hectic pace leading up to the deployment, but it is well worth the effort.

*“We make sure we celebrate birthdays before Daddy deploys so they have that special day.”*

*—National Guard spouse*

*“I take lots of pictures and have him in every room in the house. I gather things for the kids to keep in their rooms that connect them to their dad.”*

*—Army spouse*

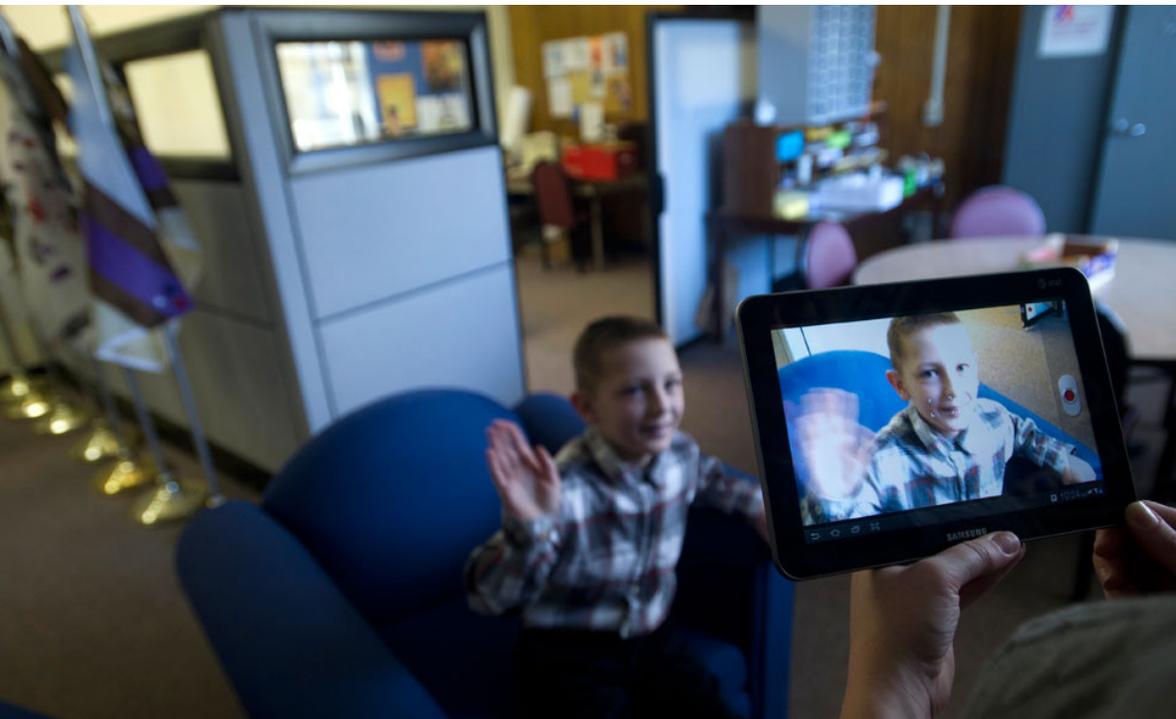
And remember, these activities don't have to be elaborate. The time together can be as simple as taking hikes or long walks, or creating a “family date night” to watch movies, play board games, get frozen yogurt, or have a picnic. The important thing is to set specific time aside to spend it together. Asking children for their preferences about family activities is vital to empowering and involving them during this very vulnerable and potentially frightening time.

*“This most recent deployment, my husband and three boys practice[d] Skyping with each other from separate floors of the house; the boys loved it.”*

*—Marine spouse*

## Video camera

If you can, use a video camera to document your together-time so that you have something to look back on when you're separated. You can also use the camera for pre-recording messages from your service member for the children to watch while she is deployed. This is particularly helpful on holidays and special events such as birthdays so the child can feel more connected to his or her deployed parent.



*“I create videos for my daughter to have connections to her daddy in case he’s deployed to an area with limited Internet and phone access.”*

*—Army spouse*

## Gift exchange

Encourage your service member to exchange something of importance with his child, such as a recordable book, dog tag, or a special doll featuring his photograph, often called a Daddy or Mommy Doll. Your service member should also spend some alone time with his child to create memories for the child to hold onto while the service member is away.



*“He spends a little one-on-one time with each child and gives them a small trinket they can keep in their pocket while he is gone.”*

*—Navy spouse*

*“My husband made Build-a-Bears for both my kids with his voice recorded so they can hug it and hear him say ‘I love you’ even when he is gone.”*

*—Army spouse*

### Tip: Create Videos for Your Newborn

When fathers deploy knowing a baby will be born while they’re away, some create a series of videos of their face at close distances from the camera lens, making appropriate sounds and gestures. Studies have shown that infants are much more likely to know their father immediately upon return—rather than showing attachment anxiety—when this program is put in place at birth.

Visit the website of Early Moments Matter ([www.earlymomentsmatter.org](http://www.earlymomentsmatter.org)), the This Emotional Life attachment toolkit, to learn more about helping your infant create secure attachments.



## Relationships: Parent

Note: for the purposes of this handbook, “parent” refers to the parent of a service member.

More than anything else, your service member needs to know that she has your unconditional love and support.

No matter how complex a relationship you have with your son or daughter, when your child deploys, all the things you thought were big problems can suddenly become very small.

Factors such as age or whether she has a family of her own may impact whether your service member reaches out to you immediately to talk about her expectations while she’s away. If you can, let your service member know that you would like to spend time together before she deploys, but you also understand that she is very busy right now. If you have time available from the demands of your own life, ask her if she needs help with anything before she leaves. Otherwise, try to be as patient and flexible as possible with your service member at this particularly chaotic time. Just knowing she has your support will be a huge source of strength for her as she prepares for deployment.

*“I try to read anything I can about where he is being deployed to, who has been there before, what kind of supplies he will need that aren’t supplied by the Army, climate conditions, etc. I also try to find online retailers that send to APOs at the most reasonable cost.”*

*—Army parent*





## Relationships: Extended Family and Friends

Like the immediate family members, you are probably going to want to see your service member before he leaves. Depending on the demands on your service member's time, this may or may not be possible. If an in-person visit isn't feasible, let him know that you would like to be able to send letters while he's deployed and to see him when he returns home.

Don't be offended if your service member seems distracted or primarily focused on his immediate family. Find out if there is something you can do to help him prepare to leave or give him greater peace of mind when he's gone, such as checking in with a parent or spouse periodically.





## Communication: Spouse/ Partner

The type of communication you have with your service member today will serve as the building blocks for the communication you practice while your service member is deployed and when he returns.

*“I communicate with my spouse before he departs on what we both expect during deployment relating to our children, our home, and our command. While I am not thrilled he has to leave us once again, I never run from a deployment—I prepare myself and our children.”*

—Navy spouse

### Hash things out now

This is a good time to sit down together and discuss what each of you expects of—and hopes for—the deployment. A good communication plan will help align expectations and lessen miscommunications during the deployment.

*“I try to make sure things are in order just as the Army does. I have discussions with my husband about how we both envision the deployment going, and how we plan on communicating and keeping connected.”*

—Army spouse

- **Discuss how you would like each other to behave while you're apart.** For example, is your service member comfortable with you going out to dance with your friends? If yes, how often? If no, why not? In turn, perhaps you would like your service member to commit to communicating as regularly as possible (and, in what form? Phone calls? Email? Written letters? Facebook messages?). Do you want your service member to call you the moment he is in port or on a break or would you understand if he waited until later?
- **Determine how much your service member wants to know about what's going on back home.** Some service members don't want to hear about the frustrations of daily life because there is nothing they can do to fix things. Others want to know about the little details they're missing because it helps them feel close to their loved ones. Either choice is okay but it has to be a choice made together.
- **Decide on the type and frequency of communication your service member would like you to have with his family and friends.**
- **Come to an understanding of what an "emergency" is for both of you.** Decide now how much you want to know about what is happening to the other while you're apart, and when it would be essential to inform the other person of an event or incident.
- **Exchange ideas about how you'll spend (or save) extra money your service member may**

**earn from being deployed to a combat zone.**

Likewise, who will be responsible for handling the money, doing the taxes, and paying the bills?

- **Nothing is off the table at this point.** If there's something in your relationship that needs to be discussed, now's the time to talk it out. It's much easier to address these issues when you're still together as opposed to trying to detail them out once your service member is away. A sensitive, yet vital, discussion point is the decision you make on how you'd like to be notified in the event of a serious injury or death of your service member. Commands deal with this delicate topic differently, so it is important to discuss with your service member so that you can both be prepared.

*“Of course I am always afraid of losing my sailor. You have to arm yourself before deployment. Sit down with each other and come up with a plan if the worst happens. Make sure you have everything in line, like power of attorney and wills. Make sure you have a support line of family and friends that would be willing to step in and help if the worst happened. You have to plan for the worst and pray for the best.”*

*—Navy spouse*



## Communication: Child

### Be as candid as possible

Consider sitting down as a family and discussing the deployment in ways that are age appropriate. Children need to understand the details about where the service member parent is going, how long she's going to be gone, and why everyone is behaving differently.

*“For the kids, we talked a lot about where he was going, what he would be doing, and how important his job was. This let them feel like it was their ‘duty’ to ‘allow’ Dad to go away.”*

—Navy spouse

*“We help our kids understand that Daddy is helping other children who can’t defend themselves and that the soldiers/Marines/sailors/airmen are making the world a safer place.”*

—Navy spouse

Explain that the deployed parent will be serving our country, she'll be well trained and well protected, and she won't be gone forever. Talk about how the deployed parent will communicate while she's away (if you know) and how your child can communicate with her. Let your child know that he can exchange letters with the deployed parent and help prepare special care packages while she's deployed.

Ask your children if they have any questions and encourage them to share their thoughts about what's happening. Ask open-ended questions, such as, "How do you think your day will be different while Mommy is away?" Ask questions and encourage conversation that requires more than a one-word response, prompting kids to open up and share.

*"To help them understand better where Daddy is going (and the time zone difference), we tell them that Daddy is going far away and that when he goes to bed he will send them the sun to let them know it's time to wake up and they need to send him the moon so that he knows it's time to sleep."*

*—Navy spouse*

## Open lines of communication

Your child needs to feel that he or she has a network of support through this deployment. Inform your child's caretakers (such as babysitters, teachers, coaches, spiritual leaders, etc.) about the deployment so that they understand the challenges your child may experience. Make sure your child is aware of the ways in which she can communicate with the deployed parent while he's gone. Also, make sure your child knows she can communicate with you or other trusted adults about her feelings related to the deployment.

*"Surround the child with as much positive atmosphere and supportive peers as possible. Kids hear and see a lot. Let people in their lives*

*know what is going on, such as teachers and coaches. They can act as mentors and help mirror what you say at home.”*

*—Army spouse*

## School involvement

While the family is experiencing the anxiety of pre-deployment preparedness, the school environment will remain routine. This can present your child with a healthy dose of normalcy in the regular scheduling but will often present unique challenges. Meet personally with your child’s teacher, school counselor, and principal to discuss the upcoming deployment. Give them as much information as you are comfortable with and encourage them to stay in communication with you. If you do not live in a town where deployments are common, you can print the Department of Education’s “The Educator’s Guide to the Military Child During Deployment” here: [www2.ed.gov](http://www2.ed.gov). This guide will explain the basics of the deployment cycle and teach educators behaviors to expect—and encourage empathy for these behaviors—and behaviors that are cause for alarm.

*“I sign the kids up with the counselor at school for any type of deployment services that are available. I make sure their teachers know ahead of time (when we are allowed to let people know ahead of time).”*

*—Air Force spouse*

## Expectations

Talk to your children about your expectations of them while the service member parent is gone. Let them know that there may be new expectations of them—for example, more chores—but they will never be expected to take on a role that's not age appropriate.

Let your child express what he or she expects from the service member parent as well as the stay-at-home parent or caretaker. Encourage your service member to write a letter for the child to read after his departure, perhaps including references to some of the expectations that were discussed with the child.

*“My husband and I together tell the kids if Dad is leaving. We talk about what he is going to do, his job of helping people, and that he will hurry back as soon as his job is done. We reassure them that I will be here every step of the way, and that it is okay to be sad.”*

*—Marine spouse*

Try to avoid suggesting that the son or daughter is now the “man or woman of the house.” This puts tremendous pressure on a child to live up to a standard that he can never meet. It is not only unrealistic but also unfair. Children, even teenagers, should be allowed to be just that: children.

Upon deployment, it is normal for roles and responsibilities of the entire family to change or shift. However, these new roles need to be negotiated clearly and should always be age appropriate.

## Talk, Listen, Connect

The Sesame Workshop created the Talk, Listen, Connect initiative to help small children learn about and understand the changes brought on by a deploying parent. Talk, Listen, Connect is a multiphase, bilingual, multimedia initiative that guides families through multiple challenges, such as deployments, homecomings, and changes that occur when a parent comes home. The program has created invaluable tools to assist and support military families with preschool-age children, addressing their needs by using the power of the Sesame Street friends to bring to light their challenges as well as their great strength and resilience. You can learn more about this initiative and the tools it offers at [www.sesamestreet.org](http://www.sesamestreet.org).





## Communication: Parent

One of the service member's most important relationships is with his parents. At this critical time in your service member's life, you cannot overestimate the importance of your approval and support. You helped make your service member the person he is today. More than anything else, he is going to want to know that you love him and are proud of him. This will be a recurring theme for your relationship.

*“I will never forget what Patrick did. He didn't tell anyone he enlisted in the National Guard. 9/11 happened, he felt like he needed to do something, so he just went and enlisted. Then one night he took me for a drive and he told me. Well, what could I say? It was done. I felt nothing but fear. But I told him that if this is what he wanted to do, then I supported his decision and I loved him. His relief was obvious, but inside my heart was breaking. It really was.”*

*—National Guard mother*

Your service member's need for your approval and support begins when he informs you of his deployment and will continue through the reintegration period—particularly if he struggles with things he may have experienced in combat.

This kind of unconditional support and your service member's need for it may not be obvious, especially if he is older or married. But it will be there. Inside every adult is



the child who wants to know that his parents still love him, no matter what happens.

Meanwhile, you may be facing a fear that is unique to a parent: losing one's child. Arguably, there is no greater fear, and no greater loss. It will take courage on your part to silence those fears and instead trust your service member's choice.

If you're the primary support person, your child may talk to you about the details of his chain of command, his mission, and what needs to be done while he's gone. If you're not his primary support person, he may share less, but probably not because he is intentionally trying to exclude you. In this case, you may want to simply ask your service member what he will need from you while he's gone. You can also ask to be put on the contact list for his command's family support group, though those groups are more oriented toward spouses and children. If you feel disconnected because of the lack of support for military parents, check out online resources like [www.bluestarfam.org](http://www.bluestarfam.org) and [www.whileourchildrenserve.com](http://www.whileourchildrenserve.com) for resources aimed at mothers and fathers of service members.



*“I had been in Nam and was never much of a talker. And I never talked about the war. Then Jason goes and joins the Army. I didn’t even know what to say. I think he wanted me to say something, and the wife kept telling me to tell him I was proud of him, but I felt he had no idea what he was getting himself into. The day he was leaving for Iraq, we drove him to the Armory. Prior to that day, we had never talked about his deployment. As he was hugging his mother, I just broke down. He let go of Margaret and turned to shake my hand, and I just grabbed him and held on to him as hard as I could. And I started crying. My boy was going to war. I was proud. And scared. And mad. But more than anything, I loved him. And I was scared to death he was going to leave and not know it. It was the best and worst hug I have ever had. I didn’t even get to tell him I loved him, I was crying so*

*hard. He just kept saying, 'I know, Dad, I know.'*  
*Every time he called home, I got on that phone*  
*and told him I loved him. Every time."*

*—Veteran and father*



## **Communication: Extended Family and Friends**

This is an important time to touch base with the service member you're supporting as well as her close friends, spouse, and family. Your relationship may temporarily change due to the constraints of communication during deployment. If possible, talk to your service member's family about the best way for you to stay in touch while she's deployed. If you're in a position to offer help to those closest to your service member, ask your service member how you can best provide support. Depending on the closeness of your relationship, attempting to support the service member's family could include going over for dinner (often the hardest part of the day for families with deployed service members), offering to watch the children for the at-home spouse, attending their sports or school events, or planning other activities to do together.

## Communication Tips for Families and Friends

- **Operational Security**

Expect a certain degree of secrecy from your service member, both prior to and during the deployment. Operational Security (OPSEC) is vital to a safe and successful mission. For more guidance on OPSEC from the Department of Defense, visit [www.defense.gov](http://www.defense.gov).

- **Communication Blackouts**

Occasionally, something may happen while your service member is deployed, resulting in her command cutting off all outside communication. If this happens, your service member will be unable to call, text, or email. Don't assume that anything negative has happened just because you're out of communication.

- **Online Networking and Personal Security**

Social media has changed how servicemen and servicewomen stay in touch with their families and friends. Until recently, military families were only able to stay in touch through letters and long distance landline telephones. Today, many online platforms enable military families to share, connect, and be part of events in real time—from daily updates about “what’s for dinner” to milestones like birthdays and graduations. However, there is still a need to maintain personal security (PERSEC) while sharing information online. For a guide for military families using Facebook, visit [www.bluestarfam.org](http://www.bluestarfam.org).



## Self-Care

**You cannot effectively care for anyone else unless you take care of yourself first.** Assuming responsibility for your own well-being is vital to a successful deployment experience.



## Self-Care: Spouse/Partner, Parent, Extended Family and Friends

If you don't already make your own self-care a priority, it's important that you start now. You can't be a reliable source of support for anyone else if your own physical and emotional systems are falling apart at the seams. On the most basic level, try to maintain healthy eating and sleeping habits; both are essential for overall good health. Then consider incorporating some of the following tips into your daily routine. These self-care practices can help rejuvenate you emotionally and physically.

*“I am not sitting around festering. Taking care of myself physically by working out is key as well as relying heavily on a solid social network of friends and family. Meditation and prayer are also a part of it.”*

*—Army spouse*

## Self-care tips:

- **Personal goals.** The deployment experience can provide an excellent opportunity for self-improvement. Articulate what you would like to accomplish during the deployment period and build support to achieve these goals. For example, if you haven't earned a degree, this could be the ideal time to set the goal of doing so and to begin the process. Or you can enroll in continuing education classes and use this time to explore something you always wanted to learn, such as a new language or hobby.
- **Time for yourself.** This is time for you to spend alone, with no distractions, taking care of yourself. You can meditate, write, take a bath, practice yoga, listen to music, or explore your artistic side. All that matters is doing something for yourself that you enjoy. An hour a day would be ideal, but if that's too much, aim for fifteen minutes in the morning and fifteen minutes at night.
- **Humor.** Laughter can be an invaluable stress reliever, so identify people and activities that bring you joy. Although you may not feel it's appropriate to "have fun" while your service member is in a combat zone, allowing yourself to do things that bring laughter into your life can, in fact, balance out your emotional state during an otherwise tumultuous time.
- **Physical fitness.** Figure out what activities you enjoy that burn away excess energy. Physical activity has been proven to be one of the most effective ways to combat negative emotions and maintain a feeling of well-being. Find a workout buddy if that will help you stay motivated.

- **Good nutrition.** Eating well helps you feel well. Start your day with a sensible breakfast; eat healthful, balanced meals; don't skip meals; and choose healthful snacks.
- **Peer support.** It's important to identify people or groups either similarly situated or who otherwise can be a sounding board for your emotions. Choose your peers wisely.
- **Medical allies.** Before your service member deploys, it's important to make sure you have a primary care provider with whom you feel comfortable and who understands the strain of a deployment. Few things can be more frustrating than having a doctor you find unsympathetic.
- **Routines.** Especially if there are children in the home, routines can provide a sense of normalcy.
- **Sleep.** Getting regular, plentiful sleep can help keep your spirits up and boost your immune system.
- **Music.** Whether you play an instrument or just listen, music can serve as an important self-soothing tool.
- **Emotional and mental wellness.** Counseling and therapy, yoga, and stress-management programs are all outlets for channeling positive mental health.
- **Hobbies.** Reading, writing, gardening, games, or taking a knitting class are wonderful outlets for expression of emotions.
- **Substance abuse.** Sometimes people turn to alcohol or drugs to cope with their problems, but this can result in worse outcomes. Steer clear of destructive habits.

- **Spirituality.** If you have religious or spiritual beliefs, you may want to reach out to members of your spiritual community for support.
- **Volunteer work.** Consider volunteering for a cause you care about. Altruism and being connected to others have demonstrable mental health benefits.

*“I plan projects. This time I wanted to completely clean out and organize the house, sell what we didn’t need, and get everything organized. Then, instead of moping on the really lonely days, I have the option of losing myself in a project.”*

*—Air Force spouse*

You may also want to explore keeping a journal, as it is an excellent way to check in with how you’re really feeling at any given time.

## Why journaling?

A journal provides an opportunity to reflect on your feelings while collecting your thoughts through writings, photos, or drawings. It’s also a way to capture memories so that you can express your thoughts and feelings in the moment and revisit them later.

Journaling has been found to be particularly useful in helping to let go of things that are clouding your thoughts. It can help chart a path, create a plan, crystallize a vision, or explore possibilities. When you write in a

journal, you reflect on past, present, and future thoughts and dreams, engaging the imagination.

Purchase a small journal, use a word-processing program on your computer, start a blog, or utilize an online site devoted to journaling or social networking. Find a quiet location with few distractions so that you are able to fully engage in the journaling process. A great example of an online journal program is [www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com). For blogging, you can visit [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) or [www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com). If you blog, please keep OPSEC and PERSEC in mind and discuss with your spouse how much information he is comfortable sharing online.

Journaling is also beneficial to children. If you think your child would enjoy writing and drawing in a journal, you can purchase a binder, use a spiral-bound notebook, or let the child pick out his own. Encourage him to express his thoughts and emotions through writing and drawing.



## Self-Care: Child

Despite the best efforts of parents, children of all ages may struggle with the pending deployment of the service member parent.

Occasionally, this struggle can result in behavioral problems. Young children may begin to act out or regress, even before the service member parent actually leaves.

*“Our oldest was only four when we learned that*

*my husband would be deploying for the third time. We waited until about a month before he left and then started sharing information with her—just the basics that he would need to travel for work and he would be gone for a long time. She became very angry and started greeting him at the door when he returned home from work with ‘I hate you! You’re stupid!’ Humor helps us get through times like these. My husband and I used to joke that we would be the only family at the redeployment ceremony with a ‘Welcome Home, Stupid!’ banner.”*

*—Army spouse*

- **Give your child a feeling of control over some things in her life.** For example, give her choices over little things, like what to wear or what to eat for breakfast.
- **Maintain a routine.** Start a routine now that you plan to use when your service member leaves. Enforce the routine to create stability and normalcy.
- **Encourage self-expression.** If the child is old enough, encourage him to write in a journal, paint, draw, or play an instrument.
- **Give your child unstructured time.** Instead of keeping your child busy with nonstop scheduled activities, allow her some personal space where she can process her feelings.
- **Engage your child in play.** Playing together—such as games of tag or hide-and-seek—can offer a valuable time to relax and share a laugh. Little ones love to play

“pretend,” which can also be a window into how they are feeling. Tweens love board games, and teens might just appreciate the quality time of a dinner out.

*“We just typically spend as much time together as we can. We try not to dwell on the deployment or bring it up to the kids too much, but we are acutely aware that every little bit of time we have together is valuable.”*

*—National Guard spouse*

The chart below highlights some behaviors that children can exhibit during the deployment cycle. Keep these red flags handy. If you notice your child exhibiting any of these behaviors, speak to the child and seek out professional assistance from your child’s pediatrician or a child mental health specialist (therapist). Most schools have counselors who are there to help both parents and students. They can provide parents with referrals in the community and support the child during the school day.

## Common Behaviors Among Children of Deployed Service Members (SM)

	<b>AGE</b>	<b>BEHAVIOR</b>	<b>MOOD</b>	<b>REMEDY</b>
<b>Infants</b>	<b>&lt; One yr.</b>	<b>May be fussier than usual or refuse to eat.</b>	<b>Confusion</b>	Infant could be reacting to parent's mood; getting support for the parent may help. Also talk to pediatrician.
<b>Toddler</b>	<b>One to Three yrs.</b>	<b>May cry more, throw tantrums, test boundaries, or become clingy, regress.</b>	<b>Irritability, sadness, confusion</b>	Increase amount of affection and attention given to toddler.
<b>Preschool</b>	<b>Three to Six yrs.</b>	<b>May have potty accidents or be clingy, aggressive, defiant, moody, or emotional. May not want to go to preschool/ day care and cry/ throw tantrum when being dropped off.</b>	<b>Irritability, sadness</b>	Increase level of affection and attention. Find fun activities to share. Perhaps explain why SM has to be away. Get a Flat Daddy or Daddy Doll (find out more information about these products in our resources chapter).
<b>School Age</b>	<b>Six to Twelve yrs.</b>	<b>May be moody, impulsive, argumentative, defiant, or act out in school or not want to go to school.</b>	<b>Anger, apathy, anxiety</b>	Increase attention. Engage in shared activities. Explain why it is important that SM is gone. Maintain routines. Talk to child therapist.
<b>Teenager</b>	<b>Twelve to Nineteen yrs.</b>	<b>May withdraw from family, friends, and school. Grades may decline, may experiment with drugs or alcohol. May become more defiant, moody, or anxious.</b>	<b>Anger, resentment, anxiety</b>	Be patient. Encourage talking. Maintain routines and set boundaries. Perhaps consider child counseling.

Here are two excellent resources to help you discuss your child's feelings and emotions during the deployment cycle:

**1. *You and Your Military Hero: Building Positive Thinking Skills During Your Hero's Deployment* ([www.uflipp.com](http://www.uflipp.com))**

For children ages five through twelve. This book helps children learn positive coping skills during a loved one's deployment and empowers children and military families to maintain positive outlooks during this challenging time.

**2. *A Parent's Guide to Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Your Child Roots and Wings* (available from Amazon, Apple, Barnes & Noble, and independent bookstores)**

This "7-C" plan for resilience helps kids of all ages learn competence, confidence, connection, character, contribution, coping, and control to help them bounce back from challenges.



## **Being Informed: Spouse/Partner**

### **Effects of stress**

As a couple, it's important to understand up front how stress can impact your relationship. Even before your service member leaves, consider learning about the common effects of a deployment. Understand that you and your service member may have less patience with one another while he's deployed. You will both be under additional stress, and your communication will be limited. If you head into your time apart realizing that your demeanor



toward one another may be impacted not by your feelings for each other but instead by the circumstances of the deployment, you won't take it personally when you're on the receiving end of a curt tone of voice or short temper.

If you've been through a deployment or two, you already know this, which is one of the reasons we encourage more experienced spouses or partners to take newer spouses or partners "under their wings" to show them the ropes. Learning how to not take personally the change in temperament during a deployment is one of the hardest lessons to absorb.

*"One afternoon, we walked through the house and I took notes about all the different things to remember to do. Things that he normally does—everything from tricks to get the A/C filter to sit in the slot easier to mixing the gas and oil in the weed eater to how to check the air in the car tires. A lot of the things I already knew how to do, but I don't normally think of because he takes care of them. We went through all of our legal paperwork and sat down with our financial planner to be sure everything was in order. Allowing him to show me these things—even if I already knew them—helped him feel better, knowing he had prepared me."*

*—Army spouse*

## Bolster your support network

Identify your existing support system: friends, family, and the unit's family readiness group. Now consider how you can add to this network. For example, you can find peers with common interests in your area through Meetup groups at [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com). The more support you have, the better.

*“A lot of wives have their own ‘battle buddies’—that other wife/spouse that is in the same situation (i.e., spouse deployed, kids of similar age, etc.). We team up and support one another in any way possible. No one can do it alone.”*

—Army spouse

*“I have a ‘Mastermind Deployment Team’ that supports me and my children. Whether it’s a daily visit on the phone or text, they reach out and I reach out to share my day—good, bad, or ugly.”*

—National Guard spouse

Some spouses find the peer support they need through online support groups and message boards. Connecting to other military families and resources online is a helpful alternative to in-person events because of the geographic dispersion of military families. Additionally, many families have small children or work hours that make it hard to plan group activities. Facebook ([www.facebook.com/BlueStarFamilies](http://www.facebook.com/BlueStarFamilies)) has become a very popular place

to connect with other spouses as well as to find and share resources. Try searching for both national and local spouses' groups as well as base or location-specific groups for local activities and events.

*“Social networking is key: friends, family (adult conversation), doing something with someone, or talking on the phone every day. I know I cannot do it alone and being aware of my strengths and weaknesses is critical. I ask for help when I need it.”*

—Army spouse

*“Living on post, my neighbors and I were able to develop our own little family together. With our husbands away, we learned to depend on one another instead. We shared babysitting and pet-sitting responsibilities. We helped each other hang curtains. We ran to the store for each other. We noticed when someone hadn't been out of their house for the day; when it was 3 p.m., we'd make a call to check and make sure everything was okay. When bad things happened, we stepped up to be one another's support system.”*

—Army spouse

*A word of caution:* You may want to be careful about whom you bring into your inner circle of friends at this time in your life. The last thing you need are people who

make tremendous demands on your time or energy. Nor do you need people in your life who are chronically negative. You may want to identify people who are toxic to your overall well-being. This can be done by assessing whether time spent talking to or being around this person invigorates or drains you. If it's the latter, then he or she is probably not someone you will want to have as a member of your support network. Remember, you are building the foundation for your entire deployment period.

### Concerns Regarding Civilian Employment

If your loved one is a member of the Guard or Reserves, she might be concerned about the status of her job during deployment. Remind her that there are laws protecting veterans' employment and re-employment rights, guaranteed by the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994. For more information, refer to the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve site at [www.esgr.org](http://www.esgr.org).



### Being Informed: Child

#### Involve your child

Both the stay-at-home parent and the service member parent will need to decide which family member needs to know what information. For example, your service member



will decide what the family as a whole will need to know (or can know) about his mission. You and your spouse should decide how much to tell your children. By all means, don't try to hide what's happening from the children. When your child asks you about your emotions, have an answer for her because not telling will only confuse her. As a parent, you need to have an appropriate answer, such as: "Mommy also misses Daddy and feels sad sometimes." A word of caution: Try not to burden or overwhelm your child with your concerns and worries—for example, sharing concerns about your service member being killed or seriously injured, or sharing your problems with finances.

*"I don't want them to worry, so we just talk about how he's overseas helping people and leave it at that. When they get older we may give them more information but for now, it's just a 'work trip' to them."*

*—National Guard spouse*

Reminding your child of the larger purpose of the deployment will help him create meaning from this experience. Show your patriotism and make your child feel proud of his parent's service. Little things like hanging an American flag on your front porch or displaying a Blue Star Flag on your home or car window can go a long way.

*"We tell them where he is going and that we will be able to write and send pictures and sometimes video chat, but that Daddy needs to go protect America."*

*—Army spouse*

Also, look for ways to involve others in your community in validating these feelings. Offer to help plan letter-writing events for deployed service members for your child's social, academic, and sports teams and organizations, and take her to events that highlight military service and the importance of serving others.

Don't forget to include your child's school in the news of a parent's deployment. Many schools now have a Military School Liaison (MSL) whose job is to coordinate educational opportunities and information to help military children succeed academically. If there is no MSL, Military Child Education Coalition's website ([www.militarychild.org](http://www.militarychild.org)) has a variety of resources and information to help you ensure quality educational opportunities for your military child as you work with his school system.

## Develop fun activities

Engage in pre-deployment activities that help spur discussion about the deployment experience in a positive way.

- **Make a counting chain**

Buy construction paper, glue, markers, and scissors. Have everything ready to go before the deployment starts. Explain to your child that every day that the deployed parent is gone, you will write something on a strip of construction paper about what you did that day, how you feel that day, or anything they want to draw. Then you'll glue the ends together to make it a link around the previous link. When the parent returns, you may be able to decorate your entire house with your counting chain.

- **Build a keepsake box**

Let your child decorate a shoebox. Daily or weekly, your child can place something inside the box. When your service member returns home, your child can show the deployed all the items in the box and explain why each one is there to explain and help remember events that happened in the service member's absence.

- **Create a treat jar**

Select a large glass jar and fill it up with as many tiny candies (for example, jellybeans) as the number of days that your service member will be gone. Once a day, let your child go to the jar and have a candy to celebrate getting one day closer to the parent coming home. (If the deployment is lengthened, you can quietly add more.)

- **Design a wishing tree or jar**

A wishing tree offers a concrete reminder of the person who is away, while providing a place to collect wishes, hopes, and prayers. Learn more at [www.survivingdeployment.com](http://www.survivingdeployment.com).

- **Make a picture map**

Staple together a few pieces of paper and write headings for the various stages of the deployment. As each milestone is reached, have one family member draw a picture to indicate what's going on at home for the family and what's happening at the deployment site for your service member.

- **Daddy/Mommy on a stick**

Print out a picture of your service member and laminate it. Tape it to a Popsicle stick or other straight

rod so that you have a travelable picture of your service member. Plan on places to take “Daddy/ Mommy on a stick” while they are deployed. You can take it to your child’s sporting and academic events or take pictures of them together doing homework. Send the pictures to your service member. Let your service member tell you where they want to see a picture taken (a favorite restaurant or park, for example).

- **Create a map collage**

Encourage your child to cut out pictures of the country where the parent will be deployed and use them to create a collage of images.



## **Being Informed: Spouse/Partner, Parent, Extended Family, and Friends**

If you’re the person closest to your service member, he’ll probably entrust you with some important documents and designate you as his emergency contact. This is the time to become as organized and knowledgeable as possible about the details of deployment.

### **Assemble a deployment binder**

When your service member prepares to leave, she’ll have numerous legal documents and financial matters to tend to and finalize (for example, creating or updating a will, handling all life insurance policies, and creating a power-of-attorney document). There are several checklists at the end

of this section to help you and your service member get started in addressing some of these issues.

Whoever is left in charge of your service member's affairs during the deployment will find himself or herself responsible for several important legal documents. Some families create "deployment binders" that contain banking and housing documentation, deployment orders, call lists for the rear detachment commander or family readiness group, life insurance policies, passports (even for infants), as well as the service member's will. Keeping these documents stored in one place and easily accessible can save valuable time and allow for an informed response to any unforeseen contingencies.

## Know your service member's chain of command

You may already have a basic awareness of how the military works, but truly understanding the rules, regulations, and culture can spare you a lot of confusion down the road. Get to know your service member's chain of command and understand who will be the commander left behind as a unit point of contact. Familiarize yourself with the website and contact information of the command as much as you can.

## Understand the language

If you aren't already familiar with military-speak, you might want to take a look at this site, which allows you to browse military terms: [www.dtic.mil](http://www.dtic.mil).

## Yellow Ribbon Program

If your service member is a part of the Reserves or National Guard, you should be aware of the Yellow Ribbon Program. This is a support network for the family members of deploying National Guard and Reserves that provides network activities to boost morale and welfare, provides family members with access to support services in time of need, and enables family members to become involved in the lines of communication with deployed unit members. For more information, go to [www.yellowribbon.mil](http://www.yellowribbon.mil).

## Child care

If you're a single parent who is deploying, or if you and your spouse are both deploying and have children, you'll need to create a viable family care plan for those who will be assuming responsibility of your children during deployment.

*"I am her mother, taking care of her special needs child. That is really hard. She makes sure that we are taken care of. She pays all the bills."*

*—Army mother*

In addition, for the stay-at-home parent, having someone to care for your child during deployment so that you can get errands done, spend some time with friends, or have your hair cut is also important. Plan ahead to find a few different babysitting options before the deployment. One resource is the **Sittercity Military Program**, which is a free service for military families, through a partnership with the Department of Defense. The Sittercity Military Program

provides a free subscription to find quality babysitters in your local area. Visit [www.sittercity.com](http://www.sittercity.com) for more information and to register. (At this time Sittercity offers the free service to Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines—the Coast Guard is not included.)

*“My children are toddlers and this will be the first time they are going to fully understand that Daddy is away. I’m still working through that one, but I have been starting to leave my children with a babysitter to get them used to being away from us.”*

*—Air Force spouse*

## Emergencies

As difficult as it may be, try to prepare for the worst-case scenario. Identify people on whom you can rely for immediate support in the event of an emergency and keep a list of their contact information by the phone. This way, you can prevent scrambling for support when you are already compromised emotionally. Make sure you have your service member’s Social Security number and full unit information readily available, and that the point of contact in your service member’s unit knows how to reach you. Just as important, make sure that you have a point of contact that you can call, should an emergency occur—to pick up your children from school, come and support you in person, and a variety of other actions that might be needed in the case of an emergency.

## Worksheet #2

# Pre-Deployment Checklists

For service members and their partners, spouses, and loved ones: use the following checklists before deployment to ensure you have completed paperwork needed during or after you/your service member deploys. There are separate checklists for legal matters, family matters, personal property, financial matters, as well as a family care plan:

## Legal Matters Checklist

- Create a Power of Attorney (POA). Contact your base legal office for information on types of POAs and advice on which one you should use.
- Create and/or update your will.
- Consider establishing a joint bank account with your spouse so that bills can be easily paid.
- Review your current life insurance coverage.
- Confirm your Servicemembers Group Life Insurance (SGLI) beneficiaries are correct and update if necessary.
- If you are currently renting your home and need to cancel your lease, notify your property management company of your deployment. Understand your rights under the Service Members Civil Relief Act, here: [www.jag.navy.mil](http://www.jag.navy.mil).

## Legal Documents

Keep copies of the following documents (if applicable) together in a secure place:

- Wills (for both service member and spouse)
- Power of Attorney (POA)
- Insurance policies (including life, health, home, and vehicle)
- Tax records
- Court orders (e.g., child support and custody documents or divorce paperwork)
- Social Security cards
- Birth certificates
- Marriage license
- Passport
- Visas and citizenship/naturalization paperwork
- Vehicle titles, registrations, and inspections
- Copy of your most recent LES

## Family Matters Checklist

- Update your Emergency Data Form (“Page 2”) with your family’s most current contact information.
- Ensure ID cards are current and will not expire during deployment.
- Confirm all family members have all necessary TRICARE and Metlife (dental) information.
- Look into international calling plans.
- Set up a Skype account at [www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com).
- Create a list of important phone numbers and

email addresses for both the service member and family.

## Personal Property Checklist

(if applicable)

- Notify your homeowners insurance if your home will be vacant during deployment.
- Notify your renters insurance if you are storing your belongings in a storage facility.
- Make sure you have the appropriate household goods/personal property insurance.
- Know the location of your car title.
- Have an up-to-date vehicle registration and proof of registration.
- Know when your vehicle will need its next inspection.
- Make sure the vehicle is in good working order.
- If you own firearms, make sure they are registered with the appropriate authority and that your spouse/family member is trained to operate them.

## Financial Matters Checklist

- Notify your credit card companies that you will be deployed.
- Make sure your family will have money available to them on a continuous basis.

- If you have a safe deposit box, make sure a family member has a key.
- Create a record of accounts with account information and bill due dates—store in a secure place.
- Set up automatic payments for bills (if desired) and make sure the credit cards you are using will not expire during deployment.
- Create a list of any computer or banking passwords—store in a secure place.
- Make sure you know where to go if you need financial assistance (e.g., Family Service Center, Command Ombudsman, Personnel Support Detachment (PSD), or Navy Marine Corps Relief Society).
- Understand the status of your finances (including debts, income, etc.).

## Family Care Plan Checklist

Use the following checklist to develop your family care plan if you are a single parent or in the event that both parents or caregivers for minor children will deploy:

- Assign a guardian for your family in a special Power of Attorney (POA) and confirm the guardian understands his or her responsibilities.
- Obtain ID and commissary cards. To ensure military health coverage for you and your

children, register all dependent family members in Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS), and check to make sure all ID cards have not expired.

- Make sure Servicemembers Group Life Insurance (SGLI) is correct.
- Arrange for housing, food, transportation, and emergency needs.
- Inform caretakers of your financial matters.
- Arrange for guardian to have access to necessary funds.
- Arrange for child care, education, and medical care.
- Arrange necessary travel and escort to transfer family members to the new guardian.
- Discuss these plans with your children.

## Worksheet #3

# Useful Contact Information

During a deployment it is helpful to have all of your contact numbers readily available in case there is an emergency. If you are the spouse or partner of a deployed service member—and particularly if you are caring for children during a loved one's deployment—you also may want to share these contact numbers with friends, family, or neighbors. This is especially important in the event you are alone and need help.

Use the list below and keep it somewhere accessible in case you need it. Make your own copy of the list below and keep it somewhere accessible in case you need it.

## Contact numbers to have on hand:

Write down the following and add the current contact information in your area for each:

TRICARE

Electric Company

Dental

Water Company

Local Hospital

Sanitation

Doctor

Housing

Dentist

Bank/Credit Union

Veterinarian

Schools

Ombudsman

Electrician

Command

Plumber

Red Cross

MWR

# DEPLOYMENT



## Introduction

So, it's here. The dreaded "D" word: deployment. Strangely, we fear and look forward to this day at the same time. Anticipation, frustration, and anxiety all creep in and create a crazy roller coaster of emotion. The good news? Now you can start counting down to homecoming. You can employ all of the techniques you learned during the pre-deployment phase. For the next few months you will grow and learn so many things about yourself, your relationships, your family, and your friends.

The next months will test you and teach you. You will have great days and sad days. Embrace and learn from your feelings, work through your hardships, and celebrate your

milestones and accomplishments. Research shows that people who face adversity in an upbeat, educated, and hopeful manner will come out on the other side stronger and more resilient than when they started. Deployments offer you a unique opportunity for growth.

Spouses, family members, and loved ones face their own unique challenges when a service member deploys. The nature of deployment necessitates that attention be paid to supporting the service member, but **loved ones left behind experience significant stressors themselves during the deployment.**

Now is the time to focus on important priorities: sustaining family and friendship ties and encouraging coping skills, maintaining a connection to your service member and the immediate family, and learning as much as you can about what your service member will need when he or she comes home.

*“I think the most important thing I learned when my husband was gone the first time was that I don’t need him in order to be happy—but I want him. That was a real ‘light bulb’ moment for me, and it totally changed our relationship for the better.”*

—Navy spouse



## Relationships: Spouse/Partner

There’s no doubt that the prolonged separation of deployment can strain even the best of relationships. However, many spouses report that deployments ultimately strengthen their relationships by reminding them how much they love and

appreciate their service member. A deployment does not have to be a negative experience for your relationship. While there are certainly hardships associated with your service member's absence, those same hardships can remind both of you why you fell in love in the first place.

*“We make purposeful efforts to not assume the worst of the other, and trust each other that we are doing the best we can. We are a team.”*

—Army spouse

## Sweet nothings can be everything!

If you're suddenly reminded of something you miss about your service member, write it down. Slip notes in the pockets of his uniforms before he packs them. Scribble even the smallest sentiments in a card and send it to your service member, just to remind her that you love and miss her. Write your sweet nothings on a piece of paper and place it in a jar, then keep filling up the jar until your service member returns or send it to him halfway through his tour.

*“Even though we communicate through email, a snail-mail letter or card means so much to them. It means you're thinking about them and they're not forgotten while they're away. We know we never forget them but they need that physical reminder that we are thinking of them and missing them. That's the priority.”*

—Army spouse

## Put pen to paper

Writing letters while apart—even if you have access to the phone or Internet—can help maintain the intimacy and closeness you have when you’re together. Another wonderful tool to foster a sense of togetherness is journaling for each other. Some couples will buy journals in which they write about their days and their feelings for one another. It’s okay to write about events or feelings that you already shared over the phone or email. The point is to memorialize your daily lives, thoughts, and feelings for your partner. The beauty of these journals lies in their ability to foster and maintain a sense of togetherness even while apart. When your service member returns home, you can give each other the journals as gifts.

*“I wrote him a letter or card at least every other day while he was away. Typically, I’d sit down at the end of the day and jot down my thoughts from the day, anything major that happened (or minor, for that matter), and other gushy stuff you say to your husband. We were also able to email one another every day.”*

—Army spouse



## Show you care with care packages

Many family members assemble care packages to send to their service member while he is deployed. Care packages serve multiple purposes: they give family members a tangible activity that they can do on behalf of their deployed service member; they boost the service member's morale and provide her with comfort items that she may not be able to obtain overseas; and they help maintain a positive connection between the service member and her family. While spouses generally send monthly care packages, friends and extended family members can do so also.

***“My husband missed both of my kids’ birthdays on his deployment. To make him feel like he was part of the fun, I created ‘party by mail’ care***

*packages. I included a party invite, cake in a jar (you can find recipes all over the Internet), icing, a candle representing the age our child was turning, hats, a favor, and even confetti. To make it more like a party, I would include enough cake, forks, plates, and napkins for a large group of people. Some of the best pictures I received while he was gone were of him in his party hat, with his friends, having a ‘birthday party’ out at sea. The snapshots are in the family picture albums right next to the pictures of the real parties that he missed.”*

*—Navy spouse*

*“I love sending him packages because it makes me feel connected to him. When I am missing him and want to talk, but we can’t, I write letters. And I take lots of pictures to photograph what he may be missing.”*

*—Marine spouse*

The United States Postal Service has created a “Mili-kit” based on the items most frequently requested by military families. For more information on contents and on how to request your free kit, visit the USPS website at [www.usps.com](http://www.usps.com). If your service member does rapid cycling deployments and there isn’t time to get mail to her, consider journaling or creating a package that you can gift her when she gets home.

## Maintain connections via phone and internet

If possible, post online messages periodically about how family members are doing and a list of their activities and accomplishments. If you're able to call, talk about important family activities such as the children's education, finances, employment successes, recreational activities, attendance at church, or participation in family or other community events.

*“Make sure you talk when you get the chance; don't stress them out with the small stuff you can handle on your own and make sure you listen to them when they need to talk. It's hard over there, and they are seeing unimaginable things. Sometimes it's best if you just listen.”*

—Army spouse



## Relationships: Child

*“The parent at home should never discourage a child from feeling hurt or resentful; don't make them feel bad for having bad feelings. Let them know it is normal and OK to be mad or sad, but then explain how important Dad's job is and why he is doing what he is and that he still loves you very much. Dad would not be who he is if he were not a soldier—it is what makes him special.”*

—Army spouse



It's important to honor your child's special relationship with the service member parent. Here are some activities that can help:

### Participate in the preparation of care packages

Encourage your child to take a big part in assembling care packages, selecting special items to send or, better yet, handmaking items to include.

*“The kids always help with the care packages. We also do a lot of military, family-related events on base to be with other families who are with us on the deployment. This time, I signed my son up for a group at school that is comprised of kids whose parents are deployed.”*

*—Marine spouse*

*“My kids communicate with him through letters. It seems the deployment actually gave them the opportunity to communicate with him more than when he was home.”*

*—Navy spouse*

## Maintain a routine

When a service member parent is deployed, it can cause a great deal of stress and anxiety for children as well as adults. It’s easy for this anxiety to interfere with the day-to-day routines that provide children with much-needed comfort and stability. When routines are disrupted, a child’s overall quality of life is diminished. Maintaining your pre-deployment routine provides children with a sense of normalcy at a very vulnerable time in their lives.

## Plan deployment activities

Having special milestones to look forward to and activities to stay busy with can help children get through deployment. It keeps them in a routine, helps with self-esteem, and can even encourage friendships with other children in their situation. Activities may include sports, a camp, or even a family road trip to see cousins or friends. It’s never too late to start something new.

*“When he first leaves, we go and do something fun right away.”*

*—Coast Guard spouse*

## Encourage age-appropriate skill development

Involve your child in skill-building activities such as home chores, sports, dance, arts and crafts, music lessons, and Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts.

*“I put my kids in after-school activities to make sure that they were busy.”*

*—Army spouse*



## Engage support from your child's school or community groups

Research shows that children are more resilient and acclimate to deployments better when they sense their communities and those close to them support their service member and believe in the importance of their

deployment. Involve your child's school classroom, if possible, by asking her teacher to acknowledge her service member's deployment through writing letters, creating class care packages, or other educational activities. You can encourage the same for community, religious, or sports groups that your child participates in, allowing your friends, neighbors, and other education and civic connections to support and celebrate your military child's experiences.

One great example of a way to highlight your child's service member when he is deployed is to encourage your school to participate in HISTORY's "Take A Veteran To School" program ([www.history.com](http://www.history.com)). Schools have Skyped ([www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)) with or viewed pre-recorded messages from deployed service members during events surrounding Take A Veteran To School, and HISTORY has created curriculum guides for grades K-12 to help connect this program to academic curriculum.



## Relationships: Parent

While your son or daughter is deployed, you may be experiencing many conflicting feelings: pride, worry, fear, love, and frustration—just to name a few. You may not be able to communicate as frequently as you would like, and you may have concerns about whether your child is safe or whether she will be the same when she returns.

*"I find online Army mother support groups and specific groups for my son's Battalion. And I tell myself it's okay to have 'weepee' days."*

*—Army mom*

## Being a safe harbor

Despite all of this, you want to create a safe space for your service member when she does communicate. You want to be a support person who is free of judgment and pressure. Lay the groundwork now in case she has any problem adjusting when she comes home. If your service member can associate you with unconditional love, then she will probably consider you a harbor of support if she is having a hard time when she returns home.

This is exactly the kind of relationship you want to foster with your service member. It may take patience on your part, but with an equal amount of understanding, peer support, and self-care, you may be able to create this relationship if it doesn't already exist.

*“When my son was deployed, I only got to talk to him once every couple of weeks. I worried about him constantly. We could only talk for a few minutes. Looking back now, all I remember is telling him to ‘keep his helmet on and his butt down.’ And, that I loved him. Every time I got off the phone, I would be so proud of myself for not crying. I know that would have killed him. The entire fifteen months he was gone, he never heard me cry. I think that was the best thing I did for him while he was gone.”*

—National Guard parent

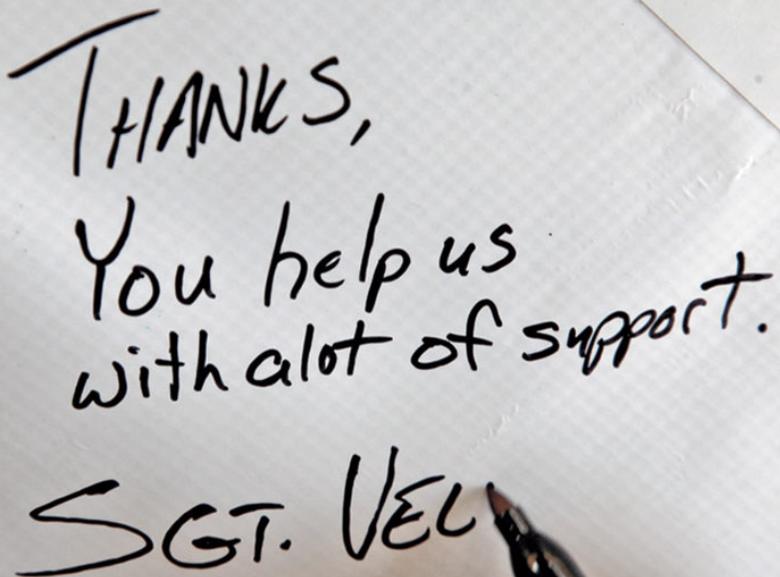


## Relationships: Extended Family and Friends

The most important thing for extended family and friends to remember during deployment is to do everything you can to remain supportive of your service member and immediate family. The best way to do this is to try to have a face-to-face meeting with the family or communicate directly with your service member. Maintaining a strong relationship requires a little work and fact-finding; the more you know, the more you can do.

### Join the care package assembly line or send letters

Many family members will assemble monthly care packages to send to their service member. See if you can add your own items to this group gift, or create a care



THANKS,  
You help us  
with a lot of support.  
SGT. VEL

package of your own. Similarly, you can send letters of support and encouragement to both your service member and her family members.



## Communication: Spouse/Partner

Hopefully, you and your service member had a discussion during pre-deployment about how often you'll communicate while he's gone. If you didn't do this before he left, it's not too late to try to establish these expectations now. However, even with a tentative calling or emailing schedule, both you and your service member may struggle to maintain the routine. As much as service members would like to establish a schedule for reaching their loved ones, their missions in a combat zone or operational activities may interfere. As a result, many spouses and partners carry cell phones with them at all times to avoid missing their service member's call.

### Communication Tip

Try to avoid comparing how often you speak with your service member with how often somebody else says they are speaking with their service member. Focus on what works for you and your service member and don't worry about how other couples are communicating.

## Schedules can be hard to maintain

If you don't hear from your service member at a pre-determined time, don't worry and don't take it personally. Your service member is probably as anxious to communicate with you as you are with him. Once deployed and actively engaged in his unit's missions, there's little that your service member can do to control when he'll be able to call. This unpredictability can be a source of frustration for some loved ones, particularly since there's not a phone number at which they can reach their service member. This is where Internet access is truly helpful for most service members.

*“I try to understand that although my husband does miss me, he may not want to spend his whole deployment on the computer with me. It can make it harder for him. He needs his ways of dealing and to get his mind off of the deployment. If the chow hall is having a themed dinner he may spend more time there with co-workers and friends than on the computer with me. He may spend more time with his friends at the gym. This doesn't mean that he does not want to talk to his family.”*

*—Air Force spouse*

## Communicating 24/7 via the Internet

Some duty stations have Internet access with varying degrees of reliability. Many service members don't take any

chances and choose to bring their own laptops so they can use email and instant messenger (IM) while they're gone. Spouses and partners report that they derive a great deal of comfort from being able to contact their service member online whenever they want. Another advantage of having Internet access is that it generally allows the service member and partner to communicate for longer periods of time.

Beware, however, that there is a risk of misunderstanding when communicating online. For example, you cannot read body language through an email and tone can be mistaken, causing confusion and conflict. Whenever possible, both you and your service member should give one another the benefit of the doubt when something that is expressed in writing just "doesn't seem right." This can save both of you a great deal of frustration. Understanding the limits of the medium goes a long way toward preserving harmony while apart.

The Internet also enables service members to free video and voice software—such as Skype ([www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com))—for face-to-face talking. Sometimes, unreliable connections can make video-conferencing difficult, in which case you can switch to voice or text chatting only. Many military installations overseas also offer free video conferencing to their service members.

*“Usually we just Skype—that is probably the biggest tool deployed families have. Skype has probably saved marriages and families. It takes away so much separation.”*

*—Air Force spouse*

*“My husband got to see our daughter crawl for her first time by chance—she was on the floor in the background while video chatting and she started crawling. He got to see her walk for the first time (for him) while on video chat, too.”*

*—Army spouse*

## The Power of Social Media

Facebook and other forms of social media can be terrific vehicles to communicate with your service member, family, and friends. Posting photos and deployment updates can streamline and personalize all communication. Just remember to maintain operational and personal security while enjoying the benefits of online technology!

## The limits of the phone

If your service member does not have Internet access, be prepared for brief phone calls. Your service member may be relying on the Defense Satellite Network (DSN), which limits call lengths to fifteen or thirty minutes. During these calls, it's important to use that time to convey positive and supportive messages to one another, encouraging each other to persevere in the relationship. Any problems that you may be having as a couple are not likely to be

resolved while your service member is deployed. Think about the meaningful issues you'd like to discuss and focus on those.

*“Make the most out of every chance you do have for communication. Don’t spend the twenty minutes you have to talk on the phone arguing over small stuff; you will regret it in the long run.”*

*—Air Force spouse*



**If you must bring up a sensitive issue, use the following steps:**

## Four Steps to Constructive Problem-Solving

### Step 1: Gentle Start-Up

Bring up issues gently so your partner doesn't feel defensive.

1. Start with "I feel" or "I'm concerned"; share how the problem affects you emotionally.
2. Describe what's wrong in objective terms. "I'm concerned that the bills didn't get paid on time this month."
3. State what you need in a positive way. "I need to know that someone is paying close attention to our family's finances and paying our bills on time."

### Step 2: Perspective

In every argument there are two ways of seeing things—yours and your partner's. It is important to understand your partner's point of view.

1. Set aside your own agenda and learn to hear and respect what your partner is saying.
2. Validate what is being said. For example, "I can see how you would feel that way..."
3. Ask questions to clarify what your partner is saying: "Could you explain what you're thinking in a different way?"

### Step 3: Compromise

Compromise is an agreement you and your partner can both live with and get behind without reservations.

1. Describe your core need—what you cannot compromise on.
2. Listen to your partner describe his core need and validate why it is important to him.
3. Describe what you are flexible about.
4. Listen to what your partner is flexible about.
5. Come to a compromise by paying attention to the places where your flexibility overlaps.

### Step 4: Recover from Conflict

Recovering from conflict is fixing things between you and your partner after a disagreement—after you have both calmed down.

1. Describe what your feelings were during the argument.
2. Listen to and validate your partner's feelings.
3. Take some responsibility for your own part in the argument and share it with your partner. (Difficult, but very important.)
4. Discuss ways to improve the conversation the next time you talk about the issue and share that with your partner.

## Choose your topics carefully

Use this time apart to focus on what you love about your service member. Any negativity conveyed in the phone call may linger and haunt both of you. The last thing you want is your service member distracted or distraught when he's headed out on his next mission. And, you definitely don't want to worry about or regret what was said, or not said, the last time you were able to talk to your service member on the phone.

*“You have to communicate as often as possible, be honest with each other about what you are feeling, and be sensitive to the circumstances. You have to remember that your deployed service member is not sitting on a computer all day chatting, and emails and calls may be slow at times. They have to be sensitive to the fact that sometimes we forget that back at home, too. Care packages with a little bit of a personal touch help and always say, ‘I love you.’”*

*—Navy spouse*

When communicating with your service member, try to focus on sending him uplifting messages of love and support. Before you launch into a new topic, ask yourself if what you're about to discuss accomplishes this goal. If your topic of conversation doesn't strengthen your service member or your relationship, consider changing the topic, unless it's an emergency.

*“We talk a lot about what we would like to do after deployment, like taking a vacation with his block leave time.”*

*—Army spouse*

Try to stay within the parameters you established with your service member in your pre-deployment agreement about what you two would share with one another while separated.

## Touching base with others

It is important to maintain your communication with friends and family, as they can be a source of strength and support. Conversely, you can provide support to them through checking in periodically with your service member’s extended family and friends to update them and keep them involved in your own deployment experiences. You can also touch base with a mentor or other confidantes to make sure that your perspective on the deployment experience is accurate.



## Communication: Child

### Exchanging videos

Think about how you want to communicate as a family with your service member. Perhaps you want to send him videos of yourself and the children, and—similarly—see videos of him at his operating base so you can get an idea of his “home away from home.” Taking this a step further, consider sending your service member videotapes



showing your child watching the service member parent's videos to help foster a feeling of connection for your service member.

## Shared communications

If possible, make sure that your child gets her own phone and Internet time with the deployed parent, for example, using Skype or Facebook or another smartphone application. This individualized attention fosters connection between your service member and your child. However, do not force interaction on your child. For younger children, it may be upsetting or confusing that they can talk to Daddy, but he still isn't coming home. Let the child move at her own pace and guide the expectations when it comes to talking to the service member parent.

For parents of very young children and toddlers with developing language skills, trying to speak virtually can be extremely frustrating for the service member and child. Try to be as patient as possible and never take a child's lack of communication as a personal affront.

*“I have found that my kids do better if they don't talk to their dad every day. It almost is too hard for them to hear his voice all the time and not be able to see him. So we try to have their phone calls with him be on the weekends when we have more time and they are able to tell him about their weeks.”*

*—National Guard spouse*

You can also encourage your child to write letters and make cards for Dad that the two of you can take to the post office and send out together. In addition, as mentioned earlier, you can encourage your children's classmates to send letters, or get her teacher involved and send class pictures to the deployed parent. It's important to get your child's teachers engaged with the deployment so that they can monitor the child's behavior in class for any changes in behavior. This might include problems with attention, aggression, anxiety, or sadness.

*“I never push her to communicate with her dad. When she was smaller, seeing him online made her behavior so much worse, so I realized it was her way of dealing with stress. So I stopped forcing it and explained to Hubby that he would have to do his best and, despite him missing her, it was best for her. She would eventually want to say ‘hi’ on occasion, but it worked for us. Now that she is older, she will be able to email from her own account and initiate contact on her own. The other invaluable thing I did was make it OK for her to be mad at him for leaving. Kids don’t want to be mad at their parents, but I assured her he still loved her and he could take it if she was mad. It helped for her to get those feelings out.”*

*—Air Force spouse*

## United Through Reading

The terrific United Through Reading program allows the service member to create a DVD showing herself reading a children's book. The service member then gets to send the DVD as well as the book that was read to her child. Once the child receives the package, he can watch the deployed parent reading to him. Not only does this encourage reading among children, it also gives them an opportunity to see their deployed parent on TV and lets them know that the parent is thinking about them. Deployed service members may have access to a United Through Reading program depending on where they're stationed. Learn more at [www.unitedthroughreading.org](http://www.unitedthroughreading.org).



## Dog Tags for Kids

A great gift idea for your child is a set of dog tags specifically made for your child from the service member parent, with the year and location of the parent's deployment on one side and your child's name on the other. These will be sent for free to your service member, who can then send them from overseas to your child. Learn more at [www.dogtagsforkids.com](http://www.dogtagsforkids.com).

*“During both my husband’s deployments, my son was extremely angry. He was just so bad at home. He was very destructive and would really act out. During the second deployment, I was at my wit’s end. I took him to a child counselor because I didn’t know what to do. He was seven and refused to do anything I told him to do. He would call me names and even hit and try to bite me. After the therapist spent time with my son and had him fill out some questions for his age, she identified that he was extremely depressed and suffering from low self-esteem. You could have knocked me over with a feather when she told me that. I thought he had anger-management issues that were maybe genetic. She explained that at his young age, it was common for depression to express itself as anger. I never knew that!”*

—Army spouse and mother

## Communicating with Children about Deployment

<b>Three- to Four-Year-Olds</b>	No concept of time. A three-year-old thinks that three months is next week. Parents need to use markers, such as, “Dad/Mom will be home right before your birthday” or “before this holiday.”
<b>Five- to Six-Year-Olds</b>	Better understanding of time. They understand that three months is a long time. Calendars are helpful. You can mark the calendar and say, “This is the day when Dad/Mom is supposed to come home.”
<b>Seven- to Eight-Year-Olds</b>	Understand time and bigger concepts. They will be able to look at the calendar and mark it. You can say, “This is the day when Mom/Dad is supposed to come home.” This age group understands concepts like good and bad. You can say that Dad/Mom is going away to take care of the bad guys or bad things.
<b>Nine- to Twelve-Year-Olds</b>	Abstract thinking has begun. They are aware of the news and can understand concepts like the “national good.” You can tell them a return date, and they will understand the time frame. Reinforce this age group’s skills by providing them with pre-stamped envelopes, as well as private email accounts, for communicating.
<b>Older Adolescents</b>	This is a challenging age group. This is an emotional period under the best circumstances. They can experience a range of emotions from feeling anxious, proud, sad, or even confused about their parent’s deployment. And with one parent now deployed, these feelings can be especially difficult for the child to cope with. Reinforce open communication and social connectivity.

## A note on children and their feelings

As soon as a child is old enough to notice the absence of the deployed parent, the child is old enough to experience the following feelings: anger, sadness, fear, confusion, abandonment, fear, anxiety, depression, or any combination of the above.

The problem with children who are struggling with these kinds of emotions is that they may be too young to fully understand and express their feelings. As the at-home parent, you will need to be watchful for changes in their behavior that may indicate they're struggling with unspoken emotions. If you have the skills to address this situation, handle it immediately; if not, seek professional assistance to help guide you.



As the home parent, you should never assume that what your child is doing is an accurate expression of what your child is feeling. If your child is acting out in school or at home, or seems extremely irritable or angry, take your child to a counselor or therapist to rule out anxiety or depression. Children have a harder time accurately identifying their emotions than adults do.

You can help your child understand his emotions by purchasing children's books that identify different emotions. These books help children understand what different emotions look and feel like. You can also help your child by being honest about your own emotions. If you're sad, frustrated, or angry, tell him so and why. Encourage your child to use words to identify his feelings. The more your child is able to understand what he's actually feeling, the more you can help your child cope with that feeling.

*“We are very open. We talk about fears. Each deployment, those fears resurface again. The older my kids get, the bigger their fears get. We don't make any unrealistic promises. We try to reassure them, but don't make promises about anything. You can't predict the future. We just make sure that our kids know how much their dad loves them and will do everything that he can to come home safe to them.”*

*—Army spouse*

*“We always speak well of one another. Sharing with Daddy what is good, noble and positive about our children; and with my children, what is good, noble and positive about their daddy.”*

—Army spouse



## **Communication: Parent**

Receiving mail and care packages is a terrific morale booster for your service member son or daughter. You can never send too many—especially letters. Your service member will always be happy to get mail from you, and this can also make you feel better by knowing that you are “doing” something that helps your son or daughter, even if it is purely on an emotional level. Sending frequent mail not only keeps your service member’s spirits up, but also helps maintain a bond of closeness between you, despite the thousands of miles that actually separate you.

*“I was always there when he was able to call, twenty-four hours per day. I let him talk about whatever he wanted to, whether it has to do with his deployment or not. I tried not to ask questions about deployment unless he brought the subject up. I always told him how much I love him, miss him, and how I am so very, very proud of him.”*

—Army parent



ISAF  
افغانستان

ARMY

FRANCO

Franco

Water

Peppermint  
Patties

MGM  
Packaging

AMERICA SERVES YOU  
PRIORITY MAIL

This bond is important, because the last thing you want is for your service member to return from combat feeling as though everyone she ever loved is now a stranger. Maintaining contact during the deployment is one way that loved ones can make those feelings less likely to surface—or if they do, less powerfully.

*“My son has been deployed to Iraq for four months now. I really thought he would call me more often, and I get a little nervous when I don’t hear from him for a week or two. But I know how busy he is and how focused he is on doing a good job over there. So I keep my cell phone close and keep sending him big batches of my famous cookies, which apparently the other guys in his unit really love! Oh, and coffee; I always send lots of good coffee. My son says he is becoming the most popular guy in his unit.”*

*—Marine Corps mom*



## **Communication: Extended Family and Friends**

Patience can be an important virtue for extended family and friends during this time. If your service member is married or has children, you may notice that he’s focusing a lot of energy communicating with his spouse and children. Chances are good that your service member

hopes that you'll check in on his immediate family to make sure they're doing well in his absence, and also hoping that the immediate family is keeping you up-to-date on how he's doing. However, if the lines of communication are not optimal between the immediate family and you, don't take that issue up with your service member while he's in a combat zone. Instead, follow up with the family in person, if possible. Potentially, because of a move associated with this deployment, the family might lack a local support network, and therefore you can be a vital resource of strength and support for your service member's family.

Don't be surprised if your service member is not able to communicate as much as you would like. Very often, service members bond with their team members while in combat. This bonding actually keeps your service member safe by improving unit cohesion and promoting resilience.

When you do speak with your service member, focus on relaying positive and supportive messages.

*"I think I only got to talk to my bro five or six times while he was gone and that kind of sucked. I mean, he was in Afghanistan and I know it was hard for him to communicate, but man, I missed talking to him. When he did get to call, we mostly asked if he was okay and tried to figure out what he needed us to buy for him because they didn't have anything over there. I think he must have lived for Mom's*

*care packages. And she sent those out like clockwork. The weirdest thing happened though. I actually started writing letters. I can't remember ever writing a letter to anyone. But three months into his deployment, I just started writing Steve letters every other week or so. It sort of made him feel closer in a way. It was pretty cool, actually."*

*—Reservist brother*



## Tips for Communicating through Social Media on Deployment

1. Reach out to military support organizations on or near your base for information on social events, pre- and post-deployment briefs, unit and DoD updates, and special offerings. Check with your family readiness officer (FRO) or family readiness group (FRG) to ensure you are accessing the appropriate pages or websites.
2. Stay in touch with close family and friends and keep them updated on how well you are handling the deployment. Don't be afraid to toot your own horn!
3. Review your privacy settings and stay aware of your personal online security.
4. Think twice before you post or tweet about your personal life or your relationships.
5. Take advantage of social media platforms if you are looking for a new job. Sites like LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)), BranchOut ([www.branchout.com](http://www.branchout.com)), and the Military Spouse Employment Partnership ([msepjobs.militaryonesource.mil](http://msepjobs.militaryonesource.mil)) are ideal resources whether you are launching a new career, improving the one you have, or looking to network for a future position.
6. Stay physically and mentally healthy. Turn off the electronics and take a walk or head to the gym at least a couple of times each week.



## Self-Care: Spouse/Partner

Having the person closest to you gone can be a huge loss. This is a time when you need to be supportive of your service member, but kind to yourself. You should be as forgiving of yourself and what you are going through as you are of your service member.

*“I try not to be so hard on myself. I don’t get upset if the house isn’t perfectly clean all the time or if we eat take-out a couple of times a week. The kids just need me to be there for them; they don’t care if the dishes get done every night.”*

*—National Guard spouse*

Remember: identify your emotions and choose to respond in a positive way.

It’s OK to feel sad, angry, or lonely—or all of the above; you just don’t want to get stuck in those emotions. Instead, find a healthy outlet for these emotions, and understand that your service member cannot necessarily be that outlet. Hopefully, you have a friend you trust, a fellow military spouse, or a close family member who can listen to you when you need to vent. Journaling or writing poetry is another great way of getting your emotions out of your system in a positive way.

*“I wrote in a journal daily when my husband was deployed. It really helped me to be able to get out everything I was feeling. I also made sure to exercise daily—it kept me feeling good about myself.”*

*—Army spouse*

Find something you enjoy that you can work into your daily routine. Without your partner around, your workload has probably increased and your stress level has certainly increased, so you need to find an outlet to help yourself relax. Maybe this is exercising, meditating, writing, taking a bath, volunteering, or a hobby; the important thing is to find something that helps alleviate stress.

*“Reaching out to others and volunteering keeps me busy and helps me not dwell on my own sorrow.”*

*—National Guard spouse*

If you have children, you may want to look into putting them into day care once per week so you can run errands by yourself. Taking time for self-care is an important way to help balance the demands of raising children alone while your service member is deployed. Some churches offer “Mommy’s Day Out” programs for that very reason. You may also want to contact the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, which is working in partnership with the Department of Defense (DoD) to help military parents locate non-DoD child care. Go to [www.naccrra.org](http://www.naccrra.org) for more information. You may also utilize the free DoD membership to Sittercity at [www.sittercity.com/dod](http://www.sittercity.com/dod). Additionally, each branch has different programs to provide child care for deployed service members.

*“I scale back on outside responsibilities so I can give more attention to the kids and my own needs.”*

*—Marine spouse*

In addition to finding time for yourself, it is equally important to identify and utilize people or groups who can provide the emotional support that your service member cannot. Use this time to do some self-evaluation.

Refer to **the self-care tips in the pre-deployment chapter.**



## Explore Your Personal Values and Beliefs

Personal values can include many things. You can find value in characteristics that you already have, like honesty, hard work, and being a kind person; in things that you appreciate, such as your family, religion, and your country; and in things you do that bring meaning to your life, like career or group activities.

For many individuals, a good place to start exploring your values and beliefs is through quiet contemplation. Sometimes, it helps to begin with calming meditation to quiet the mind of all the daily things that are occupying and distracting you.

After calming the mind, ask yourself, “What are the things in my life that make my life worth living?” Or, “What would make my life better if I had them or did them?” Write down the values that come to mind. This will help you further clarify your values and prioritize them in order of their importance to you and your family. Be sure to include values you currently have, those you would like to have, and those you admire in others. There is no time limit to this exercise, so allow yourself enough reflection to fully explore your list.

After you compile a list, it’s time to prioritize from top to bottom in order of importance. Those five items that end up at the top of the list are your core values. These values will help you to define all the goals you set.

Now that you know your core values, you can focus on setting goals for yourself and your family. Every goal you set should be based upon the five core values you identified. Goals should be attainable and in line with your beliefs and values.

## Turn to your branch-specific family readiness groups for added support

Your service member should have given his unit all of your contact information so that you may be included in his unit's family readiness group (FRG) or a similar organization. Information during the deployment should be disseminated to you through your FRG. Many FRG leaders try to arrange events for spouses, host monthly meetings, and distribute a monthly newsletter. If you're unable to participate in regular FRG activities, call your FRG leader and ask to be put on the list of activities for future events and make a monthly phone call to find out scheduled monthly activities for the FRG.

Some spouses are able to gain a great deal of knowledge, comfort, and support through their FRG group. Many spouses find their "deployment buddies" through their FRG or spouse club—someone who is going through the same deployment cycle you are and with whom you can experience the deployment cycle. Other spouses find the formalized group and its meetings uncomfortable or generally unhelpful when it comes to actually coping with the deployment. It can't hurt to give the FRG group a chance. And if this isn't your first deployment and you found your last FRG group unhelpful, it could be run differently during this deployment.

The good news, however, is that many FRG groups have gone "virtual." They have made themselves, and the information they provide, available online. Ask your FRG group if they have an online presence or are interested in developing one.

## Find a mentor spouse

If this is your first deployment, you may want to find a spouse who has already been through other deployments. Having a seasoned “mentor” in your corner can provide you with the perspective and peace of mind that you may not find by participating in your FRG alone. A mentor can help you avoid thoughts, fears, or behavior that could make the deployment more difficult. There are many emotional landmines that a loved one can unknowingly detonate during every stage of the deployment. Having a mentor will allow you to benefit from the experience of the spouse who has already been through the hardships of a deployment.

## Look for spiritual support

Many spouses find support through their churches, temples, synagogues, and other houses of worship. These spouses rely on their personal faith to help them through frightening or difficult times during the deployment. They may become active in their religious communities and find support there. You may want to explore local houses of worship if connecting with a religious community is right for you.

## Stay busy

Probably one of the most difficult aspects of a deployment is worrying about your service member. To combat that anxiety, you may want to try redirecting your thoughts. Most spouses find that the best antidote for this anxiety is keeping busy.

*“During deployment, one of the things I found most beneficial was to engage myself in as many activities as possible so I was getting out of the house at least five days per week and interacting with different people. I always checked my local military resources (like the USO, ASYMCA, and housing) to find different events going on, checked with the bases for recurring playgroups or events on base, and joined groups on Meetup with similar interests. As long as my schedule was full, my days flew by faster and there wasn’t a lot of downtime for me to sit around and think about just how many days were left! Not only did this help the deployment go by quickly, it also allowed my daughter and me to meet lots of new friends and try activities we may not have tried normally!”*

*—Coast Guard spouse*

On top of keeping your mind off of your service member, finding activities outside of the home can also be very empowering. This is important because in many ways a deployment can make a spouse feel powerless. Spouses may feel as though they spend their days and nights waiting to hear from their service member while simultaneously counting down the days until his return. The most common advice that experienced spouses give spouses facing their first deployment is to get a cell phone and a life! If you find ways to occupy your time, the deployment will go by much more quickly.

*“I try to stay busy and focused. Too much time on my hands gives me too much time to panic.”*

*—Army spouse*

*“I make sure to carve out time for me to do something fun for myself, even if it is something like eating out with girlfriends one night or getting my hair and nails done. I write it in my calendar and keep it like an appointment. I allow myself to have bad days—days where I succumb to being depressed and eat junk food and just be lazy. I cry and let my emotions out, and then I get it together again and face a new day.”*

*—Army spouse*

### Here Are Some Tips:

- Focus on the things in your life that you can control as opposed to dwelling on the things you can't—such as the safety of your service member.
- If possible, some spouses find jobs or volunteer opportunities outside the home.
- Other spouses become active in their community—military, religious, or secular.

*“While I am often lonely, I don’t feel sorry for myself and I am not afraid to invite myself out with friends. I don’t wait around for someone to call me; I make the call!”*

*—Navy spouse*

## Get educated

You now have the time to work on your marketable skills as an individual breadwinner, either by seeking an advanced degree or setting specific educational goals. Explore the offerings at your local universities and community colleges, adult education centers, or online university courses. Increasingly, even universities with physical locations offer online access as well. Make an appointment with a college admissions counselor to determine financial eligibility and course offerings, and consider taking an assessment test to determine your vocational interests and goals.

*“I try to learn something new on every deployment. This deployment, I’m thinking of learning a new language.”*

*—Air Force spouse*

## Focus on your nutrition

“Deployment Diet” is a popular term on military websites and at spouse club meetings, as spouses see deployment as a chance to focus on weight loss. It sounds easy, but the reality is much different. Cooking for one is a hassle. Cooking

for your children when you know you have to do clean up, bath, and bedtime solo can also be overwhelming. Spouses can go into survival mode and allow more fast food, more take-out, or meals void of any real nutritional value.

Weight gain (for both children and adults) is common during deployment. It is also common for spouses to have a weight loss goal in mind so that they can look good in a homecoming outfit. However, the most important goal is caring for your body with a balanced diet and good nutritional habits.

*“I try to cook for myself regularly to avoid getting into the habit of eating out, eating junk food, or just eating cereal for dinner.”*

—Army spouse

### Tips for gaining control of your diet:

- **Dieting doesn't work—lifestyle changes do.**  
The idea is to achieve moderation: reduce the servings and serving size of your favorite things, which may be unhealthy, but keep them in your diet. Enjoy your favorite things, but while you are trying to lose weight you may have to settle for a few bites instead of the whole buffet.
- **No one likes food logs, but they work.**  
When you do not track what you eat it is easy to overconsume due to lack of awareness. Daily monitoring is the key to gaining control and to reducing food intake. In numerous studies, this strategy was the most effective technique for controlling food intake.

- **Everything tastes better when we're hungry, so keep yourself fueled.**

In general, the hungrier you are the better everything tastes. It is a good rule to make sure you don't get too hungry throughout the day by choosing appropriate snacks to satisfy your hunger. This is particularly true in the late afternoon if you have a big gap between lunch and dinner. Most successful weight loss participants find that eating breakfast and a mid-afternoon snack helps them consume less throughout the day. It also helps them make better choices at dinner.

- **Out of sight, out of mouth.**

It is a lot harder to eat something if it isn't around. At home, do your best not to purchase foods that you don't want to eat. In addition, avoid walking past vending machines at work or fast-food restaurants unless you have planned an alternative to the high-sugar/high-fat options.

- **Eating properly is hard work.**

It can be more convenient to grab a bag of fast food than to take the time to prepare a healthy meal, especially during a stressful deployment. It is important to find the time to shop for healthy foods and to prepare snacks, lunches, and dinners. It can really help to prepare three or four "go-to" breakfasts, lunches, and dinners for your family that are easy to prepare, healthy, and well received by your family. There might be some resistance from your family at first, but don't get discouraged. If you commit to permanent change you will get better at cooking healthy meals and your family will come around. Most participants report that it takes at least six months.

- **Learn to ride the “Slip ’N Slide.”**

One common mistake in weight loss attempts is to allow one snack of something “bad for you” be the reason to fall off your entire day’s diet. It takes determination to make a mistake (a slip) or have a bad weekend (a slide) and turn around and recommit to eating healthily. A slip or slide does not represent total failure—no one is that disciplined. You are in control and you can learn to handle these little slips and slides on your path to a healthier lifestyle.

- **When you feel down, take a walk around.**

Some of our worst food decisions come when we are feeling stressed, tired, or depressed. Being mindful of how we react in these situations, and how food helps us cope, can be very useful skills to develop. Become aware of the situations where you make your biggest food mistakes. Then, develop strategies to make changes work. The first step might be to eat a smaller portion of comfort food, which shows a much higher awareness! The next step might be to take a walk away from the food and get the equivalent of fifteen minutes of walking, which has shown to significantly improve mood. We cannot always control the stress in our lives, but we can certainly control our reaction.

Tips derived from “Tips for Gaining Control Over Your Diet,” PEIA Weight Management Research and Evaluation, West Virginia University College of Physical Activity and Sport Sciences.

## Strengthen your social networks online

As mentioned in the **pre-deployment chapter**, spouses can sometimes find much-needed peer support online, with

a wealth of message boards for military family members. Interacting online expands the possibilities of support for those who can't attend in-person meetings.

## Don't hesitate to get professional support

Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself still struggling with anxiety, loneliness, or sadness. While it's common to have good days and bad days, prolonged periods of sadness may indicate a need to seek spiritual guidance, such as from your local chaplain, or professional help, such as from your primary care manager (PCM) or a behavioral health provider. If you are a spouse of a deployed National Guard or Reserve member, seek professional advice from your primary care physician, nurse practitioner, health maintenance organization, or local county mental health clinic. For more information on seeking mental health assistance with Tricare (the health care program for uniformed service members, retirees, and their families worldwide) visit [www.tricare.mil](http://www.tricare.mil).

Military OneSource ([www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com)) provides a wealth of information and resources—including self-referrals to local mental health providers—for all branches of service. It may also be a good idea to talk to your PCM about any severe anxiety, sleep disturbances, or prolonged periods of sadness that you're experiencing. Your PCM may consider prescribing something to help ease these disruptions to your daily life, and possibly recommend that you see a mental health professional as well.

Working with your PCM, and possibly a mental health

professional, can give you an extra layer of support as well as a medical perspective regarding what you are experiencing.

*“I love my husband’s family, but they were the worst part of the deployment. I personally found that what worked best for me was to stay busy and never watch the news. Well, someone in his family would always call when a casualty was reported on the news and frantically ask me if it was him and when I had talked to him last. And as much as I wanted to blow them off, I would inevitably start thinking, ‘Well, when did I talk to him last?’ I spent half the deployment thinking he was dead because of those phone calls. It was horrible!”*

—Army spouse





## Self-Care: Child

### Be honest

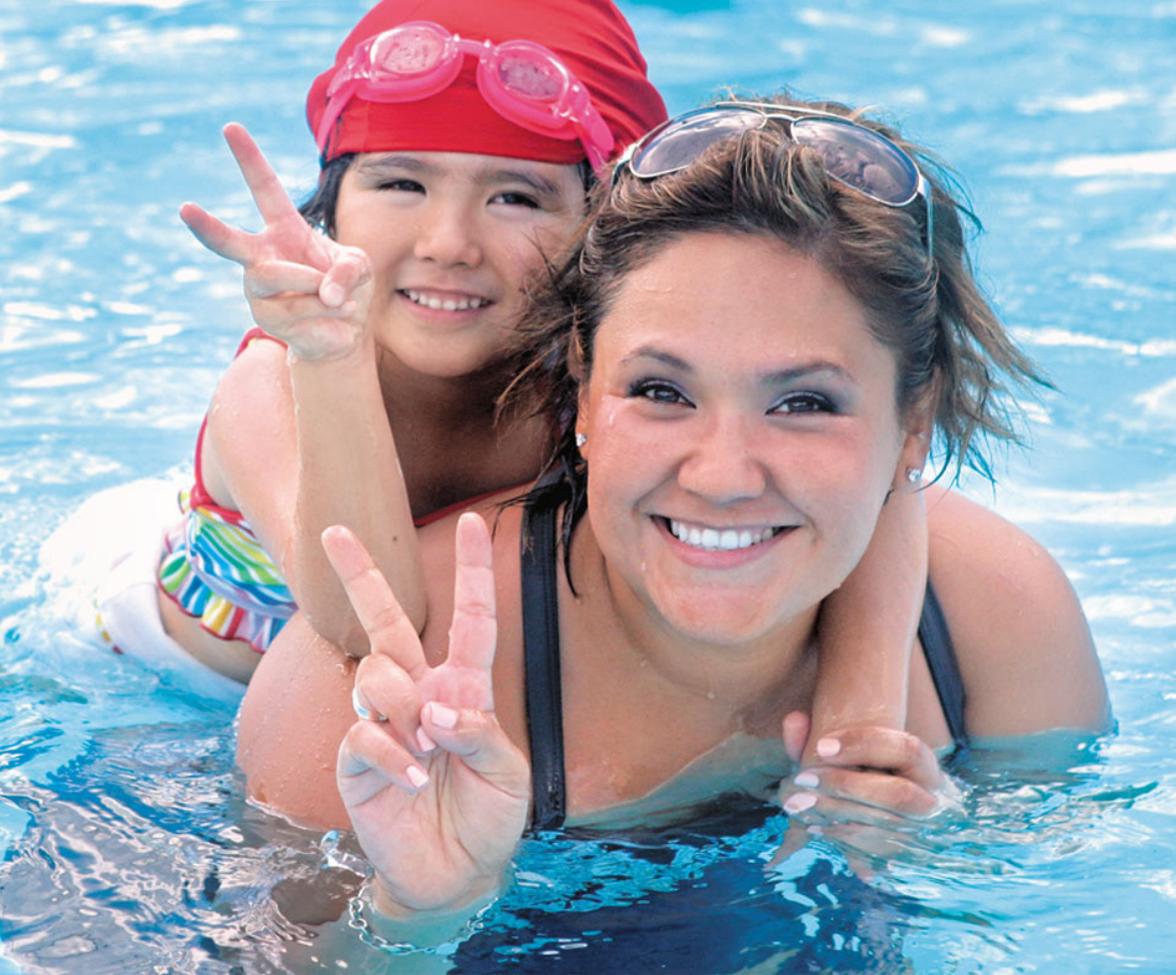
Children are very perceptive. If they see that their parents are sad, they'll pick up on this feeling. Children also tend to internalize the emotions or events that occur around them unless an alternative reason is given. For example, if Mommy is sad, they may think, "I make Mommy sad." Rather than deny being sad, explain to your children that Mommy is sad because she misses Daddy, but Mommy will be okay. This is a good time to engage your children in a talk about how they're feeling about the deployed parent being gone and to let them know that what they're feeling is okay, too.

*"We have pictures all around the house, we talk about Daddy all the time, and it even became a normal thing for my kids to say, 'I love you, Daddy' out loud, no matter where they were when they missed him. I told them that he could hear them."*

*—National Guard spouse*

### Quality time

It's important to spend quality time with each of your children. Try to spend at least twenty minutes one-on-one with each of your children on a daily basis, which will create quality time for the child and parent and improve the child's sense of being loved and acknowledged.



*“We allow Dad to assist us in making decisions while he is away. For example we will pick three movies to rent and send my husband a message. He will pick the two he thinks are the best. So when we watch movies, Dad picked them out. We also apply that to weekend activities. This helps the children and me; I do not always have to make the decision, and my husband can’t lose. Either choice he picks is the right one. There is no wrong answer.”*

*—Army spouse*

## Have fun

Together, as a family, you and your child can decide what you want to do to make each other feel better.

*“We do things Dad doesn’t necessarily like to do, like eat breakfast for dinner and only have popcorn at the movies instead of lunch. We spend all day in PJs on a Saturday or have chicken nuggets for Christmas dinner because that’s what the kids asked for.”*

—Army spouse

Maybe you can make something for the deployed parent, assemble another care package, read a story to your child that the deployed parent usually reads, watch home movies that feature that parent, or cook the deployed parent’s favorite meal while taking pictures. Whatever it is, find ways to have fun and revel in your time with each other. Do not have a “wait until Daddy or Mommy gets home” mentality. Enjoy the time you have together now!

*“We studied the place he was going to learn about the culture and geography. It made us feel closer to him.”*

—Navy spouse

*“For the toddlers, we make a book that they carry around, usually consisting of photos of just them and Daddy.”*

—Army spouse

Don't think the absence of one parent means that the family shouldn't be enjoying themselves. Now is the time to explore your relationship with your children and bond with them more than ever before.

Children of all ages are affected by the long-term absence of a parent. Here are some examples of books and other tools designed to make that absence a bit easier:

- **Books for Military Children**

[booksformilitarychildren.info](http://booksformilitarychildren.info)

A comprehensive list of over fifty fiction books portraying children with parents in the U.S. military, separated according to age and reading level.

- **Flat Daddy/Flat Mommy**

[flatdaddies.com](http://flatdaddies.com)

For younger children, having a Flat Daddy or Mommy can ease the pain of their absence. Flat Daddies/ Mommies are life-sized prints of the deployed service member.



- **Daddy Doll/Mommy Doll**

[www.daddydolls.com](http://www.daddydolls.com)

Daddy or Mommy Dolls are stuffed dolls based upon a photo of the deployed service member. These dolls allow children to actually “hug” the deployed parent. Some military installations will make these for free during the deployment. If that isn’t the case for your service member, you can also order one online.

- **Operation Military Kids**

[www.operationmilitarykids.org](http://www.operationmilitarykids.org)

The U.S. Army’s collaborative effort with America’s communities to support children and youth impacted by deployment.

- **Our Military Kids**

[www.ourmilitarykids.org](http://www.ourmilitarykids.org)

Grants to National Guard and Reserve children for enrichment activities or tutoring while the service member is deployed.

- **MilitaryKidsConnect**

[www.militarykidsconnect.org](http://www.militarykidsconnect.org)

MilitaryKidsConnect (MKC) is an online community of military children (ages six to seventeen) that provides access to age-appropriate resources to support children from pre-deployment through a parent’s or caregiver’s return.

- **Military Families Near and Far**

[www.familiesnearandfar.org](http://www.familiesnearandfar.org)

A bilingual website for military families to help children and parents stay connected and communicate, designed by Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit organization behind Sesame Street.

*“I have them kiss his picture each night before bed and they have a Daddy Doll and Daddy Dog Tags that go everywhere with them. We also watch DVDs from the USO’s United Through Reading Program and read along. I try to keep him in the forefront of their minds in a positive way and assure them that he didn’t leave because of something they did.”*

*—Navy spouse*

*“Ever since my dad’s been in Iraq, my mom has been pretty moody. I try to help a lot and fill in for my dad, like washing the car, mowing the lawn, and playing soccer with my little brother and sister. I think it makes my mom feel better and takes some of the pressure off of her, but I get tired of doing my chores and my homework, as well as all the extra stuff. I just don’t know how to talk to my mom about it without upsetting her. I feel bad because I can’t do everything he did.”*

*—Marine Corps son*



## Self-Care: Parent

### Honor your feelings

Deployments can be especially hard on the parents of service members. Yet, despite the fear of losing one's child in wartime, much is expected of the parent. Your service member needs you to be strong for him. This can be emotionally exhausting. It's essential that you acknowledge your feelings and honor them. Create a space for expressing them, either to trusted friends or through writing or some other means of expression. Eating well and getting enough sleep are also essential to combating the effects that this chronic stress will have on your body.

You may be so focused on being strong for your service member and, if he is married, helping his spouse or children, that you forget to take care of yourself. Please remember that he is going to need you throughout the deployment as well as when he returns and readjusts to life at home, whether that includes transition to the civilian sector or remaining on active duty. This is a marathon, not a sprint. You will need to tend to yourself and your own needs as well as the needs of others. Please refer to the **self-care section in the pre-deployment chapter** for ideas if you haven't already incorporated some self-care activities into your daily schedule.

### Find online support

Utilize online resources developed for parents to find information, resources, and support boards. For example, visit Parents Zone ([www.parentszone.org](http://www.parentszone.org)) for a robust and supportive community.



## Self-Care: Extended Family and Friends

Deployments can be just as stressful for extended family members and friends. All of the self-care ideas that were discussed in the **pre-deployment chapter** should be executed now. As part of your service member's support system, you need to be taking care of yourself, too.



## Being Informed: Spouse/Partner, Parent

### Research

The job of every person who loves the returning service member is to educate himself about the war experience and how it could potentially impact his service member. In many ways, it will fall upon those closest to the service member to identify the red flags indicating that he needs help. If you wait to educate yourself until your service member returns home, when you're in the midst of the real work of reintegration, you may find that you won't have the time.

While your service member is still gone, take the time to research the war experience. Thankfully, the Internet provides a great deal of information about:

- The occupational exposure of war
- Known risk factors for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in returning service members

- Endemic diseases that are known to come out of Iraq and Afghanistan
- Chemical exposure (if your service member should develop respiratory problems he or she never had before)
- Traumatic brain injury
- Substance and alcohol abuse
- Military sexual trauma
- Combat stress, depression, and anxiety

Don't be alarmed by the list. This doesn't mean that your service member is going to come back with a disease or injury. A small percentage of service members suffer from the issues listed, and there may be a small chance that your service member could suffer from one of those things. However, if your service member is suffering from something when she returns, the fact that you have educated yourself about these issues beforehand will enable you to identify the symptoms and have a conversation with your service member in order to get her the help she needs as soon as possible.

With nearly every health problem listed above, early detection and treatment can lead to positive outcomes.

### Helpful reading:

- **“Returning from the War Zone: A Guide for Families of Military Members”**

[www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov)

A guide to help manage the issues of reintegration, created by the National Center for PTSD.

- **Post-Deployment Health Assessment**

[www.dtic.mil](http://www.dtic.mil)

This is the health questionnaire that your service member must complete before he is released to return home. It's well known that regardless of how the service member is really feeling, he will say anything in order to be released immediately to his family and friends. And no wonder; if he were to be completely honest, he knows that he could be kept for further evaluation (after already being away from his loved ones for twelve to eighteen months).

- **Deployment Health Clinical Center**

[www.pdhealth.mil](http://www.pdhealth.mil)

This site was designed to assist clinicians in the delivery of post-deployment health care by fostering a trusting partnership among military men and women, veterans, their families, and their health care providers. A great deal of helpful information can be found on the site.

- **Afterdeployment.org**

[www.afterdeployment.org](http://www.afterdeployment.org)

This site provides private self-assessment and skill development modules for many common adjustment topics associated with operational stressors (e.g., sleep, grief, spirituality) including the blog on psychological health topics, a resource for military families.



## **Being Informed: Child**

If your child is a teenager, you may want to engage

him in a dialogue about some of the changes that the deployed parent may experience before she comes home. This conversation can be simple but should cover the possibility that the service member parent could be irritable, sad, short-tempered, or “different.” Empower your teenager by enlisting his aid in talking to the deployed parent when she returns. Let your teen know that he can come to you if he notices anything different or out of the ordinary. Share information, as appropriate, with your teenager about combat stress, depression, and anxiety, and talk to your teenager about any concerns he might have.



*“Things were explained differently when they were younger but as they have gotten older and begin to understand the harsh reality of where their father is being deployed to, we have had to have some deeper discussions.”*

*—Army spouse*

You should also create time to talk to your teenager about the coping skills that he has adopted while his deployed parent is away. It is important to acknowledge your teenager’s sense of growing self-esteem and the positive choices that he has made during the parent’s deployment. Continue to encourage your teenager to participate in age-appropriate, positive activities that will contribute to a sense of mastery in school, social relationships, family relationships, work, and recreation.

For younger children, you probably don’t want to discuss these issues in depth. As mentioned, there are terrific resources you can turn to that touch on how a parent may change during a deployment. For a majority of your service member’s deployment, you’ll probably want to focus on touching base with your child and assessing how she is feeling—or helping the child figure out how she is feeling and validating those feelings before providing her with reassurances that the deployed parent is safe and will be coming home soon.

*“You can’t promise them Dad will be OK and will be back. You can promise them Dad will do everything he can to stay safe and come home to us, and no matter what happens, we will be*

*OK and make it through this. Kids need to know that their parent is going away for a long time and it's not because they want to, but because it is their job and they need to."*

*—Army spouse*

Helping younger children be informed is really a matter of keeping them engaged in a dialogue about the deployment and recognizing that they are an important part of this experience. Continue your routine and rituals. If you don't already have a countdown ritual for them, it's never too late to start one.

## Coping during a Deployment: A Checklist

If you are the loved one of a service member who is deployed, use the checklist below to remind yourself of some positive ways to cope with the deployment.

You also may want to review the list from time to time to see if you can improve upon your coping strategies. You may choose to complete this checklist once or many times during the deployment cycle.

- Find things to look forward to (e.g., take a class, volunteer, start a new project).
- Reach out to others in the same situation.
- Don't hide your feelings. It is normal to feel sad, lonely, or angry. Talk to people you trust.
- Do something special for yourself and your family (e.g., rent a movie, cook a meal that your deployed spouse wouldn't necessarily enjoy).
- Concentrate on things you can control. It is normal to worry about your loved one's safety, but remember, these are things you cannot control.
- Ignore rumors. Only rely on official sources of information.

- Learn stress management techniques that work for you. Try different ways to relieve stress such as exercising, journaling, or meditating.
- Seek support from your faith community or other community organization.
- Take care of yourself (e.g., get enough sleep, exercise, eat healthy meals, and drink water).

Adapted from Military One Source: [www.militaryonesource.mil](http://www.militaryonesource.mil).

## Getting Help

### How to get help?

It is not unusual to feel overwhelmed or stressed before, during, or after a deployment. Use the contact information below and consider seeking help if you feel you are unable to cope on your own. You may also use this list if someone you know needs help.

### When should I get help?

Staying connected can sustain the support network before and during deployment, but it is natural to feel sad and anxious during these times. Whether you are feeling overwhelmed with new roles and responsibilities, or feeling helpless to support the needs of the family, we all have bad days when our spouses or loved ones are thousands of miles away for months on end. Family members should not hesitate to seek professional assistance when the sadness or anxiety interferes with our ability to cope with the stressors.

If you need help finding a provider in your area contact **Military OneSource** at [www.militaryonesource.mil](http://www.militaryonesource.mil).

To contact a Military OneSource consultant for assistance, use the phone numbers or tools below, anytime, 24/7. You can also read the FAQs on [Website Help](#), [Face-to-Face Counseling](#), [Telephonic Counseling](#), [Online Counseling](#), [Financial Consultation](#), and [Specialty Consultation](#). Here you

will find articles, booklets, resources, and websites on hundreds of topics.

### Phone Numbers

- **Toll-Free:** 1-800-342-9647
- **En español llame al:** 1-877-888-0727
- **TTY/TDD:** 1-866-607-6794

### **Contact a professional for assistance if you experience any of the following:**

- Hopelessness, feeling like there is no way out
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Feeling sad or down for more than two weeks
- Problems concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Problems completing daily or routine activities
- Severe anxiety, agitation, sleeplessness, restlessness, mood swings
- Feeling like there is no reason to live
- Rage or anger
- Engaging in risky behavior without considering the consequences
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Significant weight gain or loss

**The presence of the following requires immediate attention:**

- Thoughts of death—your own, or about others
- Thinking and looking for ways to harm or kill yourself
- Talking about death, dying, or suicide
- Self-destructive behavior, such as drug abuse, weapons, etc.

**IF YOU ARE IN CRISIS (I.E., YOU OR SOMEONE ELSE NEEDS IMMEDIATE HELP) YOU CAN CALL:**

**Military Crisis Line**

To reach the confidential Military Crisis Line by talk, chat, or text to get help for yourself and/or a friend or family member:

- Dial 911, in case of emergency
- Dial 1-800-273-8255, press 1
- Chat at the following address: [www.veteranscrisisline.net](http://www.veteranscrisisline.net)
- Text 838255
- In Europe call 00800-1273-8255 or DSN 118\* (in Europe, toll-free service may not be available through all carriers or in all countries)

## **DCoE Outreach Center**

1-866-966-1020 for psychological health and traumatic brain injury resources

## **Military Pathways**

If you have reservations about calling a crisis line or visiting a doctor, you can visit Military Pathways at [www.militarymentalhealth.org](http://www.militarymentalhealth.org) and do an online self-screening.

# REUNION



## Introduction

You have counted down to this day for months. The paper chain has grown to the size of a large boa constrictor, your M&M jar is depleted, and your calendar is decorated with hundreds of red X's. You are almost there—so close to that moment when you will see your loved one that you can feel it. You daydream about the instant you will be able to look at him, feel him, and smell him again.

Homecoming is an emotional time. Our culture idealizes this moment, painting it as a perfectly blissful reunion. We naturally set our expectations high. However, the reality is that seeing a loved one for the first time after a deployment, and getting back into a routine, can be a complicated

endeavor. This is a very happy time, but it is normal to feel anxious and insecure. It is important to prepare yourself with more than a homecoming sign.

The skills one gains throughout deployment can be applied to the reunion period as well. Drawing on the strength it took to succeed during deployment will help you adapt to the many demands that come into play after your service member is back home. There are no standard or normal stages for homecoming; every family has its own way of welcoming the service member back. Understanding that homecoming has its own challenges and stresses is the first step in the process of successful re-entry into the family and the community.

### Military homecoming tips:

#### **1. “*Semper Gumby*” (be flexible).**

Be flexible about the plans you make surrounding homecoming; things can change at a moment's notice. Expect change, and hopefully you will be pleasantly surprised when your service member arrives right on time or the homecoming happens just like you planned.

#### **2. Communicate.**

Does your service member want a big party? Does he want time with just immediate family? Does he want to hang at home for a few weeks, or does he want to travel and have a special homecoming vacation? There is no right or wrong answer to these questions. The important thing is that you communicate and decide together.

### **3. The outfit isn't everything.**

The adage of “hurry up and wait” defines homecomings, so you could be doing a lot of standing around, possibly outside in the elements, for an unknown amount of time. Even though you want to “dress to impress,” remember to dress for the weather and try to be comfortable.

### **4. Keep your expectations realistic.**

Sometimes, awaiting family members have a list a mile long that they feel needs to be accomplished in order to plan the perfect homecoming. While it is understandable to want your service member to return to a comfortable nest, don't overstress yourself. Choose a few meaningful tasks and focus your energy on those.

### **5. Expect a range of emotions in children.**

It is difficult to predict how a child is going to react at homecoming. Small children in particular might be frightened, nervous, or anxious. Military homecomings are often accompanied by loud noises and unfamiliar faces. Because homecomings can vary in length and change unexpectedly, pack snacks, drinks, and small toys to keep your children occupied and happy.

### **6. Lean on your friends.**

Friends can help you overcome your pre-homecoming jitters, and many spouses recommend enlisting the aid of a friend for the homecoming event itself. Friends can be your photographers, keep you company, wrangle the kids, and be there in case of a delay.





## Relationships: Spouse/Partner, Child

### Homecoming day

You have likely prepped and primped. You have fresh vacuum lines on your carpet, your cars are detailed, and you have turned her cell phone back on. You have the perfect suit or dress and your children are a buzz of excited energy. A lot of time has passed and significant events have been missed. You have anticipated and imagined this day for a very long time. However, you may also have a pit in your stomach, or you may be nervous about how things will be in those first days together as a reunited family unit.

It is normal to feel nervous about homecoming. These feelings in no way imply that you are not excited to see your spouse. When planning for homecoming day, keep your plans and ideas simple and flexible. Your spouse might want to celebrate with family and friends, but he might want to go home to a quiet family meal. Avoid over-scheduling the first few days after the reunion.

*“I do not have external family visit on homecoming day because I want to give our family time to adjust.”*

*—Marine spouse*

## Getting to know each other again, the first months

The reunion period is a period of relearning. Both you and your partner have grown and changed as individuals while you were apart. You were both affected by your separation. Therefore, the task that lies ahead is to re-establish the lines of communication with each other.

*“You are basically getting an acquaintance back. When you don’t spend contact time with someone for a long time, you absolutely have to give each other the space to be strangers for a while. The love doesn’t change, but people do. The dynamics of the family change almost completely when the service member goes and it takes a long time to either go back to normal or create a new normal.”*

—Air Force spouse



The second important task is to relearn problem-solving skills as a family. It's during this time that you'll have to get to know one another again on a more personal and intimate level. You'll have to learn how to live together again—but bear in mind that it won't be exactly the same way it was before.

*“I learned that marriages are resilient. They do get damaged and broken, but if you work, you can put them back together. We were definitely broken for several months after he came home. He left one type of family and came home to a different one.”*

*—Air Force spouse*

There may be some disagreements at this time as both spouses and partners struggle with the changes inherent in their service member's return—particularly if there is parenting involved. The key to a smooth transition is patience, by both parties.

## Stress and the returning service member

How much stress returning military personnel experience may be affected in part by:

- The extent to which their duty was dangerous (even if they were only awaiting this danger)
- Death or serious injury in their military unit
- The possibility of exposure to chemical warfare or other weapons of mass destruction

- The length of time they spent overseas
- Exposure to dead and wounded (including enemy combatants and civilians)
- Past trauma that can be heightened by the stress of war
- The degree to which family dynamics have changed during their absence, such as a child's or spouse's increased dependency or independence

Families have been stressed, too. The families of deployed personnel have had their own set of problems during the conflict, such as:

- Fear for the deployed family member's safety
- Disruption of established patterns and routines
- Decreased income and increased financial worry
- Negative reactions from children to sudden changes in the family environment
- Need to develop new resilience skills, renew family relationships, make new friends, and join support groups
- Being overburdened by new roles and responsibilities

Many families will continue to have pressures during the homecoming period, including:

- Being second-guessed for decisions made during a member's absence during war
- Having conflict over new relationships, such as a new baby or new friends

- Experiencing shifts in decision making
- The fact that family dynamics can never return to what they were before deployment

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## Sorting out family roles

During the service member's absence, the family has likely shifted significantly in how it operates to compensate for that parent's absence. Many military families find they have trouble re-sorting the way household responsibilities are divided—who makes what decisions and who takes care of which household tasks.

*“I believe that the hardest, for me, is to relinquish the control over the family unit. After a year or more of depending on yourself for most things, it is hard to let that other person back. He had challenges with figuring out where he fit back in. He left as a husband and came back as a father and husband. We talked to each other and a therapist. Open communication is the key. Sometimes, fitting back together is harder than the actual deployment.”*

*—National Guard spouse*



*“For months at a time, everything is my responsibility. And then he returns and wants to help. But I have a hard time letting him since I have been doing it on my own for so long.”*

*—Air Force spouse*

You or your spouse may want to move quickly to get back to the way you had split those roles before the deployment, or to change the way those roles are divided now that you have had a chance to try a different way of splitting them. This re-sorting of responsibilities and any other small changes in routine can make either of you feel unwanted and unappreciated.

*“The hardest part about homecoming is relationship stress! After the last deployment I told my husband to act as a guest until told otherwise. This eliminated me expecting him to do things and it kept him from jumping in and taking over until he got a feel for our routine.”*

*—Air Force spouse*

It isn't easy to realign goals and responsibilities, but it starts with open communication. The home front spouse should discuss the multiple roles she juggled during the deployment, and family members should begin to redefine the new roles they'll be responsible for now that the service member has returned home.

Differences and problems can arise over children, too. Indeed, probably the single greatest area of adjustment

during post-deployment is felt in the area of parenting. Returning service members sometimes reassert their role as a parent by spoiling the children or by disciplining them too strictly.

For months, one spouse has been running the household and taking care of the children in the manner that works best for the family in the service member's absence. For the harmony of the family, it's important that the service member not return home expecting to automatically or suddenly resume the role he had when he left. Both parents should understand that this is a delicate transition period for everyone involved.

This is not to imply that the service member should forfeit his say in how things are done in the home; however, he should be prepared to be flexible and engage in a conversation with his spouse about why things are being done differently now. This takes time and ongoing open discussion. Being flexible and open-minded are key.

*“It’s always a challenge because routines change, kids change, we all change. But we typically just let it all work itself out. I will usually keep up a similar routine to what we had while he was deployed with the kids. So I will put them to bed (with their dad’s help) and take them to school and keep doing the things we were doing before ... just with Dad there, too. I have found that if we try to insert my husband into their routine in place of me, they get upset. So we just do everything together for a while. And*

*I also give my husband some space to adjust. I don't ask too much of him that first week or so, but he usually wants to step up and be helpful around the house anyway."*

*—National Guard spouse*

It can sometimes be a shock to the service member to see his child again after being gone for a year or more, particularly when the child is very young. It's also not unusual for the child to bond strongly with the spouse who stayed behind during the deployment. The service member shouldn't take it personally when small children, while happy to see him, are still strongly attached to Mom or want Mommy to do the things that Mommy did when Daddy was gone.

*"The kids have a hard time. They always want me to do things and don't ask their dad. For example, bedtime stories: I have read them stories since they were little and put them to bed. They still do not want Dad putting them to bed and they are now eight and ten years old."*

*—Navy spouse*

There will need to be a transition period for small children to get used to the deployed parent being home and to "loosen" their hold on the home parent. This is normal, and the last thing a child should do is feel guilty about this process. One thing that the returning service member can do is to join the home parent in some of the routines that he would like to eventually be able to do alone, such

as reading bedtime stories or taking the child to the park. Obviously, if the child is older, this may not be an issue.

Older children and service members will need to focus on rebuilding their relationships much in the same way that adult couples will. The difference is that in the adult relationships, the parties have an equal role in rebuilding the relationship; whereas here, the parent needs to take a lead in getting to know his child again by building new memories and showing the child that his return to the family unit is a positive development for the long term. In rebuilding the relationship, it is also important to allot special time the service member spends with each child.

Children should not be forced or rushed into attaching themselves to the returning service member. Just as it took time for them to adjust to the service member parent being gone, it's going to take time for them to adjust to the service member parent being home.

The at-home parent's main task is to communicate the challenges encountered while his or her service member was deployed. Each parent will benefit from allowing discussions about the difficulties and challenges of caretaking during deployment. Mutual respect and active listening, mentioned in previous sections, are key to enabling discussions related to the challenges of being a stay-at-home parent during the deployment.

*“Challenges we’ve had in the past included my remembering to include him back into the decision making and his finding where he fits into the little things again. For example, when my*

*husband came home last time he went to take the garbage out. Our twelve-year-old looked hurt and upset and said ‘Dad, that’s my job.’ ‘Okay buddy,’ my husband said and relinquished the bag. We had to talk, and I had to reassure him that he could still help me with dishes.”*

*—National Guard spouse*

### Ten tips for resiliency during homecoming:

- 1. Early in the process, identify people who can help—a friend, clergy, mental health professional, financial advisor—and seek help if needed.** Some of these sources can supply emotional support, while others can provide direct help with day-to-day problem solving. Resolve to be open about problems and work on resolving them together, either with family members or those professionals who can help.
- 2. Dismantle big problems into manageable small parts.** Then, attack and solve these parts as a means of rebuilding confidence. A step-by-step approach can eventually resolve the larger problem.
- 3. Be an active player, not a passive victim.** Social involvement through religious organizations, hobby groups, exercise clubs, social groups, etc., helps individuals rejoin the community.
- 4. Don’t put off solving problems.** Begin to work on problems immediately; inaction can reinforce the feeling that a problem is out of your control.

- 5. Don't seek solace in drugs or alcohol.** This not only fails to resolve the problems at hand, but creates new ones.
- 6. Recognize that family readjustment problems are normal.** Don't blame others for your distress, and don't blame yourself excessively.
- 7. Keep things in perspective.** Cynicism or excessive pessimism about life and the future can become self-fulfilling and have a negative impact on you and others. Keep things in perspective—not every problem is a catastrophe. Although it sounds simplistic, a positive outlook helps raise morale and increase resilience.
- 8. Recall how you met past challenges and use the same strategies to meet the stresses of homecoming.** By facing current problems with an eye to solutions, you are more likely to achieve a sense of progress, of “getting ahead” with life.
- 9. Realize that the stress of homecoming can magnify other daily stresses.** Make allowances for yourself and your family.
- 10. Accept as inevitable some setbacks in the return to “life as normal,” whether they are emotional, financial, physical, or job-related.** At the same time, be aware that the skills of resilience can help you bounce back.

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## Relationships: Parent

### Homecoming day

If your son or daughter is married, homecoming can be a particularly tricky time. Who should attend homecoming ceremonies is an active debate in military circles. Some think only immediate family (spouse and kids) should attend, and some argue to include extended family (including you, the parent, and any siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents); both sides of the debate can be convincing.

There is no “correct” answer. This is a day for your child and you need to respect her wishes. Some returning service members love having extended family (and even

neighbors) at homecoming ceremonies. They want the festive party atmosphere. On the other hand, many families need a few days to reunite, regroup, and have some alone time after a long separation. Keep the lines of communication open over the last month of deployment and don't get your feelings hurt if they want to keep homecoming a very small event. Take your cues from your son or daughter. You will get your chance to see them soon, and they will appreciate your patience and understanding.

If you do attend homecoming, be respectful of the immediate family unit. Give your service member and her spouse the first few minutes. If you have grandchildren, yield to them for the first hugs and kisses. Once they have had their moment, then approach and welcome your son or daughter home.



## Your role, the first few months

Parents of service members have a very important role to play during the reunion period. Like a spouse, parents are most likely to notice a change in their service member son or daughter.

*“The challenge is that time has not frozen on either side of the equation. He is expecting things to be exactly as he left them; we are expecting him to react to things in the same way. But time has moved on. Mom, Dad, and the family still support him 100 percent, but he is in a different place now and so are we.”*

*—Army parent*

For the first few months, it is not uncommon for a returning service member to experience sadness, irritability, hyper vigilance, trouble concentrating, or anxiety. This does not necessarily mean that your son or daughter has posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Your child could be suffering from a certain degree of combat stress and may be processing what happened to him or her while deployed.

The best thing you can do for your service member is to simply be there for her. Try to spend time together and check in regularly. Seek to get a sense of how your service member is doing over the weeks. Is she getting better or worse? If your service member continues to behave in an unusually withdrawn manner after several weeks, consider a face-to-face talk expressing your concern that she isn't

doing well. Ask if there is anything you can do to support her during her transition. Challenges with adjusting to the return home may be expected initially, but if concerns persist or become more severe over time, consider seeking professional help. This may be a period when the service members may be at risk for suicide or other psychological health concerns. If you feel this to be the case with your service member, offer to help seek professional counseling and appropriate treatment.

If you notice anything that appears to be a red flag, don't wait to find help. The document by the National Center for PTSD, entitled "Returning from the War Zone: A Guide for Families," is particularly instructive in this regard: [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov). Stay in contact with your service member's friends and find out how they think she's doing. They could have a perspective that you may be lacking. After all, this could just be part of your child's personal journey from the battlefield overseas to coming home.

**If you believe there is a crisis, call  
the Military Crisis line,  
1-800-273-8255, and press 1.  
The Military Crisis line is available  
around the clock, seven days  
per week.**

Additional resources to learn more about combat stress:

- **“Helping Families Understand Combat Stress”**  
[www.realwarriors.net](http://www.realwarriors.net)
- **Afterdeployment.org: Wellness Resources for the Military Community**  
[www.afterdeployment.org](http://www.afterdeployment.org)



## Relationships: Extended Family and Friends

You're probably anxious to see your service member as soon as possible after his return. It's important to allow for open-ended questions in order for your service member to feel that he's capable of deciding the right time to talk about his experiences. No doubt you, too, have endured your own hardships during the deployment. But it's equally important not to overwhelm the returning service member with excessive demands or elaborate plans right away. Let your service member gauge what trips or activities he's interested in. It's not uncommon for the service member to find himself experiencing some post-deployment combat stress. This is not the same as **posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** (which is discussed extensively in the reintegration chapter); rather, it's a period during which his emotional and physiological state adapts to the noncombat environment.

The most important part about this period is expressing your support of your service member, your desire—without pressure—to see him again, and your patience. Your time to catch up on all that you have missed while you were apart will come, although maybe not as quickly as you had hoped.

*“I’d worked with him for at least six years when he got orders for Iraq. So I kind of considered him a friend, not just a coworker. I even put together some office care packages to send him and checked in on his wife and daughter a couple of times. A bunch of us were really looking forward to him coming back to work. We threw him a welcome-back party and you could tell he was a little freaked out by it, like, all the commotion and people made him super uncomfortable. I kind of felt bad because I was just trying to let him know we missed him. He sort of kept to himself for a while after that. Finally, I asked him if I had upset him. He told me that ever since the war, he’s been kind of jumpy and weirded out when surrounded by a lot of people, but he was seeing someone at the VA about it. Man, I wish I knew that before I threw that party.”*

*—Civilian coworker*



## **Communication: Spouse/Partner**

### Homecoming

You want to head on a big family vacation and he wants to stay closer to home. Or he wants to throw a huge homecoming party and you want to have him all to yourself

for a few days. In order to have a happy homecoming, you need to discuss your plans with your spouse long before he steps off the plane and lands in your arms.

Make sure to discuss the basics about homecoming. Who does your service member want at the homecoming ceremony? How would he prefer the first few days to be? And then, once he's home, discuss the longer plans for visiting extended family, going on vacation, and the other things you have been daydreaming about. Most importantly: communicate and listen. This adjustment period can feel like a battle at times. The honeymoon period after homecoming will wear off and the months following can be a challenging time for a marriage.

*“You have to take it slow when they first get home. You can’t just jump back into your life before they were deployed. You have to remember they have probably seen and done things they may or may not want to talk about. I try to keep in my regular routine, but also, just like before deployment, we try to spend time together going out to dinner to kind of get to know each other again.”*

—Navy spouse

## The first months

Both partners have endured hardships during the deployment—albeit under different circumstances—and both partners have grown and changed while apart. This

reunion is very much a “re-introduction” to one another as individuals. Communication is especially vital during this period as you learn to respect and appreciate the sacrifices that were made during the deployment.

This doesn’t mean that now is the time to argue about “who had it worse”; instead, this is the time to recognize that although it was a long journey apart, it was only part of your journey together.

Communication is critical right now, but communication can be used as a weapon or a tool. Focus on making your communication as non-confrontational as possible, which can be easier said than done during a stressful transition period.

You should both find ways to focus on what you love about one another and about being together again. One day, it may occur to you that folding his laundry isn’t annoying, it’s reassuring. Tell your service member that. If you’re doing the dishes or walking the dog with the kids and realize how



much you missed that, tell your spouse or partner or child. No matter how mundane your thoughts may seem, if they make you happy, share them with each other. Remember, you're together now, so now you can! If tensions seem to be getting the best of your relationship, seek outside assistance. Military OneSource ([www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com)) will provide a referral to a marriage counselor for at least twelve free sessions. The Military and Family Life Counseling Program (MFLC Program) is also well positioned to support couples seeking marital counseling. Many installations have MFLCs, which can be found in the installation directory. An overview of the MFLC, as well as links to its various programs, can be found at [www.mhngs.com](http://www.mhngs.com) or 1-866-966-1020. There is also VA Caregiver Support, which has information available at [www.caregiver.va.gov](http://www.caregiver.va.gov).



## Communication: Child

Make time for the family to talk together, including your child, if appropriate. The important goal is to re-establish easy rapport and communication with each child in the family. This may mean spending individual quality time to allow your child to express her feelings about the parent's deployment. Encourage your child to talk about how she feels about the deployed parent coming home and the changes that have occurred as a result. If your child seems reluctant to discuss this, or seems to be saying everything is great but her behavior at school or home changes, consider seeking outside help, such as a child development specialist or a child therapist. In the meantime, encourage your child to find ways to express herself through writing, art, or other forms of self-expression.

It's helpful for the deployed parent to spend quality time reconnecting with the child through age-appropriate, constructive activities, such as sports and dance. This enables the child to have increased self-esteem, knowing that the parent is highly interested in observing and participating in what the child feels is important to her. Again, parents are encouraged to spend time with each child in order to promote the reconnection of the parent-child relationship.

In many ways, the child has shown a sense of resiliency during this deployment. The parent who was deployed will benefit from asking his child about the ways in which she has learned to overcome the difficulties of the deployment. These conversations will enable the parent to acknowledge the child's positive assets and to encourage further growth of those assets for a better future.

## Fighting in front of children

Research has shown that couples who fight in front of their children, or even those who ignore each other, foster negative thoughts and distress in their children about marriage and family life.

This message is consistent with other research, indicating that there are harmful effects to children when parents fight in front of them. As parents, you and your partner have an obligation to address critical issues that are important to you as a couple so that your own relationship can be healthy and effective. However, you both also have an obligation to your children to be respectful to each other when discussing things in their presence.

There are times when it is appropriate to have disagreements in front of your children. Wrestling through minor issues and demonstrating to your children that you can resolve things together provides healthy modeling for them. In these circumstances, it is critical that you are respectful of each other and show your children that even though you may disagree about something, you still love each other and can work together as a team.

If you know that your conversation is likely to be heated or intense in any way, it's best to figure out a way to have the discussion away from your children. There are several strategies to consider:

1. Have conversations when the children are asleep and in a place where they will not be awakened if the discussion increases in volume.
2. Select a time each week that is devoted to discussing difficult issues in the relationship.
3. If there is a sense of urgency about having a difficult conversation, see if there is a friend or relative available to watch your children for a while so that you and your partner can talk in private.

Regardless of the circumstances, it is important that you and your partner recognize your personal signs that indicate either of you are “emotionally flooded” so that you can “take a break” and calm down before things get out of hand.



## **Communication: Parent**

As a parent, you may have to resist the urge to smother



your service member. One can only imagine your relief and joy at her safe return. Let her know how proud you are and that she has an open invitation to talk to you whenever she has the desire to. Like everything else, don't force things—if you let the relationship bounce back naturally, it will.

*“I focus on patience and letting my children talk about deployment when they are ready. I’m always there, no matter what time of day or night. Relearn who your child is after deployment. Love them no matter what.”*

—Army parent



## Communication: Extended Family and Friends

Your service member has gone through a great deal since she's been deployed, and you've also been through a lot as you've coped with her absence. Because you both have a lot to catch up on after being apart for so long, it's not uncommon for things to be a bit awkward at first. Your service member may not feel like talking about what she experienced while in combat. Let her know that you're there for her and willing to listen if she does want to talk.

*“She and I have been best friends for about twelve years; we’ve been there for each other’s weddings, our babies being born, marital troubles, everything. But when she got deployed, it was a whole new ball of wax. I tried to be there*

*for her and send her care packages and email her, but there was just such a disconnect between us. I couldn't even fathom what she was going through or what she was doing. Now that she's been home for two months, everything is just different. She's different. Maybe I'm different. I really miss the way things were. I wonder if we'll ever have the close relationship we once did, but I'm just trying to be there for her. Maybe it will just take some time and patience to get that closeness back. I hope so."*

*—Friend of service member*



## **Self-Care: Spouse/Partner**

The best thing you can do for your relationship is to make time for each other. As in the pre-deployment period, this can be as simple as setting aside a few hours for yourselves together once a week. If you need to get a babysitter, do so. Make an effort to foster intimacy and closeness.

*"I remember when he got back from Iraq. The first few times, I had to drag him out for our dates. He would sit at the table and look at the television in the restaurant and drink his beer. Next thing you know, though, he starts saying, 'Hey, what day is it? Aren't we supposed to be going out tonight?' And we started talking and having a really good time on those dates."*

*—Marine Corps spouse*

As a spouse, you may find yourself experiencing several emotions, from relief to gratitude to irritation. You were left for a long time and forced to become very independent. Some spouses report moments of frustration at the loss of privacy or independence that they didn't even know they wanted before their service member left. At the same time, you may feel guilty for feeling that way. Through it all, however, you are likely relieved that your service member is alive, safe, and home.

Prior to the deployment, there was a whirlwind of emotions to contend with. At some point during the deployment, your emotions probably normalized as you got into a routine with your day-to-day life and adjusted to your service member being gone. Now that he's back, the whirlwind has begun again. Your service member is going through a lot as well. Try to be patient with him and with yourself.

***“Try to be understanding and patient, and also try to remember you still need alone time.”***

***—Army spouse***

Now is a good time to turn to your support network again. Even though your service member is home, he's still not in a position to be your “sounding board.” As you both navigate through this transition period, continue to journal, talk to trusted friends, and, as much as you can, maintain your routine, including your thirty minutes of “me” time every day.

***“I talk a lot with other spouses going through the same readjustment. We all know it is temporary but it helps to vent.”***

***—Navy spouse***

It's important to continue the individual activities that brought personal rewards, such as the goals you may have set around furthering your education or pursuing your hobbies. Communicate your newly developed personal strengths to your service member, which will enable you to be acknowledged for your coping skills and self-growth.

*“I still continue to journal and exercise even though he is back.”*

*—Army spouse*



## Self-Care: Child

As in the pre-deployment period, this is another time when you want to focus on creating positive memories for your family. It is time to include the deployed parent in fun activities so that the child can feel that the family is safe and intact. Come together as a family and create new memories now that your service member is home again. These do not have to be extravagant plans: you can make weekend rituals of going to the park to let the children play, or go for a walk every night after dinner. Find something that you all enjoy and just do it. This is also a great way for the children to get to know their service member parent again.



## Self-Care: Parent

Just because your service member son or daughter made it home doesn't mean you should stop taking care of yourself. Whatever self-care activities you worked into your daily activities, keep doing them. This period of readjustment can be as hard on the family as it is on the service member. War is never easy, and it doesn't end when the service member comes home. Now the healing for the service member begins, and he is going to need all the support he can get from his family and friends. Stay rested, healthy, and focused.



## Self-Care: Extended Family and Friends

There can be no doubt that you're relieved and elated that your service member is finally home. However, this is not the end of your deployment journey. The service member and others who love him are still in the deployment cycle, and it can take as long as six months for the service member to fully reintegrate back into civilian life. Just as your patience was required in the pre-deployment and deployment phases, it will be required in the post-deployment phase as well.

That's why you have to continue to take care of yourself. If you started any daily self-care exercises or rituals, continue them now.

Make yourself available to your service member, but don't take it personally if it seems like it's taking a while for him to "return to normal." At first, your service member may try to spend time with members of his unit, if possible; or, if he's married, with his spouse or children. This doesn't mean that you're not important to him. It's just a natural part of the reintegration process, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. By keeping the lines of communication open between you and your service member, you'll find that he'll reconnect with you sooner rather than later.

# REINTEGRATION



## Introduction

**Reintegration is a process—not an event—in which service members return to their homes or communities to resume their lives following deployment.** Usually accompanied by an initial whirlwind of new developments and followed by a series of smaller, less obvious changes, reintegration encompasses the physical, mental, social, and spiritual transitions shared between service members and partners, children, parents, extended family, coworkers, friends, neighbors, and the larger civilian community. In the case where the service member separates from military service and/or suffers from an illness or injury, it also is a time when the military may

take a role in supporting your service member's transition.

While it is common to think of homecoming as the most important component of reintegration, it is, in fact, just one small piece of the post-deployment reintegration experience.

As your service member reunites with family and friends, the reintegration period is often joyful and exciting, but it also can be a time associated with increased tension and stress. For some, reintegration is short and uneventful; for others, it is lengthy and complicated. Like so many other life-altering events—such as a new job, marriage, or birth of a child—reintegration is a time of significant and sometimes jarring change for all those involved.

This chapter explores common reintegration experiences by detailing the transition back home, including an in-depth exploration of common health concerns and the tools and resources to help you along the way. It also offers specific information for those continuing their military service and those reintegrating into the civilian lifestyle.

Regardless of your circumstances, you can expect the reintegration transition to be difficult at times. Usually, these setbacks are only temporary, and ideally, this period—both the joys and the challenges—will give you and your family an opportunity to reflect on what is working well in your relationships and your life, and what could work even better. Reintegration is not easy, but you, your service member, children, family, and friends will get through it together.



## Relationships: Spouse/Partner

You and your partner both will undoubtedly change and grow over the course of a deployment. Partners may become more independent as they take on additional household roles. Service members may lose sight of what it means to lead a civilian home life. You both will engage in your relationship somewhat differently, now influenced by the experience of your time apart. With these changes, and many others, in mind, you and your partner will need to work hand-in-hand to re-establish your relationship after a deployment.

### Redefining roles and responsibilities

Once the excitement of homecoming is over, you and your service member must resume the regularities of daily life by working together to establish a routine that suits everyone. Sometimes this routine falls into place naturally. More often, both partners will need to actively compromise to successfully adapt to being back together.

Many military spouses and returning service members note that one of the most difficult aspects of the reintegration process is figuring out the “nuts and bolts” of living together again after a separation. The partner at home most likely adopted additional household responsibilities. With this new independence, you may even be reluctant to give up these new roles when your service member returns. On the other hand, there are probably also responsibilities you are more than ready to hand off to your returning partner. Meanwhile,

your returning service member may be eager to return to the roles they held prior to deployment—often responsibilities that the at-home partner has now successfully adopted.

*“Reintegration into the family is hard. We are a self-sufficient little machine by the time that he comes home, and he wants to change things or go back to being in charge. I try to remember that he belongs here and not away. I also remind him that he has been gone for a long time and it will take just as much time to reintegrate as it took for us to become stable on our own.”*

*—Army spouse*

Partners must work together to navigate and balance the responsibilities of daily life after deployment. Both you and your spouse will naturally have expectations about post-deployment home life, and it can be disappointing—even frustrating—when reality does not match these expectations. Starting this conversation during deployment, perhaps by keeping the service member involved in daily household decisions, can help ease these conversations, but be prepared to be flexible and to confront any disagreements, and communicate your expectations calmly and respectfully. Many tasks and responsibilities will need to be renegotiated, and some things may be different than they were before the deployment.

Talk openly and assertively about your expectations, wishes, and feelings. This will help to ensure that your partner knows what you need, when you need help, and what is and is not working.

Regardless, both spouses need to be acknowledged by one another. Whether you were at home or deployed, everyone likes to be recognized when they have accomplished something difficult. Often, just by recognizing one another's hardships (and successes), couples are able to move past their different viewpoints and establish equilibrium.

*“When you have been independent, running things the way you want them run, it is hard when our soldiers get home. It can feel like there is a tornado sitting in the midst of a perfectly run, well-oiled machine. It is important to give them tasks, such as taking out the trash or giving the kids a bath; they need to feel like they are more than just a paycheck. This is easier said than done. It can be hard to give up some of that independence, but it is important to make him feel like he has a role to play besides ‘soldier’ in our family.”*

—Army spouse

## Working through emotions

Following the initial excitement of the reunion, you and your returning service member will experience a wide range of emotions. This is normal. You may feel resentful for being left alone, frustrated at having to shoulder additional responsibilities even after your service member has returned, or defensive at any criticism about how you ran the household. Your service member may feel a mixture of being relieved, restless, and overwhelmed upon return.

Don't be surprised if you and your spouse sometimes argue as you work through your feelings. Try not to overreact to these feelings or react defensively if your spouse questions you about decisions made while he was away. Instead, remain calm, discuss your decisions, and use these conversations to grow as a family. Be prepared to be flexible and listen to what your spouse needs and how he feels. If you are frustrated, angry, or disappointed, try to talk about it. Expressing feelings is difficult, but talking about your feelings will bring you closer together and help you to build a relationship that is even stronger than when he left.

## Re-establishing intimacy

It is common for both partners to feel anxious about being back together again. Neither partner is sure of what to expect. You are not alone if you feel awkward during this time; resuming your relationship after a deployment is challenging.

Regaining the same emotional intimacy you had before the deployment will take time and patience. In some ways, you

may feel like you need to get to know each other all over again. The best way to redevelop closeness is to talk—and to listen. Make the effort to talk about your feelings with one another, building on the conversations you’ve had during pre-deployment and deployment, but don’t feel like you have to spend every minute together. Both partners may need “alone time” or space from one another.

**Re-establishing sexual intimacy can be particularly challenging.** Some people may need to be “courted” or “wooed” before they are ready to resume a sexual relationship. Rekindling intimacy, overall, is challenging not only because of the physical distance you endured, but because of the emotional distance as well. Remember what you loved about the other person. Tell your partner what you appreciate about them and why you need them. Let them know how you are feeling. Chances are both you and your spouse are working through some of the same emotions.



## Relationships: Child

Children may feel some of the same emotions you and your spouse feel during the reintegration period. Just like adults, children feel anxiety, worry, anger, happiness, excitement, and/or confusion. On the one hand, children often will not understand how a parent could have left them if they truly love them. On the other hand, children are often extraordinarily happy to see Mommy or Daddy when they return. Conflicting feelings can be confusing for a child. How children experience and express these feelings is largely dependent on the child’s age and personality, but parents also can play a critical role.

*“While it is easy and almost seems natural to drop everything for the deployed parent’s return, it can be really overwhelming for the child if everything changes all at once. If routines and pace stay the same, the children and the deployed parent can work back into each other’s lives in a more gradual and less overwhelming manner.”*

*—Coast Guard spouse*

Children will express different feelings at different times while experiencing this range of emotions. One moment, she will be giddy with excitement. The next, she will be angry or resentful at the rapid, constant life changes. As a parent, you can help your child describe what she is feeling, and this will often help her to work through her emotions.



**The chart below describes possible emotional reactions from children during the reintegration period, along with suggested tips for parents:**

Child's Age	Possible Reaction	Tips for Parents
<b>Infants and small children (ages zero to three)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not remember the returning parent and/or may be uncomfortable around their parent, as if he were a stranger (normally diminishes after a few weeks)</li> <li>• May cry, fuss, and pull away from the returning parent or be clingy with the parent who was at home</li> <li>• May regress or act younger than their actual age</li> <li>• May act out or misbehave to get attention, or be especially demanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spend time with your child.</li> <li>• Be an active parent: help with day-to-day activities (e.g., reading, playing blocks, etc.).</li> <li>• Maintain consistent discipline and expectations.</li> </ul>
<b>(ages four to twelve)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be overly clingy and affectionate, often because they are afraid the service member will leave again</li> <li>• May talk constantly to let the returning parent know what happened while he was away</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make future plans.</li> <li>• Spend quality time together as a family (e.g., go to the park, go for a walk, do something your child wants to do).</li> <li>• When you leave, reassure your child you will be back together soon.</li> <li>• Stay involved and interested in your child's activities.</li> </ul>
<b>Teenagers (ages thirteen+)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be distant, angry, or even hurtful, accusing the returning service member of abandonment</li> <li>• May express that they are "too old for this" and be unwilling to change plans or spend time with the returning parent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resist the urge to make up for leaving by buying expensive gifts; instead, give your child time with you.</li> <li>• Try not to disrupt your teen's schedule too often; respect that your teen has activities with friends that are important to him.</li> <li>• Don't take your child's reaction personally (this won't be easy).</li> <li>• Recognize that your child has suffered because of his service member's absence, even though he wasn't the one to volunteer for service.</li> <li>• Remind your teenager that all families, military or not, have hardships that children must endure.</li> </ul>



## Relationships: Parent

Parents of deployed service members play a unique role in the reintegration process. The positive support of a parent can help a service member adjust to being home. If you are the parent to a single service member, you may be her primary source of support and in a unique position to know how she is doing emotionally and physically. If your service member has a partner or family, your role may be less involved. Be prepared that his relationship with you may not be the most immediate priority.

Most service members adapt very well to life after deployment, but it is best to trust your instinct and seek help if you think there is a problem. In many cases, your child will have seen or experienced something that has changed him, and he may be reluctant, embarrassed, or scared to ask for help. If you observe or suspect behavior that concerns you—such as depression, mood changes, substance abuse, suicidal threats or behavior, or social withdrawal—enlist the help of others (e.g., counselors, commanders, trusted peers, or clergy). Keep in mind, even if you have a close relationship with your child, even adult children do not always tell their parents when they are having difficulties.

**Let your child know you care about her and discuss your concerns with her openly.**



Even in a relatively smooth reintegration transition, you will need to allow your son or daughter time to settle into his or her post-deployment lives while making sure he or she knows that you want to be a part of the reintegration process. Give your service member space, especially if she has a family of her own. Even though you are still a parent, your service member is no longer a child. If your child is in a relationship, ask everyone how and when you can be most helpful, as every family will need a different amount of time to readjust following a deployment. Often, parents of service members with children of their own can offer to help by providing child care to enable the couple to have uninterrupted time together.

Keep lines of communication open, but allow your service member to discuss the deployment experience on the terms that she is comfortable with. Even if your child does not share all of her experiences with you, she still loves and cares for you.



## Relationships: Extended Family and Friends

Family members and friends can make the reintegration transition smoother in a variety of ways. Here are some tips:

- **Ask your service member if she wants to talk about her experiences.** If she doesn't want to talk, don't push. Let her know you care about what happened, that you're willing to listen without judging, and that you want to support her.

- **Be patient. Returning service members may need a period to readjust to civilian life.** Have patience with yourself and those around you while going through this transition.
- **Don't expect your returning service member to be exactly as he was before he left.**
- **If a service member seems to be having trouble coping or if you see signs of stress or inappropriate behaviors, seek professional help.**
- **Encourage returnees to connect with other returning service members through local meetings, support groups, or the Internet.**
- **Don't raise sensitive issues if you or a loved one is tired, hungry, or intoxicated.** Wait. Mornings are usually better than evenings for emotional topics, and weekends are better than weekdays. However, regardless of the time of day, focus on waiting to address sensitive issues until the situation is calm.
- **When communicating, use "I" statements, such as "I feel hurt when you" or "I liked it when you," whenever possible.**
- **When communicating, avoid "all-or-nothing" thinking and expressions, such as "You always" or "You never."**





## Communication: Spouse/Partner

Communication is the key to adapting to the “new normal” after a deployment. Couples may feel like strangers around each other as they readjust to life together. Talk to your partner as much as possible about how it feels readjusting to having him back, and actively listen to what it is like for him as well. If possible, make the time to talk by avoiding a busy schedule, particularly at first.

Meanwhile, as your partner transitions to life back at home, remember that for a significant amount of time he depended on his unit for emotional support. He also spent very little time alone and probably has not had many opportunities to process his experiences internally. It may take time for him to readjust to you as his primary outlet and support system.

*“I try to remember that he just spent the past year with his battle buddies and that he will continue to want to spend time with them when he gets home. I remind myself that it doesn’t mean that he didn’t miss me; he just came to rely on those individuals during that time. I try to allow him his alone time (even though it can be hard sometimes since I just spent so much time alone), but I have to remember that he’s had no time to himself for a year.”*

—Army spouse

As you communicate about the time spent apart during the deployment, be aware that there may be topics your service member does not want to discuss. She may have seen and experienced things she is reluctant to talk about. Don't force her to reveal her feelings. Give her time to work through them.

*“Be patient. They have to decompress, power down in their own way. Just make them aware that you are there for them whenever they need, but give them time and space to readjust. Don't ask questions. When they are ready to talk about what happened, they will let you know. They may not want to talk about something, and it has to be OK for them not to share.”*

*—Army spouse*

If the struggle to reconnect seems too great, don't be afraid to seek outside resources for help. Letting problems linger can cause more damage to your relationship in the long run. Counseling services may be available to you through your medical service provider (many now have marriage and family clinics as part of their outpatient services), your military family support center (e.g., Navy Fleet and Family Support, Army Community Support), clergy at your military installation, or Veterans Administration Readjustment Counseling Centers ([www.va.gov/racs](http://www.va.gov/racs)).

*“We ended up in marriage counseling because I didn't feel like my husband was the same, even months after he returned. We met with the*

*chaplain and he set up meetings with us and sent us on marriage and family retreats. That was very helpful!”*

*—Air Force spouse*



## **Communication: Child**

Pay close attention to how you are communicating with your children during reintegration, both verbally and with your actions. Children usually follow cues from their parents. If you and your spouse are coping well with the reintegration, your children likely will as well.

You and your partner can take particular steps to help your child. Ask him how he feels at different stages in the reintegration period, and feel free to be honest (depending on age of the child) with him about how you are feeling as well. Keep routines consistent even upon return of your service member; this is comforting to most children. Also, delay changing household rules; this communicates a sense of stability, but also communicate to your spouse about any rules that may have changed while he was away.

Below are some tips to help your returning service member reunite with his children after a deployment. Use these tips as a guide to help your children adjust:

- Go slowly. Adapt to the rules and routines already in place.
- Provide extra attention, care, and physical closeness.
- Understand that children may be angry.



- Let the child set the pace for getting to know you again.
- Learn from how your spouse managed the children while you were away.
- Be available to your child, both with time and with your emotions.
- Delay making changes in rules and routines for a few weeks.
- Plan for upcoming events.
- Expect that the family will not be the same as before you left; everyone has changed.
- Focus on successes with your children; limit your criticisms.
- Encourage children to tell you about what happened during the separation. Allow children to talk about how they feel, accept their feelings, and don't tell them they should not feel a certain way.
- Make individual time for each child.

Tips adapted from [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov).

## Additional resources

The following links, as well as a number of books in this handbook's **resources chapter**, are useful tools for helping children cope with reintegration:

- **Real Warriors**

**[www.realwarriors.net](http://www.realwarriors.net)**

The Real Warriors Campaign promotes the processes of building resilience, facilitating recovery, and supporting reintegration of returning service members.

- **American Academy of Pediatrics**

[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

Military pediatricians and professionals serving youth, working to attain optimal physical, mental, and social health and well-being for all military-dependent infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

- **American Psychological Association**

[www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)

The American Psychological Association has several resources for parents, teachers, and military children to help them develop resilience during the reintegration period.



## **Communication: Parent**

As a parent, it is natural to want to reconnect quickly with your child who has returned home from deployment. You probably spent many months unable to communicate on a regular basis, and meanwhile were worried about his safety. Take your cues from your service member. Your service member may feel pressured by many requests for time and attention from family, friends, and others. He or she will need time to adjust. Be available to talk, but don't force it if your child is not ready. Be patient with the changes you may see in your child and any changes in the way you now communicate with one another.

*“A parent needs to realize that her child is now 100 percent independent and used to doing his own thing. He needs love, a hearing ear to vent to, and room to keep growing.”*

*—Army parent*

It may take time to reconnect and rediscover how you will relate to each other in the long term as the deployment may have changed your child. She may not want to reveal some of her experiences with you, especially if she is returning from a combat deployment. If you notice changes in your service member's health or demeanor that do not ebb in the first weeks or months after returning home, encourage her to seek professional help and/or support from peers. It is equally important that you seek help for yourself if you are having trouble adjusting to the changes you have observed in your child.



## **Communication: Extended Family and Friends**

When service members return from deployment, they are often greeted by family and friends who are eager to see them after their time away. You may be relieved that your service member returned safely and curious about what she did while he was deployed. You may also be surprised to find that the person who returned from deployment is not exactly the same as the person who left. Be patient and give both your service member and yourself time to adjust to these changes.

**Friends and family are eager to provide help and support when a service member returns. Sometimes they can help the most simply by being patient.**

While the homecoming period may be a happy time, it can also be stressful. Remember, service members with partners or children will want one-on-one time to be together, and service members may need some time alone. You can best show your support by allowing your service member time and by recognizing that reintegration is not over once your service member returns.

Reintegration is a different experience for each service member and her family. Returning to a sense of normalcy will not happen immediately and will likely take effort. You can ease your service member's transition by continuing to offer encouragement and support after the initial homecoming. In fact, research shows that service members who have positive social support tend to "bounce back" more quickly after deployments compared to those who do not. Reach out to your service member and her family to see what would be most helpful. Take your cues from the family; some may want space, and others will welcome visits or help from extended family and friends during the reintegration. Similarly, while some returning service members will want to talk about their experiences right away, others will not.

Your service member very likely needs social support, but he may not necessarily feel like being social just after he returns from deployment. Ideally, he will seek out old routines, activities, and relationships, but most likely not right away. Remember, reintegration is not a singular event, but a process that varies by individual and family.





## Self-Care: Spouse/Partner, Child, Parent

In the excitement of the return home, it is common for the spouses and parents to remain primarily focused on the transition and well-being of the service member. However, particularly after the initial homecoming, it is important for partners to continue to pay attention to their own needs as the process of reintegration unfolds.

*“I didn’t really do anything to take care of myself when he came home from the last deployment, and I think it negatively affected our reintegration.”*

*—Air Force spouse*

Most of us understand—and assume—that deployment is a stressful time. However, as counter-intuitive as it sounds, many military families note that reintegration is even more stressful than deployment.

Rather than waiting until something is wrong, it is extremely important to proactively take care of yourself, as some of the support networks you utilized during deployment may quickly fall away once your service member returns. For some families, the perception that the stress of reintegration ends with homecoming limits the amount of outside support you receive during this period. Friends and family members who were previously supportive during the deployment may reduce contact after a homecoming in an effort to give couples and families their space. In respecting

your need for privacy, friends and family may not realize you need or want their support.

**You may need to reach out to other people to let them know when you need support.**

Even after your service member returns, pay attention to how you are feeling. Consider continuing with the activities and support systems you put in place while your partner was deployed. Continue to exercise, journal, and connect with your support network. If you didn't do these things during deployment, it's not too late to start.

Many spouses also find it helpful to talk to other spouses who have gone through reintegration or who are experiencing it at the same time. Often it is reassuring to have a "reality check" and know that your feelings are normal.

*"It's almost just as difficult for me to get used to him being back home. You get into a routine and it can be hard to change all of that. I still continue to journal and exercise even though he is back."*

*—Army spouse*

At the same time, both you and your service member may need to take time for yourselves. It is more than okay if you do not want to spend every hour of every day together, or with your children. Taking the time for self-care allows each person the opportunity to reflect, relax, and recharge.

*“I give him space and he does the same for me. He might take the kids for a bit so I can go for a walk or I give him time to do something he would like to do and I take the kids for a while.”*

*—Army spouse*

Additionally, consider including your spouse in your self-care practices. Alleviating stress can become a joint effort in moving toward finding your new life together. Integrating your spouse into your activities and hobbies is also a great way to reconnect with your partner without disrupting your routines.

*“I continue to spend time with my military spouse friends, and I cook for my husband (he always enjoying my cooking and baking). I continue along with the schedule I held while he was gone and allow my husband to integrate himself into it as he feels comfortable.”*

*—Army spouse*



## **Self-Care: Extended Friends and Family**

Friends and family members should take care to understand and note feelings about the return of your service member—such as relief, concern, excitement, and anxiety—and share that with him. Meanwhile, continue to use the same self-care exercise and routines you utilized during deployment.



## Being Informed: Spouse/Partner, Parent, Extended Family and Friends

If the challenges of deployment were not enough, reintegration offers a new, diverse array of potential challenges to overcome. Your service member will return inevitably changed by his time away, and with the support of family, friends, and community, you will overcome these challenges together.

However, staying informed about the short-term and long-term effects of deployment is the key to your service member's successful future. By understanding the mental, emotional, and physical stresses she faced during her deployment, you are more likely to be able to help her with any potential mental, emotional, or physical challenge she faces back at home. When a loved one suffers from mental illness or physical injury, friends, family, and children also share in her pain and stress.

*“I try to make myself understand where he just came from. It’s not an easy adjustment for anyone.”*

*—Army spouse*

*“Readjusting is not as easy as I would have hoped. Deployments have brought out parts of his childhood that he never dealt with. All we can do is support him—but it is not easy. There have*

*been times that I would have loved to throw the towel in, but giving up is just not the way we handle things.”*

*—Army spouse*

Mental and physical health issues can be some of the greatest challenges a returning service member and his family face. In the sections that follow, we address some of the most common issues and provide links to resources related to those issues. Meanwhile, if you have an injured loved one, the **caregiving chapter** of the handbook will provide more detail about how to best manage the care your service member may need.



## **Being Informed: Child**

Even children who do not seem particularly impacted by your service member's deployment may be suddenly affected by his return. A child's reaction to a returning parent is, in part, dependent on the child's age. However, regardless of age, your child will need both time to adjust and your close attention and care. Each child, family, and reintegration situation is different, and it is important to be sensitive to each individual's unique needs.

Be particularly mindful of changes in your child's personality at home or at school, especially those that could indicate signs of depression or anxiety that are not being verbally expressed. Children often show feelings through behavior rather than words. If you notice changes that are problematic, begin by speaking with a teacher or counselor at school. You can also create a safe space



at home for her to express her feelings. Keep the lines of communication open.

If you need additional support, many families consult a family or child therapist. Your primary care doctor or **Military OneSource** (1-800-342-9647) is a good place to start if you need a referral to a specialist.



*“Having my husband back has been a big adjustment for the kids. My son potty trained himself at two and a half after finding some underwear I had purchased for him. A year and a half later, about two weeks after my husband returned from a twelve-month deployment to Afghanistan, my son decided the toilet was no longer for him. It took nearly a year for him to reconsider that decision. I’m no expert, but I’m guessing that Dad’s return had something to do with my son’s reluctance to use the toilet. That’s just one very tangible example.”*

—Army spouse



## Health after Deployment

In most cases, ensuring post-deployment health is similar to maintaining health prior to and during deployment. Strategies for maintaining a healthy lifestyle following deployment include the usual suspects: exercise, a healthy diet, enough sleep, staying away from drugs, responsible alcohol consumption, making time for the joys in life, and setting realistic goals.

However, in some cases, deployment can lead to challenging long-term health concerns that impact both the individual and her family and require either significant medical care, mental health care, or both. Some families do face serious and life-altering health concerns after a deployment. The [caregiving chapter](#) that follows

addresses some of these issues as they pertain to the family or loved one who unexpectedly becomes a caregiver.

Quite often, it is those closest to the service member who first notice the symptoms of an undiagnosed mental health problem, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or an untreated health problem, such as mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI). In addition to PTSD and mTBI, there are a number of behavioral health concerns that commonly impact returning service members, including posttraumatic stress (PTS), depression, pain, substance abuse, and sleep problems.

*“My husband is very angry. He doesn’t go out and doesn’t want to be around people ... (us included, many times). He heavily drinks for months when he returns. He has nightmares and has even gotten physical in his sleep. He wakes with the bed soaking wet with sweat from his nightmares. He doesn’t handle the kids well, not even the normal noise kids make when playing happily. Counselors say they need time to readjust. It’s been over three years since the last deployment. In some areas he has readjusted and in others he hasn’t. PTSD crops back up just when you think ‘wow, he’s his old self again.’ I cater a great deal to pacify him and try to not ‘set him off.’ I learn his triggers and try to diffuse things before they hit.”*

*—Army spouse*

Ideally, if your service member is having problems that are not getting better, he will receive a thorough evaluation for a variety of possible conditions. For effective treatment and accurate diagnosis, your service member first needs a thorough assessment. However, due to stigma, embarrassment, denial, stubbornness, or pride, service members are often reluctant to seek care. These factors may also influence whether his family will seek help for themselves.

Below we will briefly discuss several behavioral health concerns that most frequently impact service members, veterans, and their families. This handbook will briefly describe each issue and provide additional resources to access the most updated and comprehensive information.



## **Sleep Problems**

Sleep problems, especially insomnia (difficulty falling or staying asleep), are very common among service members during and after deployments. The good news is that support is available and these problems are often very easily treated. In some cases it may be necessary to see a health provider and get a referral for a comprehensive sleep study that involves spending the night at a sleep clinic. Other interventions might include sleep monitoring or the use of a sleep log or sleep diary, practicing good sleep hygiene, and using relaxation techniques such as deep breathing.

Sleep problems also can accompany other disorders—such as PTSD—when a person has difficulty falling asleep to avoid terrifying nightmares. Such sleep problems should be treated at the same time.



*“The insomnia and night terrors are some of what I remember from my husband’s last deployment. He handled them himself; I just always reminded him he was safe at home with family. I always let him know how much he is loved and left myself open for him to come to me. He saw my willingness to help. I tried not to push him before he was ready.”*

*—Army spouse*

## Resources

- **Afterdeployment.org**  
[www.afterdeployment.org](http://www.afterdeployment.org)  
Offers an online sleep assessment, a printable sleep

log to track sleep over time, and resources to help you if your sleep continues to be a problem.

- **The VA**

[www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov)

Offers information about sleep problems related to PTSD.

- **The World Sleep Foundation**

[www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org)

Offers information about finding a provider qualified to offer evidence-based treatment for insomnia.



## Pain

### Understanding pain

Pain is the number one cause of disability in returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. In a culture that values strength and determination, and relies on persistence under adversity, service members or veterans may view reporting pain as a sign of weakness or an inability to perform expected duties. When left untreated or undertreated, chronic pain can impact not only the person who suffers but also family members, other loved ones, or caregivers.

Chronic pain symptoms can co-occur with other problems including depression, PTSD, mTBI, and substance abuse. Managing pain in service members and veterans with multiple conditions may be complicated and the symptoms of each condition may overlap, affecting medication management as well as overall treatment (depression, PTSD, and mTBI are discussed below).

When more than one condition occurs at the same time, an individual's experience of each condition may be intensified. It is critical that service members who suffer from more than one condition have both conditions treated together, and treatment plans for multiple conditions should incorporate efforts to relieve associated pain.

## Consequences of pain

Untreated pain can have serious physiological, psychological, and social consequences, which may include:

- Weakened immune system and slower recovery from disease or injury
- Decreased quality of life: pain adversely impacts almost every aspect of life, including sleep, work, and social and sexual relations
- Human suffering, fear, and anger
- Depression or anxiety
- Deterioration of relationships, marriages, and intimacy
- Loss of independence (can't perform activities of daily living)
- Loss of self-esteem

## Goals of pain therapy

Ideally, your service member's pain management team will work to map out a tailored treatment plan.

Successful pain management aims to:

1. Lessen the pain
2. Improve functioning
3. Enhance quality of life

For more information on pain management, visit Real Warriors at [realwarriors.net](http://realwarriors.net).

## Where to get help

Military Treatment Facilities (MTFs) and VA medical centers do not always have specialized pain treatment clinics. To manage chronic pain, some providers may work with a team that includes a primary care physician who coordinates care with other providers, including mental health clinicians, that could include substance abuse counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, or TBI specialists. Some medical centers may offer specialists in pain treatment, and military medical facilities are increasingly realizing the need to treat pain. It is worth discussing with your medical provider (e.g., your primary care doctor) what types of treatment for pain are available in your area.

In general, according to VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guidelines for Management of Opioid Therapy for Chronic Pain (2010), pain treatment should focus on prevention of pain where possible and use a “stepped” approach in which medication is offered only after other types of treatment have been unsuccessful. Nondrug, nonsurgical treatments for chronic pain may include relaxation therapy, massage, acupuncture, application of cold or heat, behavioral therapy, and other techniques. To improve

daily functioning, doctors may suggest certain therapies to increase muscle strength and flexibility, enhance sleep and reduce fatigue, and assist the service member in performing usual activities and work-related tasks.

In most cases, pain is best managed using a combination of treatments, which may include medication, behavioral changes, relaxation training, and yoga, among others. A thorough assessment including health history, physical examination, and a review of diagnostic studies is recommended to determine how to best treat pain. Patients, providers, and, where possible, family members should work together to weigh the risks and benefits of each treatment approach.



## **Posttraumatic Stress (PTS) and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

### **Understanding PTS and PTSD**

Many service members experience stressful events during deployment, such as being attacked or ambushed, being injured, or knowing someone who has been injured or killed. Understandably, these experiences may impact a person's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors even after return from deployment. It is common among service members and veterans who have been in a war zone to continue to react to daily life events at home, in some ways, as if they are still in the combat environment. Sometimes these reactions are quite troubling, even though they do not meet

the precise requirements for a PTSD diagnosis (described below). For example, a person might experience some, but not all, of the symptoms that are needed to say they have a PTSD diagnosis. In these cases, the term posttraumatic stress (PTS) may be used by some to describe the person's response.

In other cases, the combination of symptoms is specific, persistent, and is indicative of a PTSD diagnosis (or a combination of PTSD and other problems such as mTBI, depression, or substance abuse).

**Regardless of whether or not there is a formal diagnosis of PTSD, the distress experienced by your service member can be very upsetting for both the individual and those around him, including family members and friends.**

## What is PTSD?

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is diagnosed when a person has been exposed to a traumatic event where they experienced, witnessed, or were confronted with actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of themselves or others, and their response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror (American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV-Text Revision, DSM-IV-TR,

2000). The response of the person diagnosed with PTSD is characterized by a group of symptoms that include re-experiencing a previous traumatic event where one may feel the same terror as when the event took place. Sometimes, a trigger (e.g., a sound, sight, or smell) causes the person to relive the event. An individual with PTSD also may go through great lengths to avoid experiences (even thinking or talking about the event or avoiding sleep to avoid nightmares) that remind him of these past traumatic events. He may even shut off emotionally to protect himself from feeling pain or fear. Additionally, an individual with PTSD may be on “high alert” all the time, startle easily or be extra-alert to their surroundings, or be edgy, irritable, or on guard. To be called PTSD, the symptoms must be present for more than one month.

*“My husband returned home with PTSD during the last deployment. He doesn’t want to talk about it, which hurts and angers me. It is hard to deal with his irritability and anxiety. This is something that I am still learning to handle.”*

*—Army spouse*

*“He has nightmares and shell shock. We don’t go anywhere where there are fireworks. He loves to go to the firing range, but we don’t go for several months after he gets back.”*

*—National Guard spouse*

As mentioned previously, not all symptoms experienced after a traumatic event develop into PTSD. A diagnosis

of PTSD will depend on how long the symptoms last (i.e., more than one month), the symptoms themselves, and how they affect a person's life. Luckily, most people who experience symptoms after a trauma will find the symptoms recover on their own, without any treatment, and will never meet the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis.

The symptoms of PTSD currently fall into the following three categories and must 1) last more than one month, 2) cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning, and may include the following symptoms:

### **1. Intrusive Recollection**

- Recurrent and disturbing bad memories or nightmares of the event
- Intense physical or psychological distress when faced with internal or external cues that resemble an aspect of the trauma
- Acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were happening again

### **2. Avoiding/Numbing**

- Efforts to avoid situations that remind the service member of traumatic events
- Efforts to avoid thoughts or discussions about the event
- Inability to recall trauma
- Isolation or detachment from others
- Sense of a shortened future
- Restricted range of emotions

### 3. Hyperarousal

- Edgy, jittery, or extra-alert to surroundings
- Short-tempered or irritable
- Difficulty with sleep
- Trouble with concentration

**(Note: A new version, DSM-5, will be released in 2013, and the current definition of PTSD will then be modified)**

For more information on PTSD, visit the National Center for PTSD online at [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov).



## Behaviors and feelings that sometimes accompany PTSD:

- Prescription drugs or alcohol abuse to fall asleep or otherwise feel “better”
- Feeling depressed, anxious, hopeless, irritable, ashamed, or guilty
- Having problems at work with chain of command or peers, or increased conflict with others
- Reckless behavior (as if “invincible”) or impulsive behaviors (excessive spending)

When someone has either PTSD or symptoms after they experience a trauma, it can change family life. For example, the person with PTSD may act differently, get angry easily, or he may no longer want to do the things he used to enjoy. As a family member, you may feel scared and frustrated about the changes you notice in your loved one. You also may feel angry about what is happening to your family, or wonder if things will ever go back to the way they were. These feelings and worries are common in people who have a family member with PTSD.

It is important to learn about the symptoms related to trauma and the diagnosis of PTSD so you can understand why they happen, how they are treated, and what you can do to help both yourself and your service member.

**Taking care of yourself will make it easier to cope and to contribute to the success of your family.**

## Secondary PTSD

Studies have established a definite relationship between a service member's experiences—combat or other trauma—and its effect on another individual. Trauma in various forms can impact the lives of loved ones and family member, including children, especially when they are directly involved in the constant fluctuations required during pre-deployment and deployment phases. An example of secondary PTSD symptoms is one in which a wife may have dreams and intrusive memories of her husband's combat trauma. This may result from “caregiver burden,” as she is likely stressed from the responsibility of caring for an emotionally injured spouse.

Secondary PTSD symptoms have been noted by clinicians, educators, and community leaders and can present significant problems for families if not identified. Family members need to view themselves as individuals in their own right, taking the time and making the effort to identify their own mental health issues.

Often the symptoms of secondary PTSD are minimal and short term. Early action can often completely mitigate any long-term impacts to health and life.

For additional information and resources on trauma symptoms and reactions and PTSD visit:

- **Afterdeployment.org**  
[www.afterdeployment.org](http://www.afterdeployment.org)
- **National Center for PTSD**  
[www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov)



## Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

### Understanding TBI

A TBI is a blow or jolt to the head that disrupts the normal function of the brain. It may knock you out briefly or for an extended period of time; make you feel dazed, confused, or “see stars” (alteration of consciousness); or result in memory loss before or after the injury (posttraumatic amnesia). A TBI

can be classified as mild, moderate, severe, or penetrating. The severity is determined at the time of injury.

Not all blows or jolts to the head result in a TBI. The most common form of TBI in the military is mild TBI (mTBI), commonly known as a concussion. TBI can continue to cause problems long after an injury happens. If your service member or veteran has any of the symptoms listed below, she should be evaluated immediately by a health care provider.

### What Is the Difference Between Penetrating and Closed Brain Injuries?

A penetrating traumatic brain injury (TBI) occurs when an object goes through the skull and the brain is injured as a result. A closed (non-penetrating) brain injury does not penetrate the skull. It occurs when the brain makes abrupt and sudden contact with the skull, generally from a direct blow to the head or from a powerful jolt caused by the injury event. Most service members fully recover from a concussion; symptoms typically improve within hours and resolve completely within days to weeks. However, if the service member is experiencing ongoing symptoms of concussion, he should immediately seek medical attention.

If you or your service member notice that symptoms are not improving, you should contact your doctor's office or

clinic or you can make a confidential call to the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC) about getting help at 1-800-870-9244. Family members and friends also play an important role in the care and rehabilitation of individuals with TBI. They have an active part of providing support, both physically and emotionally, for the service member and the caregiver during this time.

It is important to note that many service members have been exposed to situations that have put them at risk for a concussion, including exposure to blasts, motor vehicle crashes, sports, or falls. These injuries are not necessarily readily observable, and therefore may not be immediately diagnosed. Finally, a concussion may occur in conjunction with other problems, such as PTSD or depression, making it more complicated to diagnose.

Some of the common symptoms of a concussion/mTBI are listed below:

- Headaches
- Memory problems
- Poor attention/concentration
- Sleep disturbances
- Excessive fatigue
- Dizziness
- Balance/coordination difficulties
- Irritability or emotional disturbances
- Feelings of depression
- Mood changes (including explosive rage)

- Slowness in thinking
- Difficulty or deficiency in judgment or intellectual function
- Ringing in the ears
- Visual changes

## Treatments for concussion/mTBI

If you or your service member suspects that a concussion has occurred, you should talk to your health care provider for a further evaluation. Typically, a primary care provider can do an initial assessment and make a determination whether a specialist is needed. Most people who have sustained a concussion recover significantly in the first few days following injury. In fact, more than 85 percent of people with a concussion/mTBI recover completely within weeks to months with minimal intervention. Early detection can help in recovering from a concussion, so it is important to get an assessment as close to the time of injury as possible.

Patient education following concussion is one of the most important factors in treatment. Education should provide the following information:

- Symptoms and expected outcomes
- Reassurance about expected positive recovery
- Techniques to manage stress and sleep

Rest is important because the brain continues to heal even after all the symptoms are gone. Rest means cognitive rest and physical rest, which include:

- Maximizing downtime or rest during the day
- Maintaining adequate sleep routines
  - Keep sleeping quarters quiet and dark
  - Get six to eight hours of sleep per night
- Keeping the heart rate low
  - Stay out of the heat
  - Limit physical activity
  - Drink plenty of water

## Effects on patient and family

Living with impaired functioning can be very frustrating, for both the service member and their loved ones. Unlike the loss of a limb or eye, TBI is an “invisible wound,” but it is no less devastating. The combination of physical symptoms (e.g., headache, light sensitivity, and dizziness), cognitive symptoms (e.g., concentrating, remembering simple things that just happened, and dealing with complex issues), and emotional symptoms (e.g., irritability, depression, anxiety) results in a service member’s functioning falling below her usual levels.

## Where to get rehabilitation

Depending on the type of injury, rehabilitation will either help the person regain the functioning they had before their injury or help the individual and family adapt to the injury as much as possible.

The type of treatment received may be largely dependent on location, insurance provider, and the types of service

providers and resources in the local area. If the local community does not have a large VA facility or MTF, you may be able to have your insurance provider authorize a program in another community that does have the appropriate program. Call and ask if the program has experience with TBI. If you don't have access to such a program where you live, you might consider asking your provider to send your service member to a specialized program. Some of the specialists that work with traumatic injuries include physical therapists, occupational therapists, physiatrists, speech therapists, psychiatrists, neuropsychiatrists, and rehabilitation therapists.

Please contact the following resources for more information on concussions and finding appropriate resources for your situation and geographic location.

- **Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC)**  
[www.dvbic.org/dod-va-health-insurers](http://www.dvbic.org/dod-va-health-insurers)  
[www.dvbic.org/locations](http://www.dvbic.org/locations)
- **Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury Outreach Center**  
[www.dcoe.health.mil/24-7help.aspx](http://www.dcoe.health.mil/24-7help.aspx)

If you are transferring from one system of care to another (e.g., transitioning from active duty to civilian and you no longer will use Tricare as your primary insurance), you can find help from the inTransition Program: [www.health.mil/inTransition](http://www.health.mil/inTransition).



# Depression

## Understanding depression

Depression is an illness that involves one's feelings, thoughts, and body. Depression can affect how a person eats, sleeps, and thinks about things. Depression is more than a passing "blue" mood. Rather, depression is a medical illness that is treatable just like diabetes or heart disease. Both a family history of depression as well as a history of negative life experiences such as loss, trauma, serious illness, or stress can contribute to whether someone will become depressed.

Today, there are many effective treatments for depression, including medications and therapy. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or years. Appropriate treatment for depression, however, can help most people, and the majority of people who are treated will improve, even those with serious symptoms.

## Signs and symptoms of depression

There are some common signs that might indicate depression, but getting an evaluation from your primary care doctor or a mental health professional is the first step to evaluation. Signs of depression may look different across different ages; however, here is a general list of symptoms:

- Persistent sad or empty mood (depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day)
- Loss of interest or pleasure in all or almost all activities

- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Decreased energy or fatigue
- Inability to concentrate or make decisions
- Feelings of guilt, hopelessness, or worthlessness
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Physical symptoms that don't get better, even with treatment (e.g., headaches, stomach problems, and pain)



## Suicide

The DoD, the VA, and other non-governmental entities have many programs designed to promote access to behavioral health care. **Any suicidal comments should be taken seriously. To get help for yourself or someone else:**

- Dial 911 if you need immediate assistance.
- Call the Military Crisis Line at 800-273-8255 and press 1.
- Text 838255.
- Online anonymous chat at [www.veteranscrisisline.net](http://www.veteranscrisisline.net), a website filled with information and an anonymous chat line.
- Report suicidal content via Facebook. Click on [www.facebook.com/help/contact](http://www.facebook.com/help/contact), provide information on the content or send a screenshot of the content, and your comment will be reported to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org), or 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

Some warning signs that you or your loved one may need immediate help include:

- Talking or writing excessively about death or suicide
- Showing continued signs of depression: sadness, hopelessness, loss of interest, lack of sleep, or trouble eating
- Neglecting oneself: worsening physical appearance or hygiene
- Withdrawing from family, friends, community
- Frequent or dramatic shifts in mood
- Feeling anxious, agitated, or repeatedly reliving stressful experiences.
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol
- Feelings of desperation or helplessness—as if there is no solution to problems
- Engaging in high-risk behaviors or becoming violent or self-destructive
- Seeking out firearms, pills, or other methods to harm oneself
- Giving away possessions

List adapted from “Information and Support After a Suicide Attempt: A Department of Veterans Affairs Resource Guide for Family Members of Veterans Who are Coping with Suicidality,” Office of Mental Health Service, VA central Office. Published August 2009. Can be accessed at: [www.mirecc.va.gov](http://www.mirecc.va.gov).



## Substance Abuse

Some service members and veterans who return from combat have problems with use of alcohol, tobacco, or drugs. This can include use of street drugs or prescription medications taken in ways that were not prescribed. Such substance use can harm health, cause mood and behavior problems, hurt social relationships, or cause financial or work-related problems.

Some of the warning signs of a substance-abuse problem include:

- Frequent or excessive drinking or drug use
- Having thoughts that you should cut down
- Feeling guilty about drug or alcohol use
- Others become annoyed with you over your drinking or drug use
- Drinking or using drugs to calm your nerves
- Problems at work or with family members, friends, or others due to drinking or drug use

Family members can help their service members by seeking out information and understanding some of the stressors and emotions a service member may experience as he copes with substance use problems. Family members also benefit from knowing how best to offer support and encouragement. Even with support, substance misuse can spiral out of control, leading to continued difficulty with combat stress, tension, sleep, relationships and managing life responsibilities such as work or family.

Service members or military family members may find themselves becoming discouraged after repeated attempts to help themselves or a loved one, and recovery can be a discouraging and sometimes frustrating process. The best way to support a loved one exhibiting symptoms of substance dependence is to focus on the person, not the dependence—stay positive and reach out for help. Different treatments address all types of problems related to substance use, from unhealthy use of alcohol to life-threatening addictions.

Some of the types of care you might expect for an individual who is abusing substances might include:

- Screening for alcohol or tobacco
- Short outpatient counseling including focus on motivation
- Intensive outpatient treatment
- Residential (live-in) care
- Medically managed detoxification (stopping substance use safely) and services to get stable
- Continuing care and relapse prevention
- Marriage and family counseling
- Self-help groups
- Drug substitution therapies and newer medicines to reduce craving

How can I get help for myself or my service member?

- Speak with your existing health care provider or your MTF; a primary care provider should be able to connect you with resources in your community.

- Work with your insurance provider to find recommended treatments that are covered.
- Ask about support groups for family members.
- If you are at the VA, contact the OEF/OIF Coordinator at your local VA Medical Center.
- Contact your local **Vet Center**.
- Call 1-800-827-1000, VA's general information hotline.
- Al-Anon, **[www.al-anon.org](http://www.al-anon.org)**.

Adapted from [www.realwarriors.net](http://www.realwarriors.net).

A list of VA and Vet Center facilities can be found online at:

- Vet Center Locator at **[www.vetcenter.va.gov](http://www.vetcenter.va.gov)**.
- VA Facility Locator at **[www2.va.gov](http://www2.va.gov)**.

**“Coaching into Care”** is a free, confidential coaching service offered by the VA to help friends and family explore ways to talk with their veteran about mental health concerns and treatment options. **“Coaching into Care”** can be accessed via **[www.mirecc.va.gov](http://www.mirecc.va.gov)** or via phone at 1-888-823-7458.



## **Anger and Violence**

**How can I deal with anger or violent behavior?**

Anger can be frightening, can hurt relationships, and can make it hard to think clearly. If anger leads to violent

behavior or abuse, it is also dangerous. If you are concerned for your safety:

- Go to a safe place and call for help right away.
- Make sure children are in a safe place as well.
- Call 911 or law enforcement if you or someone else is in immediate danger.

It's hard to talk to someone who is angry. One thing you can do is set up a time-out system. This helps you find a way to talk even while angry. Here's one way to do this:



First, take a time out:

- Agree that either of you can call a time-out at any time.
- Agree that when someone calls a time-out, the discussion must stop right then.
- Decide on a signal you will use to call a time-out. The signal can be a word that you say or a hand signal; count to ten or twenty before reacting.
- Agree to tell each other where you will be and what you will be doing during the time-out. Tell each other what time you will come back.
- While you are taking a time-out, don't focus on how angry you feel. Instead, think calmly about how you will talk things over and solve the problem.

Once you have calmed down:

- Take turns talking about solutions to the problem.
- Listen without interrupting.
- Use statements starting with "I," such as "I think" or "I feel." Using "you" statements can sound accusatory.
- Be open to each other's ideas, and avoid criticizing one another.
- Focus on solutions you can agree upon. You both are likely to have good ideas.
- Try to agree on which solutions you will use.

## Family and self-care

### **Tips for improving communication**

You and your family may have trouble talking about

feelings, worries, and everyday problems. Here are some ways to communicate better:

- Be clear and to the point.
- Be positive. Blame and negative talk won't help the situation.
- Be a good listener. Don't argue or interrupt. Repeat what you hear to make sure you understand, and ask questions if you need to know more.
- Put your feelings into words. Your loved one may not know you are sad or frustrated unless you are clear about your feelings.
- Help your family member put feelings into words. Ask, "Are you feeling angry? Sad? Worried?"
- Ask how you can help.
- Give advice only when asked.

## Family therapy

If your family is having a lot of trouble talking things over, consider trying family therapy. Family therapy is a type of counseling that involves your whole family. A therapist helps you and your family communicate, maintain good relationships, and cope with tough emotions.

During therapy, each person can talk about how a problem is affecting the family. Family therapy can help family members understand and cope with the problems they are facing.

Your health professional or a religious or social services organization can help you find a family therapist or often

there are family therapists whose services are accessible via referral by your provider at your local MTF or VA Medical Center.

## Taking care of yourself

Families and friends of returning service members provide the majority of support for both physical and emotional wounds. Live-in family members, such as spouses, parents, or children, may take on significant responsibility simply because they are available and accessible to offer help. Whatever your role may be, it is important to remember your own psychological and physical wellness.

### **How can I take care of myself?**

During the reintegration period, helping a loved one with a physical or mental health issue can be hard on you. You may have your own feelings of fear and anger about the trauma. You may feel guilty because you wish your family member would just forget his or her problems and get on with life. You may feel confused or frustrated because your loved one has changed, and you may worry that your family life will never get back to normal.

All of this can drain you. It can affect your health and make it hard for you to help your loved one. If you're not careful, you may get sick yourself, become depressed, or burn out and stop helping your loved one.

DO	DON'T
<p>Do take care of yourself and allow other people to help you.</p>	<p>Don't feel guilty or that you have to know it all. Remind yourself that nobody has all the answers. It's normal to feel helpless at times.</p>
<p>Do take care of your physical and mental health. If you feel yourself getting sick or often feel sad and hopeless, see your doctor.</p>	<p>Don't feel bad if things change slowly. You cannot change anyone. People have to change themselves.</p>
<p>Do take time to be by yourself. Find a quiet place to gather your thoughts and "recharge."</p>	<p>Don't give up your outside life. Make time for friends, activities, and hobbies you enjoy.</p>
<p>Do get regular exercise, even just a few minutes a day. Exercise is a healthy way to deal with stress.</p>	<p>Don't use alcohol or drugs to cope with stress.</p>
<p>Do eat healthy foods. When you are busy, it may seem easier to eat fast food than to prepare healthy meals. But healthy foods will give you more energy to carry you through the day.</p>	<p>Don't resort to fast foods, which will drain your energy and make it more difficult to get through your day.</p>
<p>Do remember the good things. It's easy to get weighed down by worry and stress.</p>	<p>Don't forget to notice and celebrate the good things that happen to you and your family.</p>
<p>Do seek people in your life who you can depend on. These people are your support network and can help you with everyday jobs, like taking a child to school, or by giving you love and understanding.</p>	<p>Don't spend time with people who drain your energy or who are unable to support you.</p>



## Repeated Deployment

Over one million military children have experienced a parent's deployment, and 700,000 children have had a parent deploy more than once since Sept. 11, 2001. For many families, the reintegration period can also become the pre-deployment phase again as they face another impending redeployment or knowledge of another deployment in the long term. Although it can be frustrating, and sometimes overwhelming, this is a time for families to rely again on their resilience. Repeated deployments can compound the stressful impact of a military member leaving home for service reasons and your family can mitigate this stress by utilizing resources and relying on previously learned positive resiliency skills.

As a family faces another deployment, the steps in rejoining each other while preparing for the next separation may need to be hastened. However, ignoring the steps in the process can have corrosive effects on the entire family unit.

*“First, I would state upfront that I don’t feel we’ve been successful in maintaining a healthy relationship between my kids and their dad. (This makes it sound like we are divorced, but we are not.) By the time they were four and five and a half, he had been deployed for thirty-eight months. I would say they have a bond with him, but a relationship? Not so much. While my husband is gone, we make care packages for him and special gifts. He read books on video and the kids watched that. They*



*have Daddy Dolls and photo quilts. I hung lots of pictures at eye level. We probably made a mistake in between the second and third deployments. By the time my husband returned from his second deployment to Iraq, we already knew that he would be deploying again in just over a year. He never really reinserted himself into the family routine (at bedtime, for instance). I just continued to do everything myself with him stepping in kind of like a divorced dad for special outings or when I really needed the help. I don't remember that being a conscious decision, but that's just how it happened. Today, the kids are five and a half and seven and my husband has been home for fifteen months. I think he's not completely comfortable around them, and they prefer it when he is away. In his current job, my husband is gone about ten to eighteen days a month. The kids get excited to see him when he first returns home, but then they are anxious for him to leave again. He still misses some holidays and special events (e.g., birthdays and recitals) but the kids have adjusted."*

*—Army spouse*

Although it is common for families to emotionally distance themselves in preparation for deployment, doing so during what should be the reintegration period can make it very challenging for the family unit to reconnect.

Repeated deployments can have a cumulative impact on

families and service members. There is a rising concern about mental health issues among military spouses. Military kids are also showing an increase in stress-related and behavioral disorders. The DoD has recognized that these negative outcomes can be preventable with proper care and has committed to enhancing mental health care for military families. Additionally, the Department of Health and Human Services is educating health care providers on how to refer patients in the VA Health Care System and DoD Military Treatment Facilities.

Help and support is available at every moment of the deployment cycle, and it is especially vital to those experiencing repeated deployments. Engaging and re-engaging through multiple deployments is not easy. In reality, many couples who may have been married for several years or have children together have not lived together for more than a few months here and there. Communication is therefore an essential way to sustaining those relationships. However, this is especially challenging when kids are involved. What was “normal” then may not be “normal” now. Thus, finding out what the new normal is will be a process for the entire family.

*“I talk to the kids about every deployment, letting them know that Daddy is doing his job keeping us safe and how proud we are of him. I also let them know that as hard as it is to see Daddy go, it hurts him that much more. I always try to be positive and plan the fun things we can do when Daddy comes home.”*

—Army spouse



# Reintegration into the Civilian Lifestyle

## Introduction

The military has its own culture, traditions, and language. When a service member leaves the military, she must readjust to the norms of civilian culture. For military families, this may involve a variety of challenges including geographic relocation away from military installations and support systems, learning a new health care system, or creating a civilian social support network.

Whether your service member has been part of the military for five years or twenty-five years, separation from the military or the transition from military to civilian life can be an overwhelming and confusing time. This transition will be easier to the extent that you, along with your service member, can prepare by clarifying your personal and professional needs



and goals and identifying your plans for achieving those goals. Without such a plan, the transition from the military can be distressing and may create potential financial hardships, employment challenges, or family strains.

In some cases, preparation for a military separation is not possible because it is unplanned, as is the case for some injured service members, for example. For those families who face an unexpected transition from the military, several resources are available, and it is especially important that you access those resources for information specific to your situation. (Please see the **resources chapter** for service-specific support.)

**The inTransition Program:** Service members and veterans may receive assistance when they are receiving mental health treatment and are making transitions from military service, location, or a health care system. This program provides access to transitional support, motivation and healthy lifestyle assistance, and advice from qualified coaches through a toll-free telephone number: 1-800-424-7877. For more information about the inTransition Program, please log onto **[www.health.mil/inTransition](http://www.health.mil/inTransition)**.

Regardless of your situation, proactively utilizing existing services and gathering relevant information can help you and your family identify important questions and resources to consider and plan for your future outside the military.



## Spouse employment

For some spouses, transition from the military may also be a time to explore your own career aspirations. One way to take care of yourself and your family during this transition period is to take advantage of all the resources you have at your disposal. With many new programs that are designed to assist military spouses, this transition period may be a time to develop some new job skills or enhance skills you already have. Seek out spouses of retired military members to act as mentors and to share their experiences.

***“I have an amazing family and an amazing sisterhood of wives. These ladies are so amazing and have been through it all. They are as diverse as they are similar. They are my family!”***

***—Army spouse***

## Resources Related to Spouse Employment or Job Skills:

- **U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Hiring our Heroes (HoH) Military Spouses Programming**  
A National Chamber of Commerce Initiative that assists military spouses with finding civilian employment.  
[www.uschamber.com](http://www.uschamber.com)
- **Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP)**  
A national initiative, provided by the Department of Defense, that imparts employment assistance to military spouses through strategic partnerships with businesses.  
[msejobs.militaryonesource.mil](http://msejobs.militaryonesource.mil)
- **Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO)**  
A national initiative, provided by the Department of Defense, that offers military spouses seeking portable careers assistance with 1) Career Exploration, 2) Education and Training, 3) Career Readiness, and 4) Career Connections.  
[www.militaryonesource.mil](http://www.militaryonesource.mil)
- **MOAA's Career Services**  
Available to all MOAA members and their spouses.  
[www.moaa.org](http://www.moaa.org)

- **Blue Star Families' Military Spouse Resume Builder: Making Volunteer Service Work for You!; Blue Star Jobs; and Blue Star Networks for professional spouses**

Blue Star Families' career resources are aimed at helping military spouses translate their volunteer experience into resume language; connecting professional military spouses for networking and mentorship; and assisting military spouses to find short-term, contracting employment regardless of geographic location.

[www.bluestarfam.org](http://www.bluestarfam.org)

- **Military Spouse Corporate Career Network (MSCCN)**

MSCCN provides military spouses with employment readiness and job placement services.

[www.msccn.org](http://www.msccn.org)



## **Education, Employment, and Benefits**

Transitioning military service members and their families face challenges and often need information in three primary areas: employment, education, and benefits. Services and informational resources related to each of these areas are offered within the DoD prior to a military member's separation from active duty and through the VA once a

service member has left active duty. It is important to keep in mind that because of the effects each area has on the others, some of these programs overlap and include information across all three areas or in only one of the areas.

- Education
- Employment
- Benefits

*“Even though we were financially prepared for retirement, I was still apprehensive. For all the years that we have been married, I had the security of knowing that we would always have a place to live and have medical care. I had a sense of security. The ‘not knowing’ phase kicks in. Will he find a job? Will his retirement pay be enough to cover the mortgage? Until those questions were answered, I lost sleep and stressed out.”*

*—Coast Guard spouse*

Below we identify some of the available resources within the DoD and the VA as well as external resources across the three areas: employment, education, and benefits. This list is only a fraction of the programs and services available to transitioning service members and their families.

More detailed information on each program as well as a comprehensive list of transition assistance resources can be found at [www.va.gov/opa/publications](http://www.va.gov/opa/publications).



## Education

- **GI Bill Benefits**

The GI Bill can be used for continuing education for service members, their spouses, and their children. The benefits are not limited to traditional college educations—they can be applied to non-degree programs, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training. However, it is important to note that electing to transfer benefits can require additional service time. Research information about GI Bill benefits online at [www.gibill.va.gov](http://www.gibill.va.gov) or call 1-888-GI BILL-1. For information about transferring benefits to spouses or children, go to [www.defense.gov](http://www.defense.gov).

- **Verification of Military Experience and Training**

The Verification of Military Experience and Training (VMET) Document, DD Form 2586, helps Service members verify previous experience and training to potential employers, negotiate credits at schools, and obtain certificates or licenses. VMET documents are available only through Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps Transition Support Offices and are intended for service members who have at least six months of active service. Service members should obtain VMET documents from their Transition Support Office within twelve months of separation or twenty-four months of retirement.

- **Educational and Vocational Counseling**

The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Program ([www.vba.va.gov](http://www.vba.va.gov)) provides educational and vocational counseling to service members, veterans, and certain dependents (U.S.C. Title 38, Section 3697) at no charge. These counseling services are designed to help an individual choose a vocational direction, determine the course needed to achieve the chosen goal, and evaluate the career possibilities open to them.

## Employment

- **Transition Assistance Program (TAP) or TurboTAP**

The DoD pre-separation counseling or transition assistance programs (TAP) are workshops developed to aid in navigating a release from military life. The workshops cover topics such as what to expect when changing careers, the kinds of relocation assistance

available, employment assistance, and education and training possibilities. Pre-separation counseling also provides information on health care, life insurance, benefits, and personal finances—the topics that cause the most anxiety when retiring from any occupation. Spouses are eligible, and encouraged, to attend these workshops on a space allowed basis. Find business opportunities, a calendar of transition seminars and job fairs, information on veterans associations, transition services, training, and education opportunities, as well as other announcements, at [www.turbotap.org](http://www.turbotap.org).

- **VOW to Hire Heroes Act**

The “VOW to Hire Heroes Act” was enacted in 2011 and aims to lower the rate of unemployment among veterans. Below is a summary of the provisions:

- Improving the Transition Assistance Program (TAP): The Act will make TAP mandatory for most service members transitioning to civilian status, upgrade career counseling options, and tailor the program for the twenty-first century job market.
- Facilitating Seamless Transition: The Act will allow service members to begin the federal employment process prior to separation in order to facilitate a truly seamless transition from the military to jobs at VA, Department of Homeland Security, or the many other federal agencies in need of our veterans.
- Expanding Education and Training: The Act provides nearly 100,000 unemployed Veterans

of past eras and wars with up to one year of assistance (equal to the full-time payment rate under the Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty program) to qualify for jobs in high-demand sectors. It also provides disabled veterans up to one year of additional Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment benefits.

- **Translating Military Skills and Training:** The Act requires the Department of Labor to take a hard look at military skills and training equivalencies that are transferrable to the civilian sector and work to make it easier to get licenses and certifications.
- **Veterans Tax Credits:** The Act provides tax credits for hiring veterans and disabled veterans who are out of work.

As part of the Vow Act, by the end of 2013, the TAP program will evolve into **Transition GPS**, which will help separating service members transition to the civilian workforce, start a business, or pursue training or higher education by improving upon the current TAP program in several key areas.

- **Veteran Skills Translation**

Whether a reservist, a member of the National Guard returning to a civilian job after deployment, or a sailor, soldier, marine, coastguardsman, or airman leaving the active-duty military, the transition from military service to civilian employment can be challenging. Many military service members have never worked in the civilian world and are unfamiliar with how to

translate their military skills and experiences into terms that civilians can understand. Additionally, many service members have never written a civilian resume, participated in a job interview, or submitted a civilian job application. This lack of experience can translate into a lack of confidence that can further impede success in finding civilian employment.

While many civilian companies have specialized hiring managers or human resource employees that understand and actively seek applicants with military service, other employers have preconceived notions about military service and may be biased against hiring service members or veterans for fear that they will be deployed, have a mental health disorder, or they will not be able to translate their military experience into civilian work.

*“It was a roller coaster of emotions. It honestly took me several tries to decide to separate from the military and completely follow through because of my fears of leaving. I was concerned with how to manage financially, primarily, but I was also hesitant because I did love many aspects of my career and life.”*

*—Former active duty and  
current Coast Guard spouse*

*“My father, a career Marine, had warned me that I would go through these emotions and even a depression, but I downplayed it until I realized*

*later how devastated I had been ... Now, I am able to look back on my career in the military fondly but do not feel anything negative about having gotten out. There are aspects of my previous career that I miss, but the decision to separate was the right one, and I do not regret it.”*

*—Former active duty and  
current Coast Guard spouse*

Military service members bring unique and valuable skills to the civilian workplace. Once a service member becomes a veteran, they have the training, skills, leadership, and character to meet even the toughest challenges faced by today’s employers. However, in order to make a successful transition into the civilian workforce, your service member must be able to effectively translate her military experience into terms that recruiters and hiring managers understand. There are many resources to aid your service member in these efforts, regardless of whether they are looking to continue their careers in the public sector or want to move into private sector employment. Here are a few:

- **Verification of Military Experience and Training (VMET)**

[www.dmdc.osd.mil/vmet](http://www.dmdc.osd.mil/vmet)

This DoD VMET translator evaluates how to transfer job skills to a new civilian career.

- **VA for VETS Military Skills Translator**

[mst.vaforvets.va.gov](http://mst.vaforvets.va.gov)

The VA for Vets military skills translator allows a service member to translate military skills, experience,

and training to learn about VA career options that best suit their capabilities.

- **Mil2FedJobs Federal Jobs Crosswalk**

[www.Mil2FedJobs.com](http://www.Mil2FedJobs.com)

Mil2FedJobs helps translate military occupations to federal jobs. This website assists veterans in identifying federal jobs related to their military occupational specialty. Mil2FedJobs also assists veterans in identifying federal job characteristics, such as duties, pay grade, and qualifications of existing vacancies. Veterans can also search USAJOBS.GOV for vacancies.

- **CareerOneStop—Military to Civilian Occupation Translator**

[www.acinet.org](http://www.acinet.org)

The Military to Civilian Occupation Translator helps veterans match military skills and experience to civilian occupations. CareerOneStop is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration.

- **Military.com Military Skills Translator**

[www.military.com](http://www.military.com)

This skills translator allows the service member to define military experience by adding military job title (for example, MOS, MOSC, rating, or designator). Once this information is selected, the service member can add subspecialties and training to further customize the jobs available to them.

- **O\*NET Military Skills Translator**

[online.onetcenter.org](http://online.onetcenter.org)

O\*NET, the Occupational Information Network, is

a comprehensive database of occupational skills, knowledge, and other occupational characteristics—including those that veterans bring to the workforce. O\*NET can help your service member align military education and job training with current civilian workplace needs. The Crosswalk Search helps find O\*NET occupations that match MOS classifications. Users can also crosswalk their primary MOS to apprenticeship programs.

- **My Next Move for Veterans**

[www.mynextmove.org/vets](http://www.mynextmove.org/vets)

My Next Move for Veterans is an interactive tool that helps vets learn about their career options. The site has tasks, skills, salary information, job listings, and more for over 900 different careers. Veterans can find careers through keyword search, by browsing industries that employ different types of workers, or by discovering civilian careers that are similar to their job in the military.

- **Hero2Hired**

[h2h.jobs](http://h2h.jobs)

H2H is a Yellow Ribbon-funded project designed to help transitioning service members find the perfect civilian career. H2H's Military Skills Translator aligns a veteran's occupational code and military training and experience with a host of career paths.

List adapted from the Veterans Affairs website: [vetsuccess.gov](http://vetsuccess.gov).

Additionally, there are other, more generalized career-oriented websites and programs that provide a variety of personalized services. These resources are designed to facilitate a successful transition from military member

to civilian employee. Here are a few to help get your transitioning service member started:

- **VA For Vets**

[vaforvets.va.gov](https://vaforvets.va.gov)

The Department of Veterans Affairs has a comprehensive website designed to facilitate the reintegration, retention, and hiring of veteran employees to the VA. Their platform offers career-search tools for veterans seeking employment at VA, career development services for existing veterans, and coaching and reintegration support for military service members.

- **Feds Hire Vets Program**

[www.fedshirevets.gov](https://www.fedshirevets.gov)

The Office of Personnel and Management's site is the premiere site for Federal employment information for veterans, transitioning military service members, their families, and federal hiring officials.

- **Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS)**

[www.dol.gov](https://www.dol.gov)

The Department of Labor provides resources and expertise to assist and prepare veterans in obtaining meaningful careers and protecting their employment rights.

- **Hiring Our Heroes Program**

[www.uschamber.com](https://www.uschamber.com)

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Hiring Our Heroes program is a campaign to help veterans and military spouses find meaningful employment in hundreds of communities across America. Their programming

includes local hiring fairs, a fast track initiative that shows critical paths to meaningful careers, a personal branding platform for veterans, and an e-mentoring leadership program for military spouses.

- **Military.com**

[www.military.com](http://www.military.com)

This site provides a personalized transition plan for separating service members when they enter their personal data into the planning guide.

- **CivilianJobs.com**

[www.civilianjobs.com](http://www.civilianjobs.com)

Helps to assess military skills, choose relevant careers, and match employers with potential employees.

- **DoD Transportal**

[www.veteranprograms.com](http://www.veteranprograms.com)

Provides locations and phone numbers of all Transition Assistance Offices as well as mini-courses on conducting successful job-search campaigns, writing resumes, using the Internet to find a job, and links to job search and recruiting websites.

- **Warriors to Work Program**

[www.woundedwarriorproject.org](http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org)

The Warriors to Work Program helps Wounded Warriors transition back into the civilian workforce by providing career counseling services and job placement assistance. Through individual counseling, resume assistance, and career guidance, warriors' skills and experience are matched to hiring employers' needs. This free program allows warriors to post a resume on our dedicated website, while employers receive a free login to post jobs and search for warrior resumes.

## Benefits

There are numerous benefits available to veterans through the VA, and sorting through the choices can be overwhelming. A good place to start for transitioning service members is the VA's Returning Service Member Portal ([www.oefoif.va.gov](http://www.oefoif.va.gov)). In general, the VA provides: health care, education and training, home loans, life insurance, and disability compensation, among other benefits and services. The required pre-separation counseling workshops will cover much of what is available. However, the VA has also developed a website to educate those new to the benefits at [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov).

Visit TRICARE online to determine whether to continue military health care benefits at [www.tricare.mil](http://www.tricare.mil).

The VA has also developed a program called **Coaching into Care**, a national call center that helps veterans get connected to the care and services they may need. The service is not only intended for veterans but also for their friends and family members to help motivate their loved ones to seek assistance. The call center provides information, referrals, resources, encouragement, and a free and confidential coaching service. It can be reached at 1-888-823-7458 or online at [www.mirecc.va.gov](http://www.mirecc.va.gov).

## Transition for National Guard and Reserves

The transition to civilian life for reservists and members of the National Guard can carry with it special obstacles. These groups are not necessarily returning to a military installation to go through the out-processing and

transitioning period within their military community. In many cases, they are going directly back into their civilian communities, with little time to readjust. This can cause feelings of isolation from military life when that bond of common purpose is broken.

One of the greatest obstacles for National Guard service members and reservists is ensuring continuous health care in a timely manner after deployment. Where active-duty service members are monitored with post-deployment health assessments to make certain that the service member remains mentally and physically healthy in the months after returning home, reservists and members of the National Guard may not be as closely monitored in the civilian health care system. For that reason, service members, their families, and their friends must remain aware of the special health care needs facing those returning from deployment.

**For more information about health care benefits for all veterans and service members, including National Guard and Reserve members, see the following websites: [www.oefoif.va.gov](http://www.oefoif.va.gov) and [www.tricare.mil](http://www.tricare.mil).**

### Programs related to transition from service:

- **Pre-Discharge Program** ([www.vba.va.gov/predischarge](http://www.vba.va.gov/predischarge) or toll free at 1-800-827-1000) This a joint VA and DoD program that affords service members the opportunity to file claims for disability

compensation and other benefits up to 180 days prior to separation or retirement. Included in the Pre-Discharge program is the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES). The two primary components of the Pre-Discharge Program, Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) and Quick Start, may be utilized by separating and retiring service members on active duty, including members of the Coast Guard, and members of the National Guard and Reserves (activated under Titles 10 or 32) in CONUS and some overseas locations. BDD is offered to accelerate receipt of VA disability benefits, with a goal of providing benefits within 60 days after release or discharge from active duty. Service members should contact the local Transition Assistance Office or Army Career Alumni Program Center to schedule appointments to attend VA benefits briefings and learn how to initiate a pre-discharge claim.

- **The inTransition Program** ([www.health.mil/inTransition](http://www.health.mil/inTransition) or 1-800-424-7877) Service members and veterans may receive assistance when they are receiving mental health treatment and are making transitions from military service, location, or health care system. This program provides access to transitional support and motivation as well as healthy lifestyle assistance and advice from qualified coaches.
- **The eBenefits Portal** ([www.ebenefits.va.gov](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov)) This provides service members, veterans, their families, and caregivers with self-service access to benefit applications and benefits information, and access to personal information such as official military personnel file documents.



## Timeline for Preparing to Transition Out of the Military

Below are some of the significant milestones to consider in the years and months leading up to your service member's transition out of the military.

### Two years

Consider attending pre-separation counseling or the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) at [www.turbotap.org](http://www.turbotap.org) to begin to evaluate how best to separate from the military. TurboTAP is the official DoD website for transition assistance. Within TurboTAP is a section specifically for those separating or retiring due to service-related disability: [www.turbotap.org](http://www.turbotap.org).



During this time, reflect on career and educational goals, and what it will take to reach them. Research what skills and prerequisites will be necessary to meet your goals.

Now is also a good time to research GI Bill Benefits ([www.gibill.va.gov](http://www.gibill.va.gov)) to determine eligibility; if benefits are to be transferred to spouses or children, additional military service may be required. Spouses can use the benefits for up to fifteen years after the service member separates or retires. Children can use them until they reach the age of twenty-six. For more information, go to the DoD's explanation of GI Bill benefits transfer at [www.defense.gov](http://www.defense.gov).

*“The best advice that I have for any military family preparing for retirement is to become as knowledgeable as possible. I thought that having been a part of the military for over twenty years, as well as a Family Readiness Group Leader for six of those years, that I had a pretty good handle on things. There is always more to learn. Another piece of advice is to put money aside. You need something to hold you over in that time of transition. Retirement pay does not always kick in the day that they leave service. The bills still need to be paid and the mortgage still comes due.”*

—Army spouse

## One year

Pre-separation counseling is required by law no later than ninety days before leaving the military. However, many find

that the information contained in the program is helpful throughout the last year of military service. Military spouses can also participate in pre-separation counseling. For some branches, the program is available online.

This is the time to prepare a plan for civilian life. Start thinking about where to live. Develop a financial plan that includes not only living expenses but also differences in cost of living if moving, costs to move, medical expenses, and any additional expenses incurred developing a new career.

## Six months

At this point, the question about where to live should be answered. Now is also the time to hone job-searching skills: ensure your résumé is ready, practice interviewing, contact recruiters, and attend job fairs.

Research life insurance options. Retirees can determine Survivor Benefit Plan options at this time. The program can be complicated, with many variables. It may be easier to consider it earlier, rather than later, in the retirement progression.

## Three months

It's all about health. With three months to go before transition out of the military, begin preparing for your health needs in civilian life. Choose the health insurance plan that best suits your family. To find out about continuing with TRICARE, go to [www.tricare.mil](http://www.tricare.mil). Make arrangements for a final physical, and make dental appointments for the whole family.

During this time, also, confirm moving plans and begin investigating schools and homes in your new place of residence.

If retiring, begin planning the retirement ceremony before the transition gets hectic.

## One month

Go through the retirement or separation paperwork to ensure there are no errors. Confirm that insurance is ready to engage and that the forms and applications are complete.

## Conclusion

Reintegration may be short or lengthy, straightforward or complicated, joyous or agonizing. Every reintegration unfolds in a unique way and on its own time frame, presenting unique challenges for each individual involved. Whether you are a service member, spouse, family member, child, partner, or friend, remembering that reintegration is a process instead of an event will help you remain patient while you establish a life that integrates your unique perspective.

Finally, when reintegration involves planning for a life outside of military service, there may be multiple “unknowns,” especially when that transition is unanticipated (i.e., in the case of injuries or illness). Regardless, the information in this handbook is designed to help you and your service member make your reintegration transition as smooth as possible.

# CAREGIVING



## Introduction

The role of caregiver is an important one, filled with encouraging and challenging moments. And as with many aspects of military life, it is best to be prepared—mentally, emotionally, and logistically—for what will be a new and, at times, overwhelming range of responsibilities.

Fortunately there are substantive and constantly evolving programs available to give caregivers support and direction when needed. This chapter is an introduction to caregiving—for those who may take on the caregiving role suddenly and soon, or for those who might in the distant future—and to the many tools and resources that can ease your journey.

## What is a caregiver?

A caregiver is someone who provides personal care, emotional support, and advocacy for those needing very personal help for any period of time during recuperation and into the new normal. Those who require care are most often injured or ill service members and veterans, who usually need assistance in activities of daily living such as bathing, eating, mobility, or communication. Caregivers can also often assist by way of managing medication, attending medical visits, and maintaining medical documentation.

*“I never knew that my help with medications, researching treatments, or speaking up for my husband was being a caregiver. I only knew that he needed my help, and that I had to be there for him. His Alive Day was the day I became a caregiver.”*

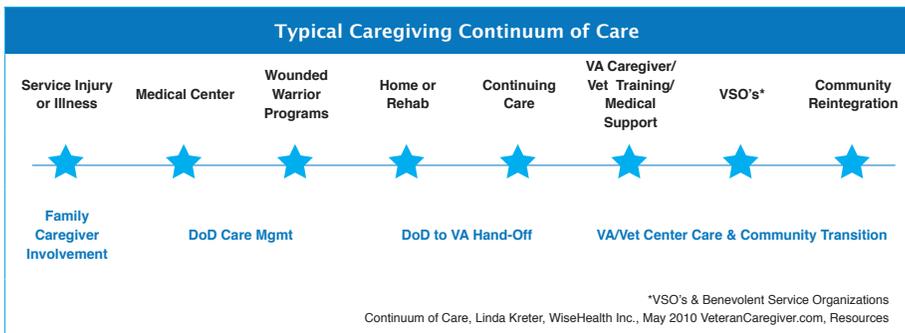
*—Army spouse*

Active-duty service members may need care during treatment and rehabilitation from injuries or illness, whether they occur in combat, training, or in transit to service. Additionally, some veterans may require a caregiver as the result of worsening chronic conditions or aging. A sandwich caregiver is a person who supports more than one person, such as a spouse caring for a child in the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) and also for a wounded warrior. Another example would be a military spouse who is simultaneously taking care of an aging parent and a returning service member.

## Caregiving is a journey

No two service members experience identical injuries, illnesses, or rehabilitations. Clearly, then, no two caregivers have the same experience—even among care for similar health conditions. However, there are some common milestones on the caregiver’s journey, and it’s valuable to have an overview of the process to ahead.

Your family’s experience will be mapped out together with your service member’s medical care team. Below is a typical timeline from injury through reintegration into the home community.



## Being prepared

If your service member is injured or becomes suddenly ill, there will be a rapid shift in your daily life. And, if you’ve taken the time to prepare for the possibility of taking on a caregiving role, you will be more readily able to respond. Organization is key to managing the sudden or unexpected.

If you have previously created an emergency or contingency plan for your family or household (strategies

for emergency preparedness were discussed in the **pre-deployment chapter**), begin by considering what additional information will be useful to those who may take your place when you are occupied with caregiving responsibilities. For example, add information regarding yard maintenance, bill payments, pets, mail delivery, and standing obligations. If you have children, their needs must be considered as well. Putting this information on paper will allow you to focus on your service member and leave the rest to designated friends.

If your service member is injured, you will receive notification through the proper official channels. However, in this age of connectivity, you may also hear from others informally (through social media or other word of mouth), and this may be a confusing time. Once the facts are known, your primary contact will be your service branch program liaison (Army Wounded Warrior Program [AW2], Marine Corps Wounded Warrior Regiment, Navy Safe Harbor, Special Operations Command Care Coalition, or the Air Force Wounded Warrior Program).



*“My call came from a friend in my son’s unit. The official call came six hours later. We had an Emergency Plan; so, while I was not prepared, I was ready. Somehow I got myself to Landstuhl and traveled with my son to Walter Reed. The people on my Emergency Plan were amazing, and looking back, I don’t know how we managed it—but we did.”*

*—Army parent*

Emotionally, there are many challenges ahead. It is absolutely normal to be shocked, frightened, angry, confused, and overwhelmed. There may be significant confusion and conflicting messages, which will become untangled in time. Rest assured that you will receive instructions from the command and have the ability to ask questions and have them answered. Remember to keep good notes. And, don’t forget to rely on those closest to you for support.

Practically speaking, you may experience a sudden introduction to the military medical system, an adjustment to the injuries or illness of your family member, and an acute need to learn the hospital culture and language. You will probably also undergo a temporary relocation to provide care. This is where your emergency plan will be helpful, as the sudden dislocation and numerous tasks can be overwhelming. Being thrust into an unknown situation with a new set of acronyms and people is not easy (an abbreviated list of acronyms commonly used in the caregiving community is provided at the end of this section). These changes require adjustments for both you and your service member.

*“My world stopped when the call came in. Once my daughter arrived at Walter Reed, I was thrust into a world unknown. I knew next to nothing about military culture or language. But, I knew she was in a coma and unable to communicate for herself. That time period is a blur, and I learned about the details much later. I carried a notebook and wrote everything down because I would have fallen apart without a plan to make her healthy again. Those notes helped us too many times to count.”*

*—Marine parent*



## Beginning the Journey

### Hospitalization

Suddenly your whole world is the hospital and your entire focus is your service member. It is not uncommon for a service member to be injured in-theater and arrive in the States as quickly as forty-eight or seventy-two hours afterward. You will most likely have a significant medical learning curve and encounter a flurry of logistics that must be managed immediately.

For now, the most important emotional connection is with your injured spouse, adult child, or friend. Initially, this can be a numbing experience. However, many have gone before you and these caregivers will often become your best source of support and information. Depending on the type of injuries,

your service member may exhibit a wide gamut of emotions—or may not be able to communicate at all. Remember, he is also experiencing a possibly bewildering sense of reality, so warmth and reassurance is crucial. Studies show that the presence of a compassionate caregiver who advocates and collaborates with her service member promotes better physical and mental health outcomes.

## Medical team

Your service member will gain access to exceptional care at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center or other intake hospital, and you will receive specific information about the hospital process and the specific service branch liaison for your injured service member. You will receive large amounts of information in the early days and you will have many questions. Though this may be a very confusing time, focus



on taking each day by itself and remember that small steps of progress add up to recovery. The medical team will work closely with you as they map out a Comprehensive Care Plan (CCP) for your service member. As the caregiver, you are considered an integral part of that team.

*“A triad? I had no idea what that was, but I learned that it’s the medical team, made up of the PCM (Primary Care Manager), the NCM (Nurse Case Manager), and the Squad Leader. Usually only the Squad Leader rotates while you’re in care, so this team is very important to your warrior. Stay close here and learn to communicate well, since it makes a difference if you work together.”*

*—Army spouse*

It is very important for you to keep excellent notes and records during the healing journey. Observe the effects of medications, and research their use, learn as much as possible about the medical conditions (physical trauma as well as mental health injuries), and educate yourself through the various programs offered by the hospital. Your observations and information are extremely valuable in the care and modifications to care of your service member. Additionally, a patient advocate and/or programs administered through the National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE) can also play an important role in the acute and recovery phases. Make sure to ask your hospital staff about all your options.

As a caregiver, you will help your service member achieve greater independence and capability as her recovery progresses. Know your service member, reasonably challenge her and yourself, and the milestone goals you set forth will increase her self-confidence as they are achieved.

*“I may never be able to do everything I did before my injury, but I’m going to work to be the best that I’m able to be now”.*

*—Navy corpsman*

## Walter Reed or other intake hospital

Walter Reed is currently launching a new program that centralizes all vetted resources for the family of a recovering service member in a closed iPad application, which is for your use while at the hospital. This is anticipated to be customized for other intake hospital specifics in the future. Part of the educational experience while at the hospital is accessing the wisdom and experience of other caregivers. (You may also hear caregivers referred to as Non-Medical Attendants, or NMA's, in your branch of service). This close communication and shared understanding with others caring for their service members provides peer support and can help you maintain a more balanced perspective if you become fatigued or feel overwhelmed.

It is crucial to maintain comprehensive records during the entire course of your service member’s recovery since there will be an evaluation process for either continuation in the military or separation and retirement from service. Documentation and communication notes are very

important, and many caregivers find that a three-ring binder is a good organizational tool for paper records. You are also encouraged to keep electronic records and images on a thumb drive or file as the medical records process becomes more digitized. Documents you should collect and save might include:

- Medical appointment notes
- Wounded warrior command correspondence
- Physical therapy instructions
- Care team correspondence
- Calendar reminders
- Specialist referrals, noting purpose
- A full medication list



## Relationships and Communication

### The many faces of caregivers

In most cases, multiple family members can be transported to the medical treatment facility where the service member is sent (up to three members). However, once the service member is in outpatient care, generally it is only a single person assigned as a Non-Medical Attendant (NMA). The NMA is provided lodging with the service member, as well as a per diem. These orders are extendable each month and are renewed or cancelled based on professional opinion of the care team.



In the past, the majority of policy and programs were designed for spousal caregivers, but there is now increased recognition of the rising number of parent, friend, or other family caregivers. Among the types of caregivers, there are both similarities and differences in the caregiver experience. There are also variations in each service branch or status (active, National Guard, and Reserve). *All* caregivers are very important to the recovery and rehabilitation of the service member, and full recovery may take many months or even years, depending on the severity of the injury or illness. It may help you to consider a team approach to caregiving, and using all appropriate resources will help you on this journey.



## **Relationships and Communication: Spouse/Partner**

Spousal caregivers are military dependents and will continue to receive medical benefits while caregiving. However, working spouses may not be able to continue their professional work or education and this adjustment can be particularly difficult. “Life interrupted” coupled with job or education losses can add layers to the emotional trauma of your spouse’s injury, and communication between you is more important than ever as you both adapt to new circumstances.

*“We were at Walter Reed for almost three years. At first, I thought my husband would be in the hospital and outpatient for maybe six to*

*eight weeks. Then, it was another six months. Sometimes I thought that we weren't told of the time because it would have broken us in the beginning. Now I know that everyone heals at a different pace, and it's not possible to know ahead of time. I'm glad I didn't know the final count!"*

*—Marine spouse*

Close quarters, multiple appointments, physical therapy, occupational therapy, vocational rehabilitation, exhaustion, and group living all can take a toll on your relationship with your service member. Intimacy with your partner may be challenging due to injuries or the hospital environment, and frank, open communication between couples and their medical team is encouraged. Setting boundaries and establishing a new normal between caregivers and their service member is also important. There is a deepening understanding among medical staff that personal relationships and physical issues are eased through gentle, supportive communication.

*"Early on, no one was talking about the practical and important needs of couples. But marriage is about closeness, and we had to work on regaining trust in one another after things physically changed. Over time, other wives began to talk about these deeply personal issues, and I knew I wasn't alone."*

*—Army spouse*

Many injured service members had anticipated a twenty-year career in the military and this may now no longer be possible. This change can be felt as an enormous loss. You both may be grieving the loss of what you'd intended for the future. In many cases, talking with professionals or a fellow battle buddy may help in the gradual realization that the future has changed. Spouses find that there can be relationship strains while both adjust to these new circumstances, and counseling can be a constructive way to address your new feelings and concerns.



## **Relationships and Communication: Child**

Children need age-appropriate communication throughout the recovery process. Through the service branch liaisons, you can request assistance in materials, counseling, and activities that help children understand, verbalize, and accept the changes in their lives. A majority of military children attend public school, but teachers and school advisors are often unfamiliar with the military. Nearly everyone will be supportive, but they may not know how to help. It is a good idea to make your children's schools aware of the situation and to ask for the help you may need in forming a unified message. A reasonable sharing of information encourages family cohesion and lessens fear of the unknown. Also, it is important to take full advantage of child and family programs at the hospital (for example, Austin's Playroom for children six to twelve years for up to twenty-five hours/week at Walter Reed) and



in the community with numerous nonprofit organizations that provide grants for camp, sports, arts, and tutoring, as well as local drop-off events for young children near the hospital campus. Several of these resources are listed in the **resources chapter** of this handbook.

*“Our children were amazing. They were the most honest and direct in talking about the injuries. ‘What did they do with your arm? Will it grow back? Daddy, why are you mad at me?’ It’s so important to be honest with them.”*

—Army spouse



## Relationships and Communication: Parent

Parent caregivers have a slightly different dynamic than spouse caregivers. As non-dependents, medical care and benefits are not automatically provided, though this is changing and improving. For previously physically fit and fully independent service members, it can be both comforting and unsettling to be dependent on a parent or parents for care. For the parent, living with your adult child may be something you left behind years ago. Group living can also be a tough adjustment for parents. Fortunately, newly designed living quarters at Walter Reed and elsewhere help ease this adjustment.

*“Living with my son took some getting used to and we both chafed at the weird situation as*

*he began to recover. Yet, without my help, he wouldn't be as far along as he is. Today, our relationship is stronger than ever, and looking back, it was hard, but amazing."*

*—Navy parent*

Parent caregivers may be nearing retirement age, so professional and/or financial issues are very important. There may also be significant grieving for the loss of professional opportunity and fulfillment and sorrow for the changed circumstances of their child. All of these tensions must be managed as you forge a new and different relationship with your service member.



Parents who are married must leave their spouses while caring for their service member while on base and parents who are estranged must find ways to put aside their own relationship issues to prioritize their service member. The added toll of trying to explain the sometimes complicated military system to a spouse who lives elsewhere is demanding. At times like this, you may feel as though your world has become a size too small. However, parent caregivers are also given access to mental health support and both spouse and parent caregivers may also take advantage of community resources to gain a broader perspective if they need it. You may also qualify for utilization of the Family and Medical Leave Act. Here is a Department of Labor fact sheet which will help familiarize you with the benefits of the FMLA: [www.dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov).

*“My husband had no patience or understanding of the day-to-day caregiving, even after a three-day stint in my shoes. He thought he could change the hospital, clear up the red tape, and move things along better than I could. He made me feel inadequate. After two more brief stays, he finally saw the bureaucracy of such a large system, and while not accepting it, he knows it’s not as simple as he first judged.”*

*—Army parent*

You could also be in the situation where your service member’s spouse becomes his main caregiver, in which case your role, as a parent, will be no less important. Your son or daughter in-law will need your full support in order to

successfully care for your child. Be open and honest with your child's spouse, but be sensitive and allow them space to shift into their new role.



## Relationships and Communication: Extended Family and Friends

When any caregiver visits home, they often find that their home community and even the extended family have no accurate idea of the responsibilities they are shouldering. Remember that many Americans assume that all care

and support of your service member is being handled by medical professionals. Even though there is a growing understanding of the critical role of caregiving, do not be surprised if you are educating others as you explain what you do day after day. It's a good objective to share your experience and to spread awareness, but remember to protect yourself as much as needed. Caregiving is a sometimes draining experience and you must set the priorities for yourself. You can identify ways to disclose your story on terms you are comfortable with.



## Caregiving for Visible and Invisible Injuries

Many caregivers have found that understanding the timeline of care and obtaining treatment for physical injuries is more straightforward than for invisible injuries (PTSD and TBI). Emotionally, you will want to educate yourself on both conditions, since this knowledge will help you communicate better with your service member. As you've read in other chapters, **TBI** may be mild or severe, and there are some challenges to communication (short temper, loss of short-term memory, frustration, and lack of verbal filters are some examples) with both **PTSD** or TBI that may be confusing or hurtful if you are not prepared. It is possible that your service member may verbally lash out at you or behave differently than what you were used to; this is normal, and these behaviors may improve over time. Persevere in obtaining help for both you and your service member to address and overcome these challenges.

*“My husband has a TBI and short-term memory loss. He forgets to turn the stove off. He forgets his meds and would miss appointments if we hadn’t worked out a smartphone alarm reminder system. He still lashes out in anger sometimes due to frustration. Without the counseling for his TBI, we wouldn’t be married today. He has learned to take a deep breath, stop, and think before he says angry words. It has helped us.”*

*—Army spouse*

This can be a very stressful time for a family, and you will need to be proactive in seeking help. Ask for what you need and seek out help for yourself and for your children in understanding this very unusual time. With dedication and good communication, this can be a very bonding experience for a family, and there are many resources to help.



## **Continuing the Journey: The Official Support System**

[Federal recovery coordinators and regional recovery coordinators](#)

### **Active Duty (DoD)**

There are two types of specialty support coordinators available for service members and caregivers: Federal Recovery Coordinators and Regional Recovery Coordinators.

Generally, Recovery Care Coordinators (RCCs) are assigned or requested for those with less severe injuries and assist service members and their families by providing non-medical support and guidance. These highly trained professionals are vital contacts to assist you in coordinating care and appointments, learning about certain medical conditions, and understanding recovery expectations. RCCs are managed by the DoD and will work closely with you to obtain the appropriate support required.

Federal Recovery Coordinators (FRCs) are assigned (or may be requested) for severely injured service members. A FRC will work with the integrated care team, service member, and caregiver to develop a Federal Individual Recovery Plan (FIRP). FRCs, managed by the VA, are invaluable resources for the family during the recovery and transition period.

*“Our FRC was amazing. She talked me through every step of the process and was available at reasonable hours. Most of the time, she reached out to me before I lost it, and that meant the world to us.”*

*—Army spouse*

## Transition from active duty to veteran status

### **Transition Process: IDES, MEB, PEB**

If the injuries or illness sustained are deemed incompatible with continued military service, you and your service member will work with a team of experts to obtain benefits ratings through a process known as Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES). You will be guided through this



process by a team of experts and the service member will be evaluated by a Medical Evaluation Board (MEB) and a Physical Evaluation Board (PEB). During this time, the MEB and PEB will determine the extent of recovery, the long-term effects of the injuries, and the future continuation or separation from the military.

***“This part of transition was rough. We were tired of our lives on hold, and of waiting for exams, meetings, and reports that had to be re-done due to mistakes. Don’t shirk this job—it’s the only way to ensure your warrior gets the ratings and benefits that he or she has earned.”***

***—Army spouse***

This process is critically important to conduct carefully, as eligibility for lifelong benefits are determined during this

process. We encourage service members to utilize all the resources available to them and their caregivers to assist with this very necessary process. Asking questions about things you don't understand and keeping good records are musts. Additionally, there are many veterans service organizations (VSO's) that provide volunteer legal and benefits experts to assist.

Once completed, the service member now transitions to veteran status and care will be provided through the VA. As a veteran caregiver, you will now be provided access to additional services, benefits, and opportunities.

## Long-term caregiving

### **Veteran (VA)**

Once the transition process is complete, a caregiver can access [www.caregiver.va.gov](http://www.caregiver.va.gov) and apply online for inclusion in the Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers Program by answering a series of questions. This program extends a stipend for family caregivers who are caring for veterans. There is an application process, training and other requirements in order to enroll. For questions, the VA can be contacted at 1-877-222-VETS (8387).

Veterans must be enrolled for VA health services to qualify, and must be in need of personal care services because of an inability to perform one or more activities of daily living and/or need supervision or protection based on symptoms or residuals of neurological impairment or injury (e.g., traumatic brain injury, psychological trauma, or other mental disorder) incurred or aggravated in the line of duty on or after September 11, 2001.

Services for this group include: monthly stipend, travel expenses (e.g., lodging, per diem while accompanying veterans undergoing care), access to health care insurance (if the caregiver is not already entitled to care or services under a health care plan), mental health services and counseling, comprehensive VA caregiving training provided by Easter Seals, and respite care (not less than 30 days per year).

**Caregiver Support Line**  
**1-855-260-3274**

In 2010, the U.S. Congress passed legislation entitled Special Compensation for Assistance with Activities of Daily Living (SCAADL). A Department of Defense (DoD) program, the SCAADL provides a special monthly stipend for service members who have a permanent catastrophic injury or illness.

For more information about this new benefit, and how to apply, go to [www.warriorcare.mil](http://www.warriorcare.mil), call 1-571-256-4516, or email [warriorcare@osd.mil](mailto:warriorcare@osd.mil). A description of the program is on the MyArmyBenefits website at [myarmybenefits.us.army.mil](http://myarmybenefits.us.army.mil).

The DoD program is available until ninety days after separation from active duty. Ideally, as one transitions out of service there would be an application to the VA Caregiver Program as the service member transitions from the DoD to the VA.

*“Sometimes my DH’s (dear husband’s) frustration at his PTSD would grow to be nearly out of control. This is when we verbally hit our ‘Stop’ button and followed our plan of communication. He sat down on one end of the couch, I sat on the other, and we talked about what I saw happening. We had also agreed on next steps if we could not agree or work it through alone. This has been a lifesaver for us.”*

*—Army spouse*

As a veteran caregiver, continued communication, planning, and evolving practical changes for ease of household and daily living tasks remain important. This is a very good time to make a communication plan that also includes a mutually agreed upon “Stop” signal, for you and your veteran to immediately halt and discuss whatever tempers begin to flare. Again, planning ahead for this eventuality gives you a structure to follow and a pre-planned solution for dealing with tense situations.

For those with mental health injuries, there are multiple options for counseling and therapy, including Telehealth, group outpatient programs, inpatient intensive programs, and a growing number of programs for the family.

**Remember that some injuries take time to present themselves, so continue to be alert to behavior, medications, and any changes in the veteran’s medical condition.** Be attentive when medications are changed and you observe insomnia, lethargy, aggression, or hyperactivity, or when sudden dizziness and balance

issues occur, which might indicate an undiagnosed medical condition. Bring up changes in behavior, personality, or communication style (such as anger, lack of verbal filters, or uncharacteristic silences) with your health professional.

## Caregiver challenges and support

The **Wounded Warrior Project Resource Center** serves and supports warriors, their caregivers, and families through a multichannel contact center. In addition to responding to specific resource requests, the Resource Center representatives actively reach out to warriors and caregivers to engage them in available programs and services. The Resource Center is equipped to help warriors, caregivers, and family members identify resources for example, registering as an Alumni or family member to participate in WWP programs and services; answering questions about WWP programs and services; connecting with a WWP benefits liaison; identifying appropriate financial assistance options; finding resources to aid in accessibility modifications; and locating resources to provide emotional support.

Over time, and with the help of your care team and caregiver peer support, you will notice the normalizing of your days, and you may be surprised at your resilience. It is very important to take care of yourself, since you

are now the primary point of contact for your family in terms of communication, progress, and updates. Family communication can be centralized and even scheduled so that you are not responding to many concerned, well-meaning callers while your concentration is on your service member. Recognize that this too can be stressful, and being kind to yourself while you adapt is important.



Many caregivers benefit from connecting to online and offline peer support groups where caregivers can gather and share their best ideas on how to manage the demands of their lifestyle. Social media is also very popular, but only participate in activities that build you up, rather than add

stress to your day. Use your well-earned discernment and experience to find what works best for you!

Connecting veterans to other veteran battle buddies has also proven very helpful and there are organizations that can assist you in finding a battle buddy for your own veteran if that would help. Explore and consider adopting a service dog into your family if it would increase the independence of your veteran. Expect more adjustments as the transition is made into the community, and know that caregiving, while challenging, can also be uniquely rewarding. Many caregivers report personal growth, expanded support and social networks, and increased sense of self-worth from their experiences.

*“I have PTSD and I had never had a dog before, but my psychiatrist encouraged me to try. He said the dog would become my best friend and he was right. I now have another puppy and we are all doing great. My dogs are labeled emotional support dogs and can fly on airplanes and accompany me just about everywhere.”*

*—Army veteran*

Veterans face certain challenges as they reintegrate into their communities. Caregivers, in their support role, increasingly share these challenges as well:

- It may be difficult to find a new life goal or purpose.
- It may be difficult to adapt from the military culture into a community that doesn't understand it.

- After the initial welcome, “life” arrives, and it may look different than you’d anticipated.
- Children may have difficulty fitting in after being exposed to this new experience.
- Family members may need education in PTSD and invisible injuries to better understand you.
- Secondary PTSD may be an issue for both caregiver and children; please mention this to your primary physician so that counseling and support may be provided.
- There may be a second time of grieving for an out-of-reach job or educational opportunity.
- There may be difficulties with home and transportation accessibility (the VA has special grants to assist you).
- There may be a deep sense of loss for the close support group and unit mentality of the hospital environment.

## **Family Caregiver Curriculum**

**[www.dvbic.org](http://www.dvbic.org)**

DVBIC’s Family Caregiver Curriculum is for caregivers of service members and veterans with moderate to severe TBI. There are four modules in the curriculum, ranging from specific information about TBI and becoming a caregiver to how to access services and benefits. There are print versions of the guides as well as webcasts that can be viewed online.

All of these situations can be met and managed with the assistance of your extended family, your CSC, friends, and community organizations that specifically support returning veterans. The good news is that most veterans and their families continue to adapt to the changing medical conditions and begin to “thrive where they are planted.” Military families are among the most resilient in the world, and you are no exception!



## Self-Care

### Caregiver health and wellness

Excellent self-care is essential. If you are unable to sustain your caregiving responsibilities due to physical or emotional drain, the entire family will be affected. Work very hard to schedule (yes, schedule) time for yourself as you continue to provide care. Physical fitness, good nutrition, positive outlets and activities will keep you in a healthier condition, and better able to “bend, but not break” as life’s inevitable emergencies occur.

Explore new ways of exercise such as yoga or Pilates that provide both relaxation and a great workout. Make time to be with friends by yourself and take advantage of community and faith-based events. If formal respite care is possible in your case, schedule it regularly, as alone time is also re-energizing. You are the “heartbeat of the family,” and you are important—make time for yourself. Your family will thank you.



Eat healthy foods and take time to eat on a regular schedule rather than on the run or between appointments as much as possible. Find space in your schedule for quiet, contemplative times. Discover at least one thing that calms you when you've reached a mental mountain, whether it's active or passive. Seek counseling for yourself, as a couple, or as a family if you feel it would help you. Connection with other caregivers can also be a great support, and realize that your role will continue to evolve and change. Remain gentle and realistic about setting your own expectations.

Consider journaling or keeping a gratitude notebook. Celebrate the small milestones of returning to "normal" life, such as a successful grocery trip, a family holiday that went relatively smoothly, or mastering a new hobby. If you're able to resume your education or career, relish the progress, and make new friends along the way. Work at keeping yourself "whole," and try to make good choices in focusing on the present.

## How to help a caregiver

Caregiving can be an isolating experience, both from the tasks associated with caregiving and the possible emotional barrier between the caregiver and others not coping with the same issues. Some friends may not wish to see a visual reminder of what their world could become. Compassionate, drama-free friends can be a valuable source of strength.

Caregivers appreciate that friends and extended family offer help and assistance, but it can also be difficult to articulate what would be most helpful. While in the hospital, visitor access is very limited, but gift cards are welcomed since they can be used when convenient for the caregiver. A caregiver may not be able to take respite or time away from the service member in the near term, but she may welcome a discussion about when the time is right for your support. Rather than showing up on the spot with a gift, talk to the caregiver about what she needs (e.g., a new book, a loaded iPod with favorite music, an offer of carry-in food favorites) and when. Respite or time away from the service member may not be possible immediately, but entering a discussion with some timely ideas is well-received—forcing the caregiver to think up something on the spot for the friend to deliver.

Caregivers appreciate the meaningful emotional support that comes through active listening and continued acknowledgement during this often-long recovery period; short notes or a special card are significant. As a friend, please don't always expect a response to your efforts as this is when a true gift with nothing expected in return is needed.

Outside the hospital and in the community, many veterans and their families are eager to renew their friendships, and controlled group outings, where friends gather together, may help allow a caregiver to enjoy the evening or day event. If it's possible to get away for an hour or more, again offer some ideas (massage, pedicure, an hour free to read, an on-site yoga class perhaps) to provide the caregiver options. Sending a cartoon or a video link can provide much-needed laughter, and these small efforts are very thoughtful.

There may be physical or emotional limitations to be managed, but caregivers sincerely appreciate that their role is recognized and affirmed, that they find time for respite in being with others, and that laughter and joy is key to feeling normal again. Frequently, veterans say they are grateful for honest, open, and accepting friends, which in turn helps the caregiver. Finally, keep a kind eye on your caregiver friend or relative, since silence or isolation is usually a signal that something has changed. Be present, be compassionate, and listen well.



## Being Informed

Information provided in the caregiving chapter of this book is based on and can be further researched in the following:

- “Caregivers of Veterans—Serving the Homefront”:  
[www.caregiving.org](http://www.caregiving.org).
- “Caregiver Support in the Veterans Health Administration: Caring For Those Who Care”:  
[www.tomah.va.gov](http://www.tomah.va.gov).

- “Testing Care Coordination for Veterans with Dementia”: [www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org).
- “Trauma Faced by Children of Military Families”: [www.nccp.org](http://www.nccp.org).
- Department of Veterans Affairs FY 2013 Funding and FY 2014 Advance Appropriations Request: [www.va.gov/budget](http://www.va.gov/budget).

## Resource list

### Wounded Warrior Programs

- Air Force Wounded Warrior Program: [www.woundedwarrior.af.mil](http://www.woundedwarrior.af.mil).
- Warrior Program (AW2): [www.wtc.army.mil](http://www.wtc.army.mil).
- Navy Wounded Warrior Safe Harbor Program: [safeharbor.navylive.dodlive.mil](http://safeharbor.navylive.dodlive.mil).
- Special Operations Command Care Coalition: [www.socom.mil](http://www.socom.mil).
- USMC Wounded Warrior Regiment: [www.woundedwarriorregiment.org](http://www.woundedwarriorregiment.org).
- The Wounded Warrior Project Resource Center: [www.woundedwarriorproject.org](http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org).
- Warriors to Work Program: [www.woundedwarriorproject.org](http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org).

### Service Member and Family Support

- DoD and VA Family Services: [www.pdhealth.mil/hss/smfss.asp](http://www.pdhealth.mil/hss/smfss.asp) (comprehensive list of web links and telephone/online chat helplines).

- National Resource Directory: [www.nrd.gov](http://www.nrd.gov).
- Fisher House™ Foundation: [www.fisherhouse.org](http://www.fisherhouse.org).

## **Medical Conditions**

- DCoE TBI Resources: [www.dcoe.health.mil](http://www.dcoe.health.mil).
- Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center: [www.dvbic.org](http://www.dvbic.org).
- DCoE PTSD Treatment Options: [www.dcoe.health.mil/ForHealthPros](http://www.dcoe.health.mil/ForHealthPros).
- DCoE Clinical Training Manuals: [www.dcoe.health.mil/training](http://www.dcoe.health.mil/training).
- Make The Connection, Medical Conditions: [maketheconnection.net/conditions/ptsd](http://maketheconnection.net/conditions/ptsd).
- NIMH/NIH, PTSD, and Mental Health Disorders: [www.nimh.nih.gov/health](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health).
- PTSD for Veterans and Families: [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov).
- VA Polytrauma Terminology and Conditions: [www.polytrauma.va.gov](http://www.polytrauma.va.gov).
- VA Guide to Mental Health Resources: [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs).

## **IDES and Benefits**

- DoD Compensation and Benefits Handbook: [warriorcare.dodlive.mil/files](http://warriorcare.dodlive.mil/files).
- IDES Overview: [warriorcare.dodlive.mil/disability-evaluation/ides](http://warriorcare.dodlive.mil/disability-evaluation/ides).
- IDES and Disability Evaluation: [warriorcare.dodlive.mil/disability-evaluation](http://warriorcare.dodlive.mil/disability-evaluation).

- Wounded Warrior Social Security Disability: [www.ssa.gov/woundedwarriors](http://www.ssa.gov/woundedwarriors).
- Caregiver Benefits Summary: [www.militaryfamily.org/your-benefits](http://www.militaryfamily.org/your-benefits).
- Veterans Benefits Handbook: [www.va.gov/opa](http://www.va.gov/opa).
- TRICARE Special Programs: [www.tricare.mil](http://www.tricare.mil).
- VA eBenefits: [www.ebenefits.va.gov](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov).

## **Acronym and Terminology Index**

Excerpted from the Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs Terminology and Acronym Listings

**A&A** - Aid and Attendance

**AMA** - Against Medical Advice

**AW2** - Army Wounded Warrior Program

**AO** - Agent Orange

**BDD** - Benefits Delivery at Discharge

**BIRU** - Brain Injury Rehab Unit

**BVA** - Board of Veterans Appeals

**CBOC** - Community Based Outpatient Clinic

**CBWTU** - Army Community Based Warrior Transition Unit

**C&P** - Compensation and Pension Examination (VA)

**C&C** - Confirmed and Continued (rating continuance)

**CCP** - Comprehensive Care Plan (Wounded Warrior)

**CHAMPVA** - Civilian Health & Medical Plan -  
Veteran

**COAD** - Continuation on Active Duty (AD)

**COAR** - Continuation on Active Reserve (AR)

**COAVC or COVA** - U.S. Court of Appeals for  
Veterans Claims

**Comp** - Service-Connected Disability Compensation

**COTA** - Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant

**CSF** - Comprehensive Soldier Fitness

**CTP** - Comprehensive Transition Plan (Intake,  
Assessment, Goal Setting, CTP Review,  
Rehabilitation, Pre-Transition, Post-Transition)

**CWV** - Center for Women Veterans

**DA199** - Army Physical Evaluation Board Proceedings

**DEA** - Dependency Education Allowance

**DD214** - Certificate of Release or Discharge from  
Active Duty

**DIC** - Dependency and Indemnity Compensation

**DOM** - Domiciliary

**DRO** - Decision Review

**DTAP** - Disabled Transition Assistance Program

**DVBIC** - Defense and Veteran Brain Injury Center

**DVOP** - Disabled Veterans Outreach Program

**EAD** - Entry on Active Duty

**E2I** - Education and Employment Initiative

**EHR** - Electronic Health Record

**EVR** - Eligibility Verification Report

**FOIA** - Freedom of Information Act

**FRC** - Federal Recovery Coordinator

**GAF** - Global Assessment of Functioning

**IOC** - Independent Outpatient Clinic

**IU** - Individual Unemployability

**IVAP** - Income for VA Purposes

**IVM** - Income Verification Match

**LOD** - Line of Duty (determination of eligibility)

**MAR2** - Military Assessment Retention Review

**MEB** - Medical Evaluation Board

**MMI** - Maximum Medical Improvement

**MOS** - Military Occupational Specialty (work category)

**MRDP** - Medical Retention Determination Point

**MST** - Military Sexual Trauma (rape and assault)

**NARSUM** - Narrative Summary for warrior injuries used in the IDES process

**NCM** - Nurse Case Manager (part of the care triad)

**NOD** - Notice of Disagreement

**NPRC** - National Personnel Records Center

**NSC** - Non-Service Connected

**NW** - Net Worth

**OEF** - Operation Enduring Freedom

**OIF** - Operation Iraqi Freedom

**OIG** - Office of the Inspector General

**OP** - Outpatient Clinic

**OND** - Operation New Dawn

**OT** - Occupational Therapy

**PCM** - Primary Care Manager

**PDO** - Per Diem Only

**POA** - Power of Attorney; HCPOA is Health Care Power of Attorney

**P&T** - Permanent and Total

**PRC** - Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center

**PTSD** - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

**RAD** - Release from Active Duty Date

**Rating Schedule** - VA's Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD); contains criteria for evaluating disabilities to determine the degree of physical or mental impairment in earning capacity resulting from the disabilities

**RCC** - Readjustment Counseling Center (Vet Center)

**SBP** - Survivor's Benefits Plan

**SC** - Service-Connected

**SCAADL** - Special Compensation for Assistance with Activities of Daily Living

**SL** - Squad Leader

**SMC** - Special Monthly Compensation

**SMP** - Special Monthly Pension

**SMR** - Service Medical Record

**SOC** - Statement of the Case

**SSI** - Supplemental Social Security Income

**TBI** - Traumatic Brain Injury (sometimes called concussion)

**TDRL** - Temporary Disability Retirement List

**TRICARE** - Military's managed health care system

**VBA** - Veterans Benefits Administration

**VACO** - VA Central Office (Washington, D.C.)

**VAMC** - VA Medical Center

**VARO** - VA Regional Office

**VAOPT** - VA Outpatient Treatment Clinic

**VAMROC** - VA Medical and Regional Office Center

**VEAP** - Veterans Education Assistance Program

**VET Centers** - VA Community-based Readjustment Counseling Centers primarily for PTSD, war trauma, and/or sexual assault (MST)

**VETS** - DOL's Veterans Employment and Training Service

**VGLI** - Veterans Group Life Insurance

**VHA** - Veterans Health Administration; health care administration

**VISN** - Veterans Integrated Services Network, twenty-three geographic health networks within VH

**VRA** - Veterans Readjustment Act/Appointment

**VR** - Vocational Rehabilitation (Voc Rehab)

**WVHP** - Women Veterans Health Program



## Preparation Guide: Taking Care of the Details When You Become a Caregiver

If you suddenly become a caregiver, you will likely be in shock. This is a hard time to begin thinking about all the details you need to address. Use the list below to help you begin to think about what you need to do, what to bring to the hospital, and what to pack for yourself and your service member. **Consider that you might be gone for thirty days or more.**

### What to pack:

- Clothing, taking into account the weather and season (e.g., do you need a jacket?), and the need for comfort (sweatpants). Remember extra socks and comfortable shoes.
- Comfortable pajamas and robes for yourself and your service member
- Prescription medication and toiletries
- Cell phone and electronics (e.g., laptops and cords), including chargers and special batteries
- Comfort items for yourself, service member, and children (special blankets, stuffed animals, pillows, braces, etc.)
- Important phone numbers, addresses, and email contacts
- Glasses or contact lenses (including replacements and cases)

- Ear plugs or sleep mask, in case you need to sleep in the hospital
- Activities for children, if appropriate (small games, electronics, crayons)
- Calendars or journal to relieve stress or help record details

### Documents to bring:

- Power of Attorney (POA)
- Driver's license and proof of insurance (in case you need a rental car)
- Immunization records for your children, if they come with you (in the event they need to attend daycare)
- Copy of your latest leave and earning statement (LES)
- Original prescriptions for yourself, your service member, and your children (including eyeglasses, contact lenses, EpiPens, etc.)
- Health insurance information (e.g., phone number, sponsor's social security number)
- Important contact numbers
- Copy of service member's Deployment Orders
- Bank information (e.g., routing numbers, phone numbers), credit cards, check book, account numbers
- Passport, if needed

## Household preparations:

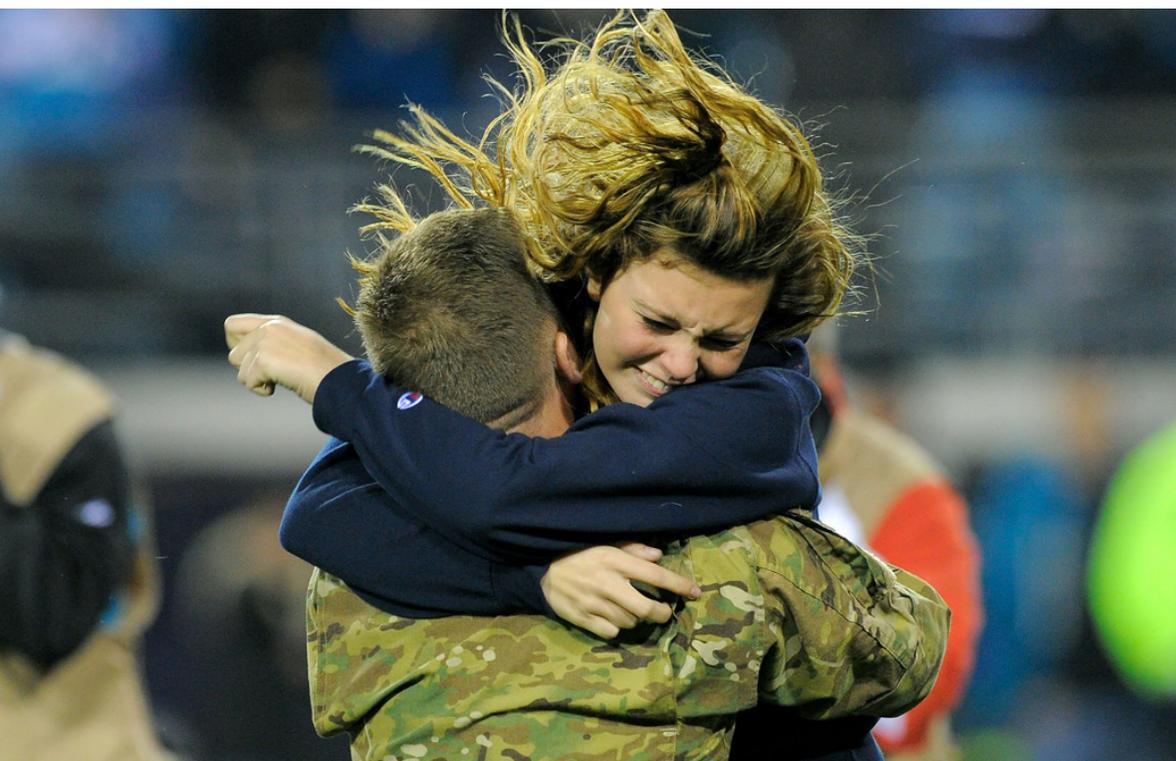
- Stop the delivery of the mail and newspaper, or arrange to have someone come by and pick it up for you.
- Work with your job's human resources office to arrange time off from work (using vacation time or the Family and Medical Leave Act), and let schools know of your plans if you have children.
- Arrange care for pets (you may need pet immunization records and vet information).
- Contact insurance companies (e.g., homeowners, auto, health, long-term care) to make necessary arrangements.
- Schedule bill payments (there are many agencies that allow for online payments).
- Inform a trusted friend or family member of your plans; they can be your go-between for information dissemination if you need them to be. Also, provide them with a key to your house or apartment in the event they need to get in to send you something.
- Empty trash cans and dispose of perishable items (remember items in the fridge, too!).
- General household maintenance: Set thermostat at a lower temperature, arrange lawn care, lock car, secure doors and windows, and, if you rent, inform the landlord or property manager you will be gone.

# CONCLUSION

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This handbook has provided a basic understanding of the deployment and reintegration experiences as they impact the family and friends of service members. It is not meant to have been an exhaustive exploration of every aspect of the deployment and reintegration journey, but rather a representation of the common highs and lows that you might experience as a military family member or friend, along with assorted, highlighted “what if” scenarios and some suggested ways to approach them.

We encourage you to maintain your focus on building resilience in yourself, your family, and in your community networks by utilizing strategies that draw on your strengths



and develop skills to confront the challenges ahead. Continue to expand your knowledge by learning as much as you can about the occupational exposures of military service from a variety of sources and by referring back to this handbook to stimulate additional questions and important conversations within your family. Your experience as someone supporting a service member is a lifelong process with enduring benefits. However, the experience is not easy; taking the steps outlined throughout this guide is key to happiness and physical and emotional health.

The road ahead may be unpredictable. Yet, being prepared gives you and your service member a better chance for success. Working as an individual, as a family, and as a community of support to your service member will help you grow stronger from each deployment. This strength will then help provide the basis for a more comfortable reintegration period—whether your service member will be re-deployed in the future or is transitioning out of the military service.

Simply by taking a look through this handbook, you have demonstrated your commitment to the health and well-being of your service member, your family, and yourself. Everything you do to support your service member is important. Military families are the heart of our national defense; we know that every member of a military family serves in one way or another. And, it's your support and sacrifice that allows every sailor, soldier, Marine, airman, and Coast Guardsman to be the very best that he or she can be!



# RESOURCES

The following pages include selected resources that may prove helpful to your family as you navigate the military lifestyle and experience deployment and reintegration. We are continuing to expand this glossary of valuable tools and organizations, so please refer to our website at [everyoneserveshandbook.com](http://everyoneserveshandbook.com) for the most updated list. If you have recommendations for organizations, online communities, or tools that we should include, we welcome your ideas; please contact us at: [everyoneserveshandbook.com](http://everyoneserveshandbook.com).

## Department of Defense Resources

### **U.S. Department of Defense (DoD)**

[www.defense.gov](http://www.defense.gov)

Defense.gov supports the overall mission of the DoD by providing official, timely, and accurate information about defense policies, organizations, functions, and operations.

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### **After Deployment**

[www.afterdeployment.org](http://www.afterdeployment.org)

AfterDeployment.org offers modularized content for service members and their families on common post-deployment issues such as substance abuse, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), living with physical injuries, employment issues, and reconnecting with family and friends. Users can take assessments, view video-based testimonials, and immerse in narrator-guided workshops.

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## **Armed Forces Legal Assistance**

**[legalassistance.law.af.mil](http://legalassistance.law.af.mil)**

Armed Forces Legal Assistance helps to find a military legal assistance office based on geography.

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## **Brainlinemilitary**

**[www.brainlinemilitary.org](http://www.brainlinemilitary.org)**

Brainlinemilitary provides military-specific information and resources on traumatic brain injury (TBI) to veterans, service members, and their families.

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## **Center for Deployment Psychology (CDP)**

**[www.deploymentpsych.org](http://www.deploymentpsych.org)**

The Center for Deployment Psychology trains military and civilian behavioral health professionals to provide the high-quality care necessary to address the deployment-related needs of military personnel and their families.

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## **Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS)**

**[www.centerforthestudyoftraumaticstress.org](http://www.centerforthestudyoftraumaticstress.org)**

CSTS pioneers research in neuroscience and the neurobiology of stress to inform prevention, treatment, and resiliency-based interventions for trauma-induced disorders, especially PTSD and the risk and protective factors for suicide.

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## **Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE)**

**[www.dcoe.health.mil](http://www.dcoe.health.mil)**

DCoE advances excellence in psychological health (PH) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) prevention and care to improve the lives of our nation's service members and families. DCoE is comprised of three operational centers: Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC), Deployment Health Clinical Center (DHCC), and National Center for Telehealth and Technology (T2).

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## **Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS)— MyPay website**

<https://mypay.dfas.mil/mypay.aspx>

The MyPay website, sponsored by DFAS, gives each soldier and his or her family access to information about the service member's pay and Leave and Earning Statements (LES) twenty-four hours a day from anywhere in the world.

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## **Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC)**

[www.dvbic.org](http://www.dvbic.org)

[www.dvbic.org/friends-family](http://www.dvbic.org/friends-family) (friends and family section)

[www.dvbic.org/tbi-basics](http://www.dvbic.org/tbi-basics) (TBI basics)

DVBIC serves active-duty military and veterans with TBI, and their family members, through state-of-the-art medical care, innovative clinical research initiatives, and educational programs.

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## **Department of Defense Dictionary of Military Terms**

[www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod\\_dictionary](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary)

Browse the DoD's Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms to search acronyms, terms, and their definitions.

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## **Deployment Health Clinical Center, DHCC**

[www.pdhealth.mil](http://www.pdhealth.mil)

PDHealth.mil, the website of the DHCC, is designed to assist clinicians in the delivery of post-deployment health care by fostering a trusting partnership between military men and women, veterans, their families, and their health care providers to ensure the highest quality care for those who make sacrifices in the world's most hazardous workplace.

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## **Deployment Health and Family Readiness Library**

[deploymenthealthlibrary.fhp.osd.mil](http://deploymenthealthlibrary.fhp.osd.mil)

The Deployment Health and Family Readiness Library

provides access to deployment health and family readiness topics such as survivor benefits, financial readiness, and legal readiness.

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### **Family Caregiver Curriculum**

**[www.dvbic.org/family-caregiver-curriculum](http://www.dvbic.org/family-caregiver-curriculum)**

DVBIC's Family Caregiver Curriculum is for caregivers of service members and veterans with moderate to severe TBI. There are four modules in the curriculum, ranging from specific information about TBI and becoming a caregiver to how to access services and benefits. There are print versions of the guides as well as webcasts that can be viewed online.

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### **InTransition**

**[www.health.mil/inTransition](http://www.health.mil/inTransition)**

InTransition provides transition services to service members and veterans receiving mental health treatment who are moving between health care systems or providers (e.g., moving from active-duty to veteran status).

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### **Joint Family Support Assistance Program (JFSAP)**

**[www.militaryonesource.mil/jfsap/service-providers](http://www.militaryonesource.mil/jfsap/service-providers)**

The JFSAP's primary program supports families who are geographically dispersed from military installations. Services are delivered in local communities through collaborative partnerships with federal, state, and local resources.

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### **Military OneSource**

**[www.militaryonesource.mil](http://www.militaryonesource.mil)**

Military OneSource is a free service, provided by the DoD for active-duty, Guard, and Reserve service members and their families. The service is private and confidential, with few exceptions. Among other things, services include obtaining contact with military

installation family advocacy programs, military benefits, and local resources for military families.

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### **Military Pathways**

**[www.militarymentalhealth.org](http://www.militarymentalhealth.org)**

Military Pathways provides anonymous mental health self-assessments for family members and military personnel in all branches including National Guard and Reserves.

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### **The National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE)**

**[www.nicoe.capmed.mil](http://www.nicoe.capmed.mil)**

The NICoE is a DoD institute dedicated to providing cutting-edge health evaluation, treatment planning, and education for service members and their families dealing with the complex interactions of mild traumatic brain injury and psychological health conditions.

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### **National Resource Directory (NRD)**

**[www.nrd.gov](http://www.nrd.gov)**

The National Resource Directory is a website for wounded, ill, and injured service members, veterans, their families, and those who support them. It provides access to services and resources at the national, state, and local levels to support recovery, rehabilitation, and community reintegration.

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### **Real Warriors Campaign**

**[www.realwarriors.net](http://www.realwarriors.net)**

Real Warriors is a multimedia public awareness campaign that encourages help-seeking behavior among service members, veterans, and military families coping with invisible wounds. Launched by DCoE, the campaign is an integral part of the DoD's overall effort to reduce the stigma associated with psychological health concerns.

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## **Traumatic Brain Injury: The Journey Home**

**[www.traumaticbraininjuryatoz.org](http://www.traumaticbraininjuryatoz.org)**

A project of the Center of Excellence for Medical Multimedia, and sponsored by the Air Force Surgeon General's Office, this website provides an informative, sensitive exploration of TBI, and includes information for patients, family members, and caregivers.

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## **TRICARE**

**[www.tricare.mil](http://www.tricare.mil)**

TRICARE is the health care program serving service members, retirees, and their families worldwide.

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## **TurboTAP**

**[www.turbotap.org](http://www.turbotap.org)**

TurboTAP is the DoD's official website, providing information and resources for service members about transitioning from military service through the Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS), or Transition GPS program (formerly known as TAP).

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## **United States Special Operations Command Care Coalition**

**[www.socom.mil](http://www.socom.mil)**

The mission of USSOCOM Care Coalition is to provide Special Operations Forces (SOF) warriors and their families with a model advocacy program in order to enhance their quality of life and strengthen the overall readiness of Special Operations.

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## **USA4 Military Families**

**[www.usa4militaryfamilies.dod.mil](http://www.usa4militaryfamilies.dod.mil)**

USA4 Military Families is the DoD website for official Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP) and seeks to engage and educate state policy makers, nonprofit associations, concerned business interests,

and other state leaders about the needs of military members and their families.

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## **Air Force Resources**

Make sure to check out the DoD, Military Kids, General Governmental, and Non-Governmental resource sections for a full listing of services available to you and your family.

### **The United States Air Force**

**[www.af.mil](http://www.af.mil)**

The official home page of the U.S. Air Force

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### **Air Force Wounded Warrior**

**[www.woundedwarrior.af.mil](http://www.woundedwarrior.af.mil)**

The official home page of the Air Force Wounded Warrior program. The AFW2 program works to ensure airmen receive professional support and care from the point of injury through separation or retirement, for life.

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## **Army Resources**

Make sure to check out the DoD, Military Kids, General Governmental, and Non-Governmental resource sections for a full listing of services available to you and your family.

### **The United States Army**

**[www.army.mil](http://www.army.mil)**

The official home page of the U.S. Army

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### **Army Behavioral Health**

**[www.behavioralhealth.army.mil](http://www.behavioralhealth.army.mil)**

Army Behavioral Health is an official website of the

U.S. Army, providing post-deployment and transition resources for soldiers, families, and friends.

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### **Army Suicide Prevention Program**

**[www.armyg1.army.mil/hr/suicide](http://www.armyg1.army.mil/hr/suicide)**

The Army Suicide Prevention Program is the official U.S. Army suicide prevention resource, designed to minimize suicide behavior—thereby preserving mission effectiveness through individual readiness for soldiers, their families, and Department of the Army civilians. The website includes resources about suicide prevention but is NOT a suicide prevention hotline.

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### **Army Wife Network**

**[www.armywifenet.com](http://www.armywifenet.com)**

A resource started by Army wives, the Army Wife Network website now includes resources and information including articles and a resource database for all military spouses.

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### **Gold Star Mothers, U.S. Army**

**[www.army.mil/goldstarmothers](http://www.army.mil/goldstarmothers)**

This Army website provides links to resources and information to mothers of fallen soldiers.

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## **Coast Guard Resources**

Make sure to check out the DoD, Military Kids, General Governmental, and Non-Governmental resource sections for a full listing of services available to you and your family.

### **The United States Coast Guard**

**[www.uscg.mil](http://www.uscg.mil)**

The official home page of the U.S. Coast Guard

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## **CG SUPRT**

[www.cgsuprt.com](http://www.cgsuprt.com)

A virtually all-inclusive resource for the Coast Guard, the site includes a hotline to access Coast-Guard specific information. Contact a consultant: 1-855-CG SUPRT (247-8778); international: country code+800-02478778.

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## **Marine Corps Resources**

Make sure to check out the DoD, Military Kids, General Governmental, and Non-Governmental resource sections for a full listing of services available to you and your family.

### **The United States Marine Corps**

[www.marines.mil](http://www.marines.mil)

The official home page of the U.S. Marine Corps

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### **Marine and Family Programs Division**

[www.manpower.usmc.mil](http://www.manpower.usmc.mil)

The Marine and Family Programs Division (MF) of the U.S. Marines is responsible for providing service policies and resources to support commanders in executing quality Marine and family programs.

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### **Marine for Life**

[www.marineforlife.org](http://www.marineforlife.org)

Marine for Life provides assistance to Marines who leave active duty and return to civilian life. The network—consisting of Marines, Marine veterans, mentors, businesses, and civic and veterans' organizations—helps Marines make a smooth and successful transition into the community.

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## **Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center (NMCPHC)**

**[www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcphc](http://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcphc)**

The Navy and Marines Public Health Center website covers topics including substance abuse, anger, gambling, and family stress.

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## **Wounded Warrior Regiment**

**[www.woundedwarriorregiment.org](http://www.woundedwarriorregiment.org)**

The United States Marine Corps Wounded Warrior Regiment provides and facilitates assistance to wounded, ill, and injured Marines and sailors attached to or in direct support of Marine units—and their family members—to assist them as they return to duty or transition to civilian life. The Regiment supports active, Reserve, and veteran Marines.

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## **Navy Resources**

Make sure to check out the DoD, Military Kids, General Governmental, and Non-Governmental resource sections for a full listing of services available to you and your family.

### **The United States Navy**

**[www.navy.mil](http://www.navy.mil)**

The official home page of the U.S. Navy

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### **Navy Fleet and Family Support Program**

**[www.ffsp.navy.mil](http://www.ffsp.navy.mil)**

Fleet and Family Support Programs provide a variety of programs for service members and their families related to mental health and wellness, including financial

readiness services, employment help, and mental health and family counseling.

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### **Navy Safe Harbor**

**[safeharbor.navylive.dodlive.mil](http://safeharbor.navylive.dodlive.mil)**

Navy Safe Harbor is the Navy's organization for coordinating the non-medical care of seriously wounded, ill, and injured sailors, Coast Guardsmen, and their families. The program provides a lifetime of individually tailored assistance designed to optimize the success of recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

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## **National Guard And Military Reserve Resources**

Make sure to check out the DoD, Military Kids, General Governmental, and Non-Governmental resource sections for a full listing of services available to you and your family.

### **Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR)**

**[www.esgr.mil](http://www.esgr.mil)**

ESGR develops and promotes employer support for Guard and Reserve service by advocating relevant initiatives, recognizing outstanding support, increasing awareness of applicable laws, and resolving conflict between employers and service members.

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### **Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense: Reserve Affairs**

**[ra.defense.gov](http://ra.defense.gov)**

The mission of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense: Reserve Affairs is to serve as adviser to the Secretary of Defense on all matters that involve the Reserve components in all branches. This official website provides information on resources targeted toward the

Reserve components like the Yellow Ribbon Program, Wounded Warrior Care, Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR), and TRICARE Reserve Select.

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### **Strategic Outreach to Families of All Reservists (SOFAR)**

[www.sofarusa.org](http://www.sofarusa.org)

SOFAR is a pro-bono mental health project that provides free psychological support, psychotherapy, psychoeducation, and prevention services to extended family of Reserve and National Guard deployed during the Global War on Terrorism, from time of alert through the period of reunion and reintegration.

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### **Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program**

[www.jointservicesupport.org/yrrp/](http://www.jointservicesupport.org/yrrp/)

[YourYellowRibbon.aspx](http://YourYellowRibbon.aspx)

The National Guard Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program is a legislatively mandated program designed to provide information, services, referrals, and proactive outreach programs to service members and families of the National Guard and Reserves throughout all phases of the deployment cycle.

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## **Military Veterans Resources**

### **Veterans Affairs**

[www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov)

The official home page of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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### **Air Compassion for Veterans®**

[www.aircompassionforveterans.org](http://www.aircompassionforveterans.org)

The mission of Air Compassion for Veterans® is to ensure that no financially stressed wounded warrior,

veteran, or his/her adversely affected family member(s) is denied the ability to access any of the following: distant, specialized medical evaluation; diagnosis and treatment; counseling; rehabilitation; service dog acquisition; or any program that promotes healing and restoration for reintegration into a productive life.

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### **Disabled American Veterans (DAV)**

[www.dav.org](http://www.dav.org)

Disabled American Veterans is dedicated to building better lives for all of our nation's disabled veterans and their families.

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### **eBenefits**

[www.ebenefits.va.gov](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov)

eBenefits is a web-based portal, provided by the VA, for veterans and service members to research, find, access, and manage their benefits.

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### **Make the Connection**

[www.maketheconnection.net](http://www.maketheconnection.net)

Make the Connection connects veterans and their friends and family members with information, resources, and solutions to issues affecting their lives.

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### **Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD**

[www.ptsd.va.gov/public](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public)

This website provides information on trauma and PTSD for veterans, family members, and the general public.

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### **Veterans Crisis Line**

[www.veteranscrisisline.net](http://www.veteranscrisisline.net)

Phone: 1-800-273-8255, Press 1

The Veterans Crisis Line personnel are trained and experienced in helping veterans of all ages and

circumstances. Many of the responders are veterans themselves and understand what veterans and their families and friends have been through, including challenges faced by veterans of all ages and service eras.

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## **Military Child Resources**

### **American Association of School Administrators' Toolkit: Supporting the Military Child**

[www.aasa.org/MilitaryChild.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/MilitaryChild.aspx)

This toolkit provides guidance for school leaders on meeting the unique educational needs of children whose parents are deployed or in transition.

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### **Daddy Dolls/Mommy Dolls**

[www.hugahero.com](http://www.hugahero.com)

Daddy and Mommy Dolls are stuffed dolls created with a photo of the deployed service member, allowing children to “hug” the deployed parent.

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### ***Deployment: Strategies for Working with Kids in Military Families***

Karen Petty PhD (Author)

Children with parents in the military face unfamiliar and complicated emotions. This comprehensive handbook is for civilians and military personnel who work with or care for children who experience separation through deployment, death, or divorce.

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### **Dog Tags for Kids**

[www.dogtagsforkids.com](http://www.dogtagsforkids.com)

Dog Tags for Kids is dedicated to helping United States servicemen and women in harm's way connect with their children at home. Service members can request

especially engraved dog tags in the appropriate service color—for free—to give to their children.

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### **Early Moments Matter**

**[www.earlymomentmatter.org](http://www.earlymomentmatter.org)**

Early Moments Matter is designed to raise awareness about early childhood attachment and to provide parents and caregivers with the information they need to help their infants develop secure attachments.

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### **Flat Daddies/Flat Mommies**

**[www.flatdaddies.com](http://www.flatdaddies.com)**

Flat Daddies and Flat Mommies are life-sized printed posters of parents who are actively serving overseas in the military, creating a way to help families stay connected to loved ones who are deployed.

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### **Kids Journals**

**[www.hnfs.com](http://www.hnfs.com)**

Health Net Federal Services' children's initiative provides additional resources to help children successfully navigate the unique challenges military families face. Users can review, download, and print journals related to deployment, military moves, and the death of a loved one at no cost.

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### **Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC)**

**[www.militarychild.org](http://www.militarychild.org)**

The Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) is a nonprofit, worldwide organization focused on ensuring quality educational opportunities for all military-connected children affected by mobility, family separation, or transition.

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## **Military Families Near and Far**

**[www.familiesnearandfar.org](http://www.familiesnearandfar.org)**

Part of Sesame Workshop's Military Families Initiative, in cooperation with the DoD, Military Families Near and Far is a bilingual website where military families can create, communicate, and stay connected. The site offers suggestions and tools to empower preschool and school-aged children to express themselves and communicate within their own family networks.

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## **Military Kids Connect (MKC)**

**[www.militarykidsconnect.org](http://www.militarykidsconnect.org)**

MKC, an initiative of the DoD's National Center for Telehealth and Technology (T2) agency, is an online community for military children ages six to seventeen, providing access to age-appropriate resources to support children from pre-deployment, through a parent's or caregiver's return.

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## **Military Youth on the Move**

**[apps.militaryonesource.mil](http://apps.militaryonesource.mil)**

Military Youth on the Move covers topics specifically for military children and teens, including military moves, social life, and school.

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## **National Association of Child Care Resources and Referral Agencies (NACCRRRA)**

**[www.naccrra.org](http://www.naccrra.org)**

NACCRRRA is the nation's leading voice for child care, working with more than 700 state and local Child Care Resources and Referral Agencies nationwide to help ensure that families in 99 percent of all populated ZIP codes in the United States have access to high-

quality, affordable child care. NACCRRA is working in partnership with the DoD to help military parents locate non-DoD child care.

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### **Operation: Military Kids**

**[www.operationmilitarykids.org](http://www.operationmilitarykids.org)**

The U.S. Army's collaborative effort with America's communities—called Operation: Military Kids—supports children and youth impacted by deployment.

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### **Our Military Kids**

**[www.ourmilitarykids.org](http://www.ourmilitarykids.org)**

Our Military Kids provides tangible support to children of deployed National Guard and Reserve personnel as well as to children of severely injured service members through grants for enrichment activities and tutoring. Such activities help these children cope with the stress of having a parent in a war zone or recovering from injury at home.

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### **Sesame Street for Military Families**

Visit iTunes and search “Sesame Street for Military Families.” The “Sesame Street for Military Families” mobile application puts all of Sesame’s bilingual (English and Spanish) resources for military families right in your pocket! Use your mobile device to access engaging videos, articles, storybooks, and parent guides to help you support your preschool and school-aged children as they encounter transitions common to military families.

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### **Specialized Training of Military Parents (STOMP)**

**[www.stompproject.org](http://www.stompproject.org)**

STOMP is the only national parent training and information center for military families, providing medical support and advice to military parents regardless of the condition.

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## **Talk, Listen, Connect**

**[www.sesameworkshop.org/initiatives/emotion](http://www.sesameworkshop.org/initiatives/emotion)**

Sesame Workshop created the Talk, Listen, Connect initiative to help small children learn about and understand the changes brought on by a deploying parent. Talk, Listen, Connect is a multiphase, bilingual, multimedia initiative that guides families through multiple challenges, such as deployments, homecomings, and changes that occur when a parent comes home, as well as coping with grief.

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## **Tool Kits for Kids**

**[www.toolkitsforkids.com](http://www.toolkitsforkids.com)**

Tool Kits for Kids is designed to teach young people emotional life skills, with a focus on reducing anxiety in children and teens, building self-esteem, improving confidence, and strengthening coping skills.

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## **United Through Reading**

**[www.unitedthroughreading.org](http://www.unitedthroughreading.org)**

The United Through Reading military program helps ease the stress of separation for military families by allowing deployed parents to read children's books aloud and make a DVD recording for their child to watch at home. This program is available to all deploying military units and at select USO locations. It offers parents the chance to make powerful and lasting connections with their children and to parent from afar.

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## **ZERO TO THREE**

**[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)**

ZERO TO THREE works to increase awareness and collaboration throughout the military community so that parents and professionals can more effectively care for very young children and their families impacted by such deployment-related issues as trauma, grief, and loss.

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# Books For Military Children

*The following book recommendations are available from Amazon, Apple, Barnes & Noble, and independent bookstores.*

## ***Deployment Journal for Kids***

Rachel Robertson (Author)

Deployment Journal for Kids is a special journal created for children to record feelings and events during a loved one's military deployment.

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## ***H Is for Honor: A Military Family Alphabet***

Devin Scillian (Author), Victor Juhasz (Illustrator)

Written by the son of a career officer, this book explores the branches of the Armed Services and speaks from the heart about the honor, privileges, and sacrifices of military families everywhere. Children will discover why drill sergeants have to be so tough, what it means to be patriotic, and why we need Special Forces such as the Navy SEALs, the Green Berets, and the Army Rangers.

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## ***Henry Hero Bear***

[www.henryherobear.com](http://www.henryherobear.com)

Henry Hero Bear is an eleven-inch cuddly teddy bear accompanied by a story book designed to help young children cope with the absence of a military parent or loved one during a long deployment.

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## ***Heroes! Activities for Kids Dealing with Deployment***

Susan B Weaver (Author)

Heroes! is a beautifully designed and produced activity book offering a loving, creative, and healthy way for kids ages four to fourteen to deal with a parent's deployment. The author gently walks children and "tweens" through carefully structured activities like

drawing pictures, gathering photos, and finding new ways to relax, express anger, and keep in touch.

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### ***I Wish Daddy Was Here***

Katherine DeMille (Author)

See how one little girl and her mother find strength through the seasons as they await the return of their loved one.

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### ***Love, Lizzie: Letters to a Military Mom***

Lisa Tucker McElroy (Author), Diane Paterson (Illustrator)

Lizzie's mom is serving in the military overseas, and Lizzie really misses her. While they are apart, Lizzie and her mom write letters to each other to help make the separation easier.

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### ***Love Spots***

Karen Panier (Author), Teresa Blomquist (Illustrator)

Do you know the real reason camouflage uniforms have all those spots? It's a story every military dad and mom should share with their children.

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### ***My Dad's Deployment: A Deployment and Reunion Activity Book for Young Children***

Julie LaBelle (Author), Christina Rodriguez (Illustrator)

This 112-page activity book features deployment- and reunion-related mazes, connect-the-dots, counting, matching, coloring, crafts, telling time, and other activities familiar to preschool and early elementary children.

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### ***My Mommy Wears Combat Boots***

Sharon McBride (Author)

My Mommy Wears Combat Boots is based the personal experience of a soldier and a mother who was seeking

a way to explain why she needed to leave her child again and go to war. The book is for mothers in uniform everywhere that are seeking a way to explain to their children the emotions associated with deployment and a way to positively channel those emotions when they are away.

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### ***Night Catch***

Brenda Ehrmantraut (Author), Vicki Wehrman (Illustrator)  
When a soldier's work takes him halfway around the world, he enlists the help of the North Star for a nightly game of catch with his son. Night Catch is a timeless story that connects families while they are apart and offers comforting hope for their reunion.

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### ***A Paper Hug***

Stephanie Skolmoski (Author), Anneliese Bennion (Illustrator)  
Have you ever said good-bye to someone very dear? Here's a story about a little boy who figured out the best gift to give his dad who was leaving to serve his country ... a paper hug.

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## **We Serve Too! Books and Resources for Military Kids and their Families!**

**[www.weservetoo.com](http://www.weservetoo.com)**

We Serve Too! provides books and resources that discuss common experiences of military children. On this website you can purchase the books and download curriculum, coloring pages, stickers, discussion guides, and even specially designed dog tags for children.

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### ***A Yellow Ribbon for Daddy***

Anissa Mersiowsky (Author)

A book for military children going through a deployment, this book asks, from a child's perspective, why Daddy has gone to fight and protect other children and families.

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## **General Governmental Resources**

### **Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)**

[www.dol.gov/whd/fmla](http://www.dol.gov/whd/fmla)

The FMLA entitles eligible employees (for example, caregivers) of covered employers to take unpaid, job-protected leave for specified family and medical reasons with continuation of group health insurance coverage under the same terms and conditions as if the employee had not taken leave.

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### **National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

[www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov)

The mission of the National Center for PTSD is to advance the clinical care and social welfare of America's veterans through research, education and training in the science, diagnosis, and treatment of PTSD and stress-related disorders.

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### **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**

[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

SAMHSA's mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities. Since its founding in 1992, SAMHSA has demonstrated that prevention works, treatment is effective, and people recover from mental and substance use disorders.

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## **Social Security Administration**

**[www.socialsecurity.gov/woundedwarriors](http://www.socialsecurity.gov/woundedwarriors)**

Military service members can receive expedited processing of disability claims from the Social Security Administration. Benefits available through Social Security are different than those from the VA.

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## **Non-Governmental Organizational Resources**

### **American Academy of Pediatrics: Support for Military Children and Adolescents**

**[www2.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment/resources.html](http://www2.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment/resources.html)**

This website was developed by military pediatricians and youth-serving professionals working to attain optimal physical, mental, and social health and well-being for all military dependent infants, children, adolescents, and young adults. Among other resources, the site contains information about talking to children about deployment and helping children understand war injuries.

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### **American Gold Star Mothers, Inc.**

**[www.goldstarmoms.com](http://www.goldstarmoms.com)**

American Gold Star Mothers, Inc. is an organization of mothers who have lost a son or daughter in the service of our country and provides community and support for these families.

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### **The American Legion**

**[www.legion.org](http://www.legion.org)**

The Legion was chartered and incorporated by Congress in 1919 as a patriotic veterans organization devoted to mutual helpfulness. It is the nation's largest wartime veterans service organization, committed to

advocating patriotism and honor, promoting strong national security, and championing continued devotion to service members and veterans.

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### **American Psychological Association**

**[www.apa.org/topics/military](http://www.apa.org/topics/military)**

The American Psychological Association website's military section provides links to useful resources, tips for finding a psychologist, and information on helping children cope with war, deployments, and other stressors.

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### **American Red Cross (Coping with Deployments Course)**

**[www.redcross.org/find-help/military-families/deployment-services/coping-deployment-course](http://www.redcross.org/find-help/military-families/deployment-services/coping-deployment-course)**

"Coping with Deployments: Psychological First Aid for Military Families" was developed out of the continuing commitment of the Red Cross to serve military families. This course was designed specifically for the spouses, parents, siblings, and partners of service members.

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### **Armed Services YMCA**

**[www.asymca.org](http://www.asymca.org)**

The Armed Services YMCA of the USA runs more than 150 programs around the world to ease the burden of nearly 500,000 families of junior-enlisted military personnel each year. The Armed Services YMCA delivers free and low-cost programs through fourteen branches, ten YMCA affiliates, and nine DoD affiliates.

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### **The Band of Mothers**

**[www.thebandofmothers.com](http://www.thebandofmothers.com)**

The Band of Mothers is a support group for mothers of U.S. Soldiers. The website features an events calendar, photo album, videos, and other resources.

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### **Blue Star Families (BSF)**

**[www.bluestarfam.org](http://www.bluestarfam.org)**

Blue Star Families is a nonprofit organization created by military families. The organization is committed to helping military families support one another through the unique challenges of military service and asking the larger civilian population to help as well. BSF connects military families regardless of rank, branch of service, or physical location, and empowers military family members to create the best personal and family life possible for themselves.

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### **Brain Injury Association of America (BIAA)**

**[www.biausa.org](http://www.biausa.org)**

An organization that exists to advance brain injury prevention, research and treatment, BIAA is dedicated to increasing access to quality health care and raising awareness and understanding of brain injury.

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### **Families OverComing Under Stress™ (FOCUS)**

**[www.focusproject.org](http://www.focusproject.org)**

FOCUS is a psychological health resiliency-building program designed for military families facing the psychological challenges of combat operational stress during wartime. FOCUS' staff assists families in understanding the effects of combat operational stress on the family unit, how to manage stress, and how to strengthen their family units.

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### **Fisher House™ Foundation**

**[www.fisherhouse.org](http://www.fisherhouse.org)**

Fisher House™ Foundation provides a “home away

from home” for military families to be close to a loved one during hospitalization of their service member for illness, disease, or injury.

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### **Military Families Learning Network**

**[blogs.extension.org/militaryfamilies](https://blogs.extension.org/militaryfamilies)**

The Military Families Learning Network serves military family service professionals through engaged online communities that identify and make use of the highest quality best practices, research - and evidence-based information, educational and curriculum materials, and programming activities and efforts.

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### **Military Officers Association of America (MOAA)**

**[www.moaa.org](http://www.moaa.org)**

MOAA is the nation’s largest and most influential association of military officers. It is an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization. With about 370,000 members from every branch of service—including active duty, National Guard, Reserve, retired, former officers, and their families—MOAA is a powerful force that promotes a strong national defense and represents the interests of military officers at every stage of their careers.

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### **National Military Family Association (NMFA)**

**[www.militaryfamily.org](http://www.militaryfamily.org)**

The NMFA speaks up on behalf of military families and empowers spouses/partners and children to understand and access their benefits.

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### **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

**[www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)**

Veterans, current service members, and their families and friends can call 1-800-273-TALK (8255), and press “1” to be routed to the Veterans Suicide Prevention

Hotline. Professional counselors are available 24/7 to help in cases of emotional crisis, suicidal thoughts, or concern about someone who is. You can also chat live with a VA counselor.

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### **Operation We Are Here**

[www.operationwearehere.com](http://www.operationwearehere.com)

Operation We Are Here creates an awareness of the challenges of families/loved ones of deployed military personnel and offers practical suggestions to churches, communities, and individuals on how to support and encourage the families who remain at home. It provides a comprehensive list of resources for families/loved ones of deployed military personnel.

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### **ReMIND.org**

[www.remind.org](http://www.remind.org)

ReMIND is a public education movement of the Bob Woodruff Foundation that educates the public about the needs of injured service members, veterans, and their families as they reintegrate into their communities.

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### **This Emotional Life**

[www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife](http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife)

This Emotional Life is a multimedia campaign to foster awareness, connections, and solutions regarding mental health and emotional well-being. Anchored by a successful PBS documentary series that premiered in January 2010, this ambitious campaign includes a special initiative to promote the critical importance of early childhood attachment as well as a grassroots effort to help service men and women and their families. The project's campaign for military families is a unique endeavor to build national awareness for the needs of service members and their families while also delivering resources directly to those families.

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## **Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)**

**[www.taps.org](http://www.taps.org)**

TAPS is the 24/7 tragedy-assistance resource organization for anyone who has suffered the loss of a military loved one, regardless of the relationship to the deceased or the circumstance of the death.

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## **USA Cares**

**[www.usacares.org](http://www.usacares.org)**

USA Cares exists to help bear the burdens of service by providing post-9/11 military families with financial and advocacy support in their time of need. Assistance is provided to all branches of service, all components, and all ranks, while protecting the privacy and dignity of those military families and veterans who request our help.

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## **United Service Organizations (USO)**

**[www.uso.org](http://www.uso.org)**

The USO's mission is to provide morale, welfare, and recreation-type services to our men and women in uniform. Services include free Internet and email access, libraries and reading rooms, housing assistance, family crisis counseling, support groups, game rooms, and nursery facilities.

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## **Wounded Warrior Project**

**[www.woundedwarriorproject.org](http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org)**

The mission of the Wounded Warrior Project is to honor and empower wounded warriors. The organization is dedicated to raising awareness and enlisting the public's aid for the needs of severely injured service men and women; helping severely injured service members aid and assist each other; and providing unique, direct programs and services to meet the needs of severely injured service members.

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# Concurrent Retirement and Disability Pay (CRDP) and Combat-Related Special Compensation (CRSC)

## Air Force

United States Air Force Disability Division (CRSC)

550 C Street West, Suite 6

Randolph AFB, TX 78150-4708

1-800-525-0102 (select option 5,1)

[www.afpc.af.mil/library/combat.asp](http://www.afpc.af.mil/library/combat.asp)

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## Army

U.S. Army Human Resources Command

ATTN: AHRC-PDR-C (CRSC), Dept 420

1600 Spearhead Division Avenue

Fort Knox, KY 40122-5402

1-866-281-3254 (select option 4)

[www.hrc.army.mil/site/crsc/index.html](http://www.hrc.army.mil/site/crsc/index.html)

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## Coast Guard

Commander (adm-1-CRSC) U.S. Coast Guard

Personnel Command

4200 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 1100

Arlington, VA 20598-7200

1-202-493-1735

[www.uscg.mil/psd/de/crsc.asp](http://www.uscg.mil/psd/de/crsc.asp)

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## Navy and Marine Corps

Secretary of the Navy Council of Review Boards

Attn: Combat-Related Special Compensation Board

720 Kennon Street SE, Suite 309

Washington Navy Yard, Washington, DC 20374-5023

[www.donhq.navy.mil/corb/crscb/crscmainpage.htm](http://www.donhq.navy.mil/corb/crscb/crscmainpage.htm)

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# Mobile Applications

## **The American Legion Claims Coach**

[www.legion.org/mobileapps](http://www.legion.org/mobileapps)

The “American Legion Claims Coach” is a handy, secure organizational tool to help veterans and their service officers through the VA benefits claim filing process.

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## **American Red Cross Mobile Apps**

[www.redcross.org/prepare/mobile-apps](http://www.redcross.org/prepare/mobile-apps)

The Red Cross provides a variety of mobile applications related to disaster preparedness and response including mobile apps for first aid, shelter finder, hurricanes, earthquakes, and wildfires.

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## **Karoo**

Visit iTunes and search “Karoo”.

The application, created by Care.com, is designed to connect parents with their child’s caregivers as well as record memories.

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## **Life Armor Mobile App**

[www.t2health.org/apps/lifearmor](http://www.t2health.org/apps/lifearmor)

Through the “Life Armor” application, browse information on seventeen topics, including sleep, depression, relationship issues, and posttraumatic stress. Brief self-assessments help the user measure and track their symptoms, and tools are available to assist with managing specific problems.

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## **Military and Money**

[www.militaryandmoney.com](http://www.militaryandmoney.com)

“Military and Money” features educational resources and tools to help users make informed decisions about money.

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## **Military Traveler**

[www.miltraveler.com](http://www.miltraveler.com)

“Military Traveler” is a universal base directory application that contains information like phone numbers, hours of operations, and websites for military installations.

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## **Mood Tracker**

[www.t2health.org/apps/t2-mood-tracker](http://www.t2health.org/apps/t2-mood-tracker)

“T2 Mood Tracker” is a mobile application that allows users to self-monitor, track, and reference emotional experiences over a period of days, weeks, and months using a visual analogue rating scale.

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## **MyMilitaryLife**

[www.militaryfamily.org/mymilitarylife.html](http://www.militaryfamily.org/mymilitarylife.html)

“MyMilitaryLife,” created by the National Military Family Association, helps military spouses navigate the many adventures of military life.

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## **National Center for Telehealth and Technology (T2)**

[www.t2health.org/mobile-apps](http://www.t2health.org/mobile-apps)

T2 has developed a host of mobile applications relevant to the military community including those related to PTSD and stress management.

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## **PE Coach**

[www.t2health.org/apps/pe-coach](http://www.t2health.org/apps/pe-coach)

“PE Coach” is designed to be used during

psychotherapy provided by a behavioral health professional.

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### **PTSD Coach**

**[www.t2health.org/apps/ptsd-coach](http://www.t2health.org/apps/ptsd-coach)**

“PTSD Coach” was designed for veterans and military service members who have, or may have, PTSD.

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### **Tactical Breather**

**[www.t2health.org/apps/tactical-breather](http://www.t2health.org/apps/tactical-breather)**

The “Tactical Breather” application can be used to gain control over physiological and psychological responses to stress.

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# Acknowledgements

*Everyone Serves: A Handbook for Family & Friends of Service Members During Pre-Deployment, Deployment, and Reintegration* was created by Vulcan Productions, the independent film production company founded by investor and philanthropist Paul G. Allen, in partnership with Blue Star Families, the country's largest chapter-based military family support organization. NBC Publishing, a division of NBC Universal Media, provided the technical resources for the digital version of the handbook. The stakeholders collaborated with ProSocial, a social change agency leveraging media to create public engagement and sustainable impact, to oversee the content, design and development of the resource.

This handbook is designed to help family and friends of service members manage the stresses of deployment, reintegration, and transition and to build resilience in ways that are valuable to themselves and their warriors long after the deployment experience it completed.

This handbook was created through extensive contributions and review from mental health professionals, military experts, service members, and military families. Representatives from the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health & Traumatic Brain Injury and

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The content in this handbook is for informational and educational purposes only and NOT a substitute for professional psychological, psychiatric, or medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified mental health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition or mental disorder. Never disregard professional medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have read in this material.

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