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Coping When a Family Member Has Been Called to War

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When a family member goes to war, the impact upon those left at home can be daunting. There is often tremendous uncertainty about the dangers that exist where the loved one is being deployed and about when he or she will return. Concerns may be intensified as TV news programs emphasize threats, such as chemical or biological warfare, scud missile attack, and environmental destruction. In addition to having to adjust to the loved one's absence, the families of those who have been deployed may live in constant fear of harm to their loved one.

The Emotional Cycle of Deployment

When a loved one is deployed, fluctuating emotions such as pride, anger, fear, and bitterness can add to the distress of uncertainty. Various emotions continue during the person's deployment, based upon changes the family encounters as they adjust to the departure and absence of their family member. The following is a typical cycle of emotions:

- The cycle begins with a short period of intense emotions, such as fear and anger, when news of deployment is released to the family.
- As departure grows closer, a period of detachment and withdrawal may occur. In preparation for the physical separation, family members may experience intense emotions.
- A period of sadness, loneliness, and tension begins at the time of departure; this can last several weeks or longer.
- Following the first weeks of deployment, families begin to adjust to a new routine without the deployed service member.
- As the end of the deployment period draws near, tension continues as the family anticipates changes related to the return of the service member.

When Families Have Difficulties

Deployment will be a challenging time for family members who are left behind:

In addition to patriotism and pride, feelings of fear and anger are also common. The mixture of these feelings may be confusing, particularly for children.

If a family already has difficulty communicating with one another, such problems may worsen during times of stress, and add strain to the family.

Those deployed may downplay the potential for danger in order to protect the family from excessive worry, which can make family members feel their feelings of fear are being invalidated.

When there is an impending crisis such as a war deployment, some families may need to be become more aware of their style of relating to and supporting each other.

Emotions can run high during the deployment, and people can turn fear, anger, and other emotions against those they care for the most.

When certain family members, particularly children, do express their fear or anger, families should not view these feelings as too sensitive or as an annoyance. Instead, realize that those feelings may be emotions that everyone shares, but perhaps not everyone has acknowledged those feelings yet.

Alternatively, it is possible that members will feel as though their emotions are numb during the time before a departure. This is because these individuals may be preparing emotionally for the separation from the family; it does not mean these family members don't care. Sometimes the stronger the numbing, the stronger the emotions underlying the feelings.

Fear of the Unknown

Communication with the deployed family member during war may be minimal. When the family knows little about where the service member is being deployed, they may try to obtain any information they can about that area of the world. Often, family members will turn to the media for this information. When families do this, they may be faced with media speculation that emphasizes frightening commentary and images. Online discussion groups can also be a source of unreliable information that creates needless distress. Learn what you can about the issues from trustworthy resources, such as public libraries and published books. Put the risk in proportion so that you are in a better position to think realistically. For example, remind yourself that even though you hear regularly about deaths in the military, the vast majority of deployed troops are not harmed.

Changes in Family Structure

A spouse left at home during deployment will be faced with work tasks that s/he may be unfamiliar with. Juggling finances, lawn care, car and home repair, cooking, and raising children can lead to stress overload and exhaustion. Families that are flexible regarding roles and responsibilities are better able to adapt to deployment stresses. It's important for family members to support each other in these new responsibilities and to get outside help as much as possible. Your military contingency officer and your employee assistance program can provide you with childcare referrals, including before- and after-school programs and in-home care.

Special Concerns When the Primary Caretaker Is Deployed

Many more women are now participating in war-related deployments. During Operation Desert Shield/Storm, more than 40,000 women were deployed, thousands of them mothers with dependent children. Research on work-family conflict among active duty women indicates:

The struggle between work and family duties is a source of parenting distress.

Women who were supported by their husbands in their marital and parenting roles had fewer work-family conflicts, less distress, or less depression.

Families that are flexible regarding roles and responsibilities are better able to adapt to deployment stresses.

Getting information about difficult issues, such as separation anxiety, discipline, raising adolescents, and sibling rivalry, may help make care easier.

Special Concerns for Reservists

Reservists have added concerns pertaining to the families and jobs left behind. In some cases, military deployment can create financial hardships due to a loss of income. Sometimes the household financial manager is the one who is deployed and the remaining head of the household is left to manage the finances, perhaps without much practice. The government has developed many services and programs to assist you and your family with these challenges during the predeployment, deployment, and reunification stages. There are groups that can help with the development of family emergency plans, family care plans, and personal financial management.

Suggestions for Families of Those Going to War

The following are suggestions to help you manage the stress of having a family member deployed for war-related duties:

Take time to listen to each other.

Know that deployment will be a painful and frightening time, particularly for children. Spend time listening to family members without judging or criticizing what they say. People may need to just express themselves during this time. The more family members can communicate with one another, the less long-term strain there will be on the family.

Limit exposure to news media programs.

Families should minimize exposure to anxiety-arousing media related to the war. News programs often emphasize fearful content and frightening images to create a "story." Watching a lot of TV news programs, for example, can create needless distress. When children worry about war, let them know that the war is far away. Acknowledge children's fears, and let them know that parents, teachers, and police are here to protect them.

Remember the deployed member is still a part of the family.

Find ways to keep a symbolic representation of the deployed member visible to the family. Keep photographs of your loved one in prominent locations. Get children's help in keeping a family journal of each day's events for the deployed member to look at when he or she returns.

Understand feelings.

Emotions such as fear, anger, and feeling "numb" are normal and common reactions to stress. Family members need to make sure these emotions aren't turned against one another in frustration. It will help family members manage tension if you share feelings, recognize that they are normal, and realize that most family members feel the same way.

Spend time with people.

Coping with stressful events is easier when in the company of caring friends. Ask for support from your family, friends, church, or other community group.

Join or develop support groups.

Forming support groups for the spouses of deployed military personnel helps spouses cope with separation from their loved ones. Peer-support groups, led by spouses of deployed service members, can be a tremendous aid to family functioning. Spouses can share ideas with each other, trade childcare or other responsibilities, and encourage each other if they are feeling taxed.

Keep up routines.

Try to stick to everyday routines. Familiar habits can be very comforting.

Take time out for fun.

Don't forget to do things that feel good to you. Take a walk, spend time with your pets, or play a game you enjoy.

Help others.

It is beneficial for everyone to find ways you and your family can productively channel energy. Helping other families and organizing neighborhood support groups or outings can help everyone involved.

Self-care.

The more emotionally nurturing and stable the remaining caretaker is, the less stress the children will feel. However, trying to "do it all" can lead to exhaustion. Signs of caregiver stress include feeling as though you are unable to cope, feeling constantly exhausted, or feeling as though you no longer care about anything. It is especially important for caretakers to devote time to themselves, exercise, and get plenty of rest.

Get professional help if needed

When stress becomes overwhelming, don't be afraid to seek professional help. Ongoing difficulties such as exhaustion, apathy, worry, sleeplessness, bad dreams, irritability, or anger-outbursts warrant the attention of a professional counselor. The military employment assistance program provides free counseling for family members impacted by the stress of deployment. Contingency planning personnel are available on bases around the country to help families handle stress related to deployment.

Use military outreach programs. Military outreach programs are in place to help families prevent social isolation. Interventions for military families are especially important for younger families and those without a prior history of deployments. Group leaders are trained to (1) assist in the grief process that a family goes through when a spouse is deployed, (2) teach coping skills to deal with indefinite separations, and (3) help spouses plan a family reunion.

Conclusion

War brings about difficult stressors for families of deployed service members. Mixed feelings about the deployment are common, and emotions tend to fluctuate over the course of the deployment. It is most important to take added steps during this time to take care of yourself and your family. Also, seek help from others around you who will understand, including friends, family members, or other families who have a member deployed.

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