Chapter Five:
The Deployment Cycle:
Mobilization and Deployment

I. Lesson Plan
   A. Purpose: Understand the cycle of deployment and its effects
   B. Objectives:
      1. Understand the emotional cycle of deployment
      2. Understand the five stages of deployment
      3. Understand separation anxiety and its symptoms
      4. Understand strengths, stressors, and appropriate responses to deployment
   C. Time: 45 minutes
   D. Preparation/Materials Needed:
      ✪ Laptop computer, LCD, PowerPoint slides, flip chart, and markers
      ✪ Blanket Activity supplies: tarp, beach balls, and nametags with roles

II. Training Session Content
   A. PowerPoint Slides
      Slide 5-1: Chapter 5 Introduction Slide
      Slide 5-2: Deployment and the Community
      Slide 5-3: The Deployment Cycle
      Slide 5-4: Stage One: Pre-Deployment
      Slide 5-5: Stage Two: Deployment
      Slide 5-6: Stage Three: Sustainment
      Slide 5-7: Understanding Separation Anxiety: Preschool or Kindergarten Age Children
      Slide 5-8: Understanding Separation Anxiety: Primary School Children
      Slide 5-9: Understanding Separation Anxiety: Adolescents
      Slide 5-10: Stage Four: Re-deployment
      Slide 5-11: Stage Five: Post-deployment
      Slide 5-12: Strengths for Youth Resulting from Deployment
      Slide 5-13: Symptoms of Deployment Stress in the School Setting
      Slide 5-14: Suggested Healthy Responses by Adults
      Slide 5-15: Other Deployment Stress-Related Issues
B. Activities and Directions
   1. “A Blanket Community” activity
   2. Review slides on the stages of deployment. Brainstorm strengths (assets) built in children during deployment (write on flip chart).
   3. In small groups, come up with three symptoms of stress in a classroom/program setting and the appropriate adult response.

III. Must-Read Background Material
   A. The Emotional Cycle of Deployment: A Military Family Perspective
   B. Strengths Resulting from the Deployment Cycle/Stages
   C. Helping Children Adjust While Their Military Parent Is Away
   D. Helping the Nonmilitary Parent during a Spouse’s Extended Absence
   E. Talk to Your Children about Deployment…Before it Happens
   F. Deployment Stress-Related Issues

IV. Evaluation
   A. Reflection Questions
      1. What did you learn about deployment?
      2. In what ways will deployment affect your classroom/program?
   B. Application Questions
      1. How can you adapt your classroom/program to meet the needs of youth in a deployed family?
Slide 5-1: Chapter 5 Introduction

Content of this slide adapted from: N/A

Materials Needed: N/A

Trainer Tips: N/A

What to Do, What to Say:

Do:
- Review slide content with participants.
- Share purpose and objectives of this chapter.

Say: The purpose of this chapter is to understand the deployment cycle and its effects on families.

The objectives include understanding the emotional cycle of deployment, the five stages of deployment, and separation anxiety and its symptoms. We will also discuss the strengths, stressors, and appropriate responses to deployment issues.
Slide 5-2: Deployment and the Community

Content of this slide adapted from: N/A

Materials Needed: Blanket Activity supplies: tarp, beach balls, nametags with roles

Trainer Tips: Make up nametags in advance, with roles that represent the community. Blow up the beach balls ahead of time, and make sure you have enough room to move with the tarp fully opened.

What to Do, What to Say:

Say: This is an exercise in building teamwork, demonstrating how we need to recognize the strengths of all community members and understand the importance of communication. This exercise helps emphasize that we need to support the youth and families from our military units.

Do: • Place the blanket or tarp on the floor and have all participants align themselves on the edges. Each member picks up an edge of the cloth and holds the blanket tightly. Each participant holding the blanket will assume a community role: teacher, parent, business owner, law enforcement officer, doctor, county employee, school administrator, elected official.
Do: • Start adding objects to the center of the blanket. As the objects are added, a
group leader will describe a situation where several of your community
members have been called up to serve in their National Guard or U.S. Army
Reserve Unit. The remaining participants/community members will try to
keep all the objects on the blanket.
• Ask for volunteers to serve as community members of a fictitious town. Read
each nametag as you give it to the volunteers.

Say: Towns and cities form a support system or safety net for youth. The volunteers
represent this safety net for our town.

Do: • Have volunteers pick up tarp.

Say: Towns have many children to support and help develop into capable, caring,
contributing citizens.

Do: • Add beach balls to tarp.

Say: The adults in the town need to keep the tarp steady so that the youth don’t roll off
the side or “fall through the cracks” in the system. However, when members of the
community are in the National Guard or Army Reserves, they can be deployed.
Often this affects many members of the community at the same time.

Do: • At this point start “deploying” community members (by having them leave
their spots along the sides of the tarp). Keep doing this until the balls fall off
the tarp.
• Debrief the activity by asking the following questions.

Say: What happened as people started leaving their spots on the blanket?

How did you feel when trying to keep all the objects on the tarp?

How did your role/responsibility change as others left the tarp?

What implications does this activity have for how we respond to the military youth
and families in our community?
The Cycle of Deployment

- Each stage characterized by a timeframe and specific emotional challenges
- Failure to adequately negotiate can lead to significant strife
- Promoting understanding of deployment helps avert crisis and need for intervention/mental health counseling
- Five distinct stages—
  - Stage One: Pre-deployment
  - Stage Two: Deployment
  - Stage Three: Sustainment
  - Stage Four: Re-deployment
  - Stage Five: Post-deployment

Slide 5-3: The Cycle of Deployment


Materials Needed: N/A

Trainer Tips: Emphasize physical, mental, and emotional impact of deployment on soldiers, family, and youth—giving particular emphasis to National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve “Citizen Soldiers.”

What to Do, What to Say:

Do:   • Review slide content with participants.

Say:   The emotional cycle of an extended deployment (six months or greater) is readily divided into five distinct stages. These stages are comprised as follows: pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment, re-deployment, and post-deployment. Each stage is characterized both by a timeframe and specific emotional challenges which must be dealt with and mastered by each of the family members. Failure
to adequately negotiate these challenges can lead to significant strife—both for family members and the deployed soldier. Providing information early about what to expect, especially for families who have not endured a lengthy separation before, can go a long way toward “normalizing” and coping positively with the deployment experience. Furthermore, promoting understanding of the stages of deployment helps to avert crises and minimize the need for intervention or mental health counseling.

The following slides will individually review each of the five components of deployment in detail.
Stage One: Pre-Deployment

- Shock/surprise for National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve Soldiers, family members
- Anticipation of loss vs. denial
- Train up/long hours away
- Getting affairs in order
- Mental/physical distance
- Stress/arguments
- Timeframe: Variable

**Slide 5-4: Stage One: Pre-Deployment**

**Content of this slide adapted from:** The Emotional Cycle of Deployment: A Military Family Perspective by LTC Simon H. Pincus, et al. http://www.hooah4health.com/deployment/familymatters/emotionalcycle.htm

**Materials Needed:** N/A

**Trainer Tips:** Be sure to read through the Must-Read material at end of the chapter.

**What to Do, What to Say:**

**Do:**
- Review slide content with participants.

**Say:**
The onset of this stage begins with the warning order for deployment. This stage ends when the soldier actually departs from the home station. The pre-deployment timeframe is extremely variable, from several weeks to more than a year.

The pre-deployment stage is characterized alternately by denial and anticipation of loss. As the departure date gets closer, spouses often ask: “You don’t really have to go, do you?” Eventually, the increased field training, preparation, and long hours away from home herald the extended separation that is to come. Soldiers energetically
talk more and more about the upcoming mission and their unit. This “bonding” to fellow soldiers is essential to unit cohesion and necessary for a safe and successful deployment. Yet, it also creates an increasing sense of emotional and physical distance for military spouses. In their frustration, many spouses complain: “I wish you were gone already.” It is as if their loved ones are already “psychologically deployed.”

The soldier and family try to get their affairs in order. Long “honey-do” lists are generated, dealing with all manner of issues. At the same time, many couples strive for increased intimacy. Plans are made for the “best” Christmas, the “perfect” vacation, or the “most” romantic anniversary. In contrast, there may be some ambivalence about sexual relations: “This is it for six months, but I do not want to be that close.”

A common occurrence, just prior to deployment, is for soldiers and their spouses to have a significant argument. For couples with a long history, this argument is readily attributed to the ebb-and-flow of marital life and therefore not taken too seriously. For younger couples, especially those experiencing an extended separation for the first time, such an argument can take on “catastrophic” proportions. However, the impact of unresolved family concerns can have potentially devastating consequences. From a command perspective, a worried, preoccupied soldier is easily distracted and unable to focus on essential tasks during the critical movement of heavy military equipment. In the worst-case scenario, this can lead to a serious accident or the development of a soldier stress casualty who is mission ineffective.

Although easier said than done, it is often helpful for military couples—in the pre-deployment stage—to discuss in detail their expectations of each other during the deployment. These expectations can include a variety of issues, to include: freedom to make independent decisions, contact with the opposite sex (fidelity), going out with friends, budgeting, child-rearing, and even how often letters or care packages will be sent. Failure to accurately communicate these and other expectations is frequently a source of misperception, distortion, and hurt later on in the deployment. It is difficult at best to resolve major marital disagreements when face to face, let alone over six thousand miles apart.
Slide 5-5: Stage Two: Deployment


Materials Needed: None

Trainer Tips: Be sure to read through Must-Read material at end of the chapter.

What to Do, What to Say:

Do: • Review slide content with participants.

Say: This stage is the period from the soldier's departure from home through the first month of the deployment.

A roller coaster of mixed emotions is common during the deployment stage. Some military spouses report feeling disoriented and overwhelmed. Others may feel relieved that they no longer have to appear brave and strong. There may be residual anger at tasks left undone. The soldier's departure creates a “hole,” which can lead to feelings of numbness, sadness, being alone or abandonment.
It is common to have difficulty sleeping and anxiety about coping. Worries about security issues may ensue, including: “What if there is a pay problem? Is the house safe? How will I manage if my child gets sick? What if the car breaks down?” For many, the deployment stage is an unpleasant, disorganizing experience.
Slide 5-6: Stage Three: Sustainment

Content of this slide adapted from: The Emotional Cycle of Deployment: A Military Family Perspective by LTC Simon H. Pincus, et al.
http://www.hooah4health.com/deployment/familymatters/emotionalcycle.htm

Materials Needed: N/A

Trainer Tips: Be sure to read through Must-Read material at end of the chapter.

What to Do, What to Say:

Do: • Review slide content with participants.

Say: The sustainment stage lasts from the first month through the 18th (penultimate) month of deployment.

Sustainment is a time of establishing new sources of support and new routines. Many rely on the Family Readiness Group (FRG), which serves as a close network that meets on a regular basis to handle problems and disseminate the latest information. Others are more comfortable with family, friends, church or other
religious institution as their main means of emotional support. As challenges come up, most spouses learn that they are able to cope with crises and make important decisions on their own. They report feeling more confident and in control. During the sustainment stage, it is common to hear military spouses say: “I can do this!”

One challenge, during this stage, is the rapid speed of information provided by widespread phone and e-mail access. Over long distances and without face-to-face contact, communications between husband and wife are much more vulnerable to distortion or misperception. Given this limitation, discussing “hot topics” in a marriage can be problematic and are probably best left on hold until after the deployment when they can be resolved more fully. On a related note, many spouses report significant frustration because phone contact is unidirectional and must be initiated by the soldier. Some even report feeling “trapped” at home for fear that they will miss a call. Now that Internet and e-mail are widely available, spouses report feeling much more in control as they can initiate communication and do not have to stay waiting by the phone. Another advantage of e-mail, for both soldier and spouse, is the ability to be more thoughtful about what is said and to “filter out” intense emotions that may be unnecessarily disturbing. This is not to say that military couples should “lie” to protect each other, but rather it helps to recognize that the direct support available from one’s mate is limited during the deployment.
Slide 5-7: Understanding Separation Anxiety—Preschool or Kindergarten children

**Content of this slide adapted from:** The Emotional Cycle of Deployment: A Military Family Perspective by LTC Simon H. Pincus, et al. http://www.hooah4health.com/deployment/familymatters/emotionalcycle.htm

**Materials Needed:** N/A

**Trainer Tips:** Be sure to read through Must-Read material at end of the chapter.

**What to Do, What to Say:**

**Do:**
- Review slide content with participants.

**Say:**
Preschoolers (3–6 years) may regress in their skills (difficulty with potty training, “baby talk,” thumb sucking, refusal to sleep alone) and seem more “clingy.” They may be irritable, depressed, aggressive, prone to somatic complaints, and have fears about parents or others leaving. Caregivers will need to reassure them with extra attention and physical closeness (hugs, holding hands). In addition, it is important to avoid changing family routines such as sleeping in their own bed, unless they are very scared. Answers to questions about the deployment should be brief, matter-of-fact, and to the point. This will help to contain the free-floating anxiety of an overactive imagination.
Understanding Separation Anxiety

- **Primary School children:**
  - Same as previous slide, plus...
  - Rise in physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches) when nothing seems wrong
  - More irritable or cranky
  - Increase in problems at school
  - Drop in grades
  - Unwillingness to go to school
  - Odd complaints about school or teachers

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**Slide 5-8: Understanding Separation Anxiety—Primary School Children**

**Content of this slide adapted from:** The Emotional Cycle of Deployment: A Military Family Perspective by LTC Simon H. Pincus, et al.
http://www.hooah4health.com/deployment/familymatters/emotionalcycle.htm

**Materials Needed:** N/A

**Trainer Tips:** Be sure to read through Must-Read material at end of the chapter.

**What to Do, What to Say:**

**Do:**
- Review slide content with participants.

**Say:**
School-age children (6–12 years) may whine, complain, become aggressive, or otherwise “act out” their feelings. They may focus on the soldier-parent missing a key event, for example: “Will you (the soldier) be here for my birthday?”

Depressive symptoms may include: sleep disturbance, loss of interest in school, eating, or even playing with their friends. They will need to talk about their feelings and will need more physical attention than usual. Expectations regarding school performance may need to be a little lower, but keeping routines as close to normal is best for them.
Understanding Separation Anxiety

• Adolescents
  — Same as previous slide, plus...
  — Acting out behaviors (trouble in school, at home, or with the law)
  — Low self-esteem
  — Self-criticism—blaming themselves for situation
  — Misdirected anger (i.e., excess anger over small events)
  — Sudden or unusual school problems
  — Loss of interest in usual activities/hobbies

Slide 5-9: Understanding Separation Anxiety—Adolescents


Materials Needed: None

Trainer Tips: Be sure to read through Must-Read material at end of the chapter.

What to Do, What to Say:

Do: • Review slide content with participants.

Say: Teenagers (13–18 years) may be irritable, rebellious, fight, or participate in other attention-getting behavior. They may show a lack of interest in school, peers, and school activities. In addition, they are at greater risk for promiscuity, alcohol, and drug use. Although they may deny problems and worries, it is extremely important for caregivers to stay engaged and be available to talk out their concerns.

At first, lowering academic expectations may be helpful; however, return to their usual school performance should be supported. Sports and social activities should be
encouraged to give normal structure to their life. Likewise, additional responsibility in the family, commensurate with their emotional maturity, will make them feel important and needed.

Unfortunately, some children may have great difficulty adapting to the stress of a deployed parent. If they are unable to return to at least some part of their normal routine or display serious problems over several weeks, a visit to the family doctor or mental health counselor is indicated. Children of deployed parents are also more vulnerable to psychiatric hospitalization—especially in single-parent and blended families.

Despite all these obstacles, the vast majority of spouses and family members successfully negotiate the sustainment stage and begin to look forward to their loved ones coming home.
Stage Four: Re-Deployment

- Anticipation of homecoming
- Excitement
- Apprehension—“Will I have to give up my independence”?
- Burst of energy; “nesting”
- Difficulty making decisions
- Time frame: Months 17–18

Slide 5-10: Stage Four: Re-Deployment


Materials Needed: N/A

Trainer Tips: Be sure to read through Must-Read material at end of the chapter.

What to Do, What to Say:

Do: • Review slide content with participants.

Say: The re-deployment stage is essentially defined as the month before the soldier is scheduled to return home.

The re-deployment stage is generally one of intense anticipation. Like the deployment stage, there can be a surge of conflicting emotions. On the one hand, there is excitement that the soldier is coming home. On the other, there is some apprehension. Some concerns include: “Will he (she) agree with the changes that I
have made? Will I have to give up my independence? Will we get along?” Ironically, even though the separation is almost over, there can be renewed difficulty in making decisions. This is due, in part, to increased attention to choices that the returning soldier might make. Many spouses also experience a burst of energy during this stage. There is often a rush to complete “to-do” lists before their mate returns—especially around the home. It is almost inevitable that expectations will be high.
Stage Five: Post-Deployment

- Honeymoon period
- Loss of independence
- Need for “own” space
- Renegotiating routines
- Reintegrating into family
- Most important stage to get to know one another again—patient communication, going slow, and lower expectations are key
- Timeframe: 3–6 months or more after deployment

Slide 5-11: Stage Five: Post-Deployment


Materials Needed: N/A

Trainer Tips: Be sure to read through Must-Read material at end of the chapter.

What to Do, What to Say:

Do: • Review slide content with participants.

Say: The post-deployment stage begins with arrival to the home station. Like the pre-deployment stage, the timeframe for this stage is also variable depending on the particular family. Typically, this stage lasts from three to six months.

This stage starts with the “homecoming” of the deployed soldier. This can be a wonderfully joyous occasion with children rushing to the returning parent followed by the warm embrace and kiss of the reunited couple. The unit then comes to
attention for one last time, followed by words of praise from the senior commander present. Lastly, weapons are turned in, duffle bags retrieved, and the family goes home.

Homecoming can also be an extremely frustrating and upsetting experience. The date of return may change repeatedly or units may travel home piece-meal over several days. Some spouses express a sense of awkwardness in addition to excitement: “Who is this stranger in my bed?” For others, however, the desire for sexual intimacy may require time in order to reconnect emotionally first.

Eventually, soldiers will want to reassert their role as a member of the family, which can lead to tension. This is an essential task, which requires considerable patience to accomplish successfully. Soldiers may feel pressure to make up for lost time and missed milestones. Soldiers may want to take back all the responsibilities they had before. However, some things will have changed in their absence: spouses are more autonomous, children have grown, and individual personal priorities in life may be different. It is not realistic to return home and expect everything to be the same as before the deployment.

Reunion with children can also be a challenge. Their feelings tend to depend on their age and understanding of why the soldier was gone. Babies less than 1 year old may not know the soldier and cry when held. Toddlers (1–3 years) may be slow to warm up. Pre-schoolers (3–6 years) may feel guilty and scared over the separation. School age children (6–12 years) may want a lot of attention. Teenagers (13–18 years) may be moody and may not appear to care. In addition, children are often loyal to the parent that remains behind and do not respond to discipline from the returning soldier.

Post-deployment is probably the most important stage for both soldier and spouse. Patient communication, going slow, lowering expectations, and taking time to get to know each other again is critical to the task of successful reintegration of the soldier back into the family. Counseling may be required in the event that the soldier is injured or returns as a stress casualty. On the other hand, the separation of deployment—not experienced by civilian couples—provides soldier and spouse a chance to evaluate changes within themselves and what direction they want their marriage to take. Although a difficult as well as joyful stage, many military couples have reported that their relationship is much stronger as a result.
Slide 5-12: Strengths for Youth Resulting from Deployment

Content of this slide adapted from: Working with Military Children: A Primer for School Personnel, Military Child Education Coalition, http://militarychild.org

Materials Needed: N/A

Trainer Tips: Be sure to read through Must-Read material at end of the chapter.

What to Do, What to Say:

Do:  • Review slide content with participants.

Say:  Much has been written about the negative impact family separations and relocations have on military children. Less attention has been focused on the positive impact of these realities of military family life. Several psychological studies show that despite the stress of separation, many children make significant developmental gains.

Positive impacts include:
1) Fostering maturity
2) Growth inducing
   Youth assume age-appropriate responsibilities in the service member’s absence. This provides a chance to develop new skills and develop hidden interests.
3) **Encourages independence, flexibility**  
   In an ever-changing world, youth learn to be resourceful and flexible.

4) **Builds skills for adjusting to separations and losses faced later in life**  
   In a lifestyle filled with good-byes and hellos, military children learn not only how to say good-bye, but how to begin new friendships.

5) **Strengthens family bonds**  
   Emotional adjustments during a separation often lead to the discovery of new sources of strength and support among themselves.
Symptoms of Deployment Stress in School Settings

- Unable to resume normal class assignments/activities
- Continued high levels of emotional response (i.e., crying and intense sadness)
- Difficulty concentrating in school
- Express violent or depressed feelings verbally or through drawings/play
- Intentionally hurt self or others
- Gain or lose significant amount of weight in period of weeks
- Discontinue care of personal appearance
- Exhibit possible alcohol/drug abuse problem
- Frequent absences
- Experience decline in performance and grades that does not improve over time

Ready, Set, Go!

Slide 5-13: Symptoms of Deployment Stress in School Settings

Content of this slide adapted from: Educator’s Guide to the Military Child During Deployment, sponsored by Educational Opportunities Directorate of the Department of Defense

Materials Needed: N/A

Trainer Tips: Be sure to read through Must-Read material at end of the chapter.

What to Do, What to Say:

Say: Many factors influence a family’s ability to adapt to deployment. Each individual in the family must adjust to new roles. Most children and youth will be able to adjust to a new normal after the departure of a parent. However, some children and youth who are fragile or who have had previous social or emotional problems may continue to have serious symptoms of stress and their ability to function may remain compromised.

Do: • Review slide content with participants.

Say: The difference between a normal and a serious reaction to deployment is the degree and duration of the change rather than the kind of change. If a “normal” reaction persists for over six weeks, then the parent needs to be notified and a referral made to the appropriate health service.
Slide 5-14: Suggested Healthy Responses by Adults

**Content of this slide adapted from:** Educator’s Guide to the Military Child During Deployment, sponsored by Educational Opportunities Directorate of the Department of Defense

**Materials Needed:** None

**Trainer Tips:** Be sure to read through Must-Read material at end of the chapter.

**What to Do, What to Say:**

**Do:**
- Review slide content with participants.
- Brainstorm and share as a group additional responses not indicated on this slide that adults can offer to support children and youth.

**Say:** Children and youth watch the way adults react to situations—deployment is no different. Adults can respond to the concerns of youth by educating themselves. Listen and reflect what you see and hear in terms of their behavior to help them with understanding. Be patient, caring, and consistent. Help youth understand their feelings in an age-appropriate manner. Be a positive role model in dealing with emotions like anger, grief, loss, and sadness.
Other Deployment Stress-Related Issues

- **Combat Stress**—Natural result of heavy mental and emotional work when facing danger in tough conditions; physical symptoms (i.e., headaches, racing heart, fatigue, anger) generally get better with rest and replenishment.

- **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**—Possible response when deployment has occurred to war zone, natural disaster site, or urban riot location; physical, mental, and emotional symptoms that require professional assistance.

- **Secondary Traumatic Stress**—Possibly experienced by family members upon return of Soldier; stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a suffering or traumatized person (Figley, 1993)

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**Slide 5-15: Other Deployment Stress-Related Issues**

**Content of this slide adapted from:** Hot Topics: Current Issues for U.S. Army Leaders; Reunion: Putting the Pieces Back Together, Volume 5. No. 3

**Materials Needed:** N/A

**Trainer Tips:** Be sure to read through Must-Read material at end of the chapter.

**Caution to Trainer:** This information is meant to illustrate to participants that the severe stress resulting from extended deployment can result in these conditions. Do not engage in lengthy discussion on these topics. Refer participants interested in learning more to other qualified mental health and/or military professionals in community.

**What to Do, What to Say:***

**Do:**
- Review slide content with participants.

**Say:**
When a Soldier returns home, they may be out of harm’s way but the stress of being deployed may not go away. There are different types of stress that may appear during post-deployment.
**Combat Stress** is a natural result of heavy mental and emotional work when facing danger in tough conditions; physical symptoms (i.e., headaches, racing heart, fatigue, anger) generally get better with rest and replenishment.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**—This is a possible response when deployment has occurred in a war zone, natural disaster site, or urban riot location; physical, mental, and emotional symptoms require professional assistance.

**Secondary Traumatic Stress**—Possibly experienced by family members upon return of Soldier; it refers to stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a suffering or traumatized person.

If you or one of your trainees is interested in learning more about these disorders, please talk with a qualified mental health and/or military professionals in your community.
Activity Instructions:
“A Blanket Community”

This is an exercise in building teamwork, demonstrating how we need to recognize
the strengths of all community members and understand the importance of
communicating with community members. This exercise helps emphasize that we
need to support the youth and families from our military units.

Supplies:
- Blanket, tarp, or tablecloth
- Several objects to represent various aspects of the community such as balls,
  empty plastic water bottles, other objects with different shapes, textures

Procedures:
Place the blanket or tarp on the floor and have all participants align themselves on
the edges. Each member picks up an edge of the cloth and holds the blanket tightly.
Add objects to the center of the blanket. Each participant holding the blanket will
assume a community role: teacher, parent, business owner, law enforcement officer,
doctor, county employee, school administrator, elected official.

As the objects are added, a group leader will describe a situation where several of
your community members have been called up to serve in their National Guard or
U.S. Army Reserve Unit. The remaining participants/community members will try
to keep all the objects on the blanket.

Debriefing:
- Who or what did the objects represent?
- What happened as people started leaving their spots on the blanket?
- How did you feel in trying to keep all the objects on the blanket?
- How did your role/responsibility change as others left the blanket?
- What implications does this activity have for how we respond to the “military”
youth and families in our community?
The Emotional Cycle of Deployment:  
A Military Family Perspective

By: LTC Simon H. Pincus, US, MC, COL, Robert House, USAR, MC, LTC,  
Joseph Christenson, USA, MC, and CAPT Lawrence E. Alder, MC, USNR-R  
http://www.hooah4health.com/deployment/familymatters/emotionalcycle.htm

Overview

The emotional cycle of an extended deployment, six months or  
greater, is readily divided into five distinct stages. These stages are  
comprised as follows: pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment,  
re-deployment, and post-deployment. Each stage is characterized  
either by a timeframe and specific emotional challenges, which  
must be dealt with and mastered by each of the family members.  
Failure to adequately negotiate these challenges can lead to sig-  
nificant strife—both for family members and the deployed soldier. Providing information early about what to expect, especially for  
families who have not endured a lengthy separation before, can go  
a long way toward “normalizing” and coping positively with the  
deployment experience. Furthermore, promoting understanding  
of the stages of deployment helps to avert crises, and minimize  
the need for intervention or mental health counseling.

Stage One: Pre-deployment

The onset of this stage begins with the warning order for deployment. This stage ends when the soldier actually departs from home station. The pre-deployment timeframe is extremely variable, from several weeks to more than a year.

The pre-deployment stage is characterized alternately by denial and anticipation of loss. As the departure date gets closer, spouses often ask: “You don’t really have to go, do you?” Eventually, the increased field training, preparation, and long hours away from home herald the extended separation that is to come. Soldiers energetically talk more and more about the upcoming mission and their unit. This “bonding” to fellow soldiers is essential to unit cohesion and necessary for a safe and successful deployment. Yet, it also creates an increasing sense of emotional and physical distance for military spouses. In their frustration, many spouses complain: “I wish you were gone already.” It is as if their loved ones are already “psychologically deployed.”
As the reality of the deployment finally sinks in, the soldier and family try to get their affairs in order. Long “honey-do” lists are generated dealing with all manner of issues including: home repairs, security (door and window locks, burglar alarms, etc.), car maintenance, finances, tax preparation, child care plans and wills, just to name a few. At the same time, many couples strive for increased intimacy. Plans are made for the “best” Christmas, the “perfect” vacation, or the “most” romantic anniversary. In contrast, there may be some ambivalence about sexual relations: “This is it for six months, but I do not want to be that close.” Fears about fidelity or marital integrity are raised or may go unspoken. Other frequently voiced concerns may include: “How will the children handle the separation? Can I cope without him/her? Will my marriage survive?” In this very busy and tumultuous time, resolving all these issues, completing the multitude of tasks, or fulfilling high expectations often fall short.

A common occurrence, just prior to deployment, is for soldiers and their spouses to have a significant argument. For couples with a long history, this argument is readily attributed to the ebb-and-flow of marital life and therefore not taken too seriously. For younger couples, especially those experiencing an extended separation for the first time, such an argument can take on “catastrophic” proportions. Fears that the relationship is over can lead to tremendous anxiety for both soldier and spouse. In retrospect, these arguments are most likely caused by the stress of the pending separation. From a psychological perspective, it is easier to be angry than confront the pain and loss of saying goodbye for six months or more.

However, the impact of unresolved family concerns can have potentially devastating consequences. From a command perspective, a worried, preoccupied soldier is easily distracted and unable to focus on essential tasks during the critical movement of heavy military equipment. In the worst-case scenario, this can lead to a serious accident or the development of a soldier stress casualty who is mission ineffective. On the home front, significant spousal distress interferes with completing basic routines, concentrating at work, and attending to the needs of children. At worst, this can exacerbate children’s fears that the parents are unable to adequately care for them or even that the soldier will not return. Adverse reactions by children can include inconsolable crying, apathy, tantrums, and other regressive behaviors. In response, a downward spiral can develop—if not quickly checked—in which both soldier and spouse become even more upset at the prospect of separating.

Although easier said than done, it is often helpful for military couples—in the pre-deployment stage—to discuss in detail their expectations of each other during the deployment. These expectations can include a variety of issues, to include: freedom to make independent decisions, contact with the opposite sex (fidelity), going out with friends, budgeting, child-rearing, and even how often letters or care packages will be sent. Failure to accurately communicate these and other expectations is frequently a source of misperception, distortion, and hurt later on in the deployment. It is difficult at best to resolve major marital disagreements when face to face, let alone over six thousand miles apart.
Stage Two: Deployment

This stage is the period from the soldier’s departure from home through the first month of the deployment.

A roller coaster of mixed emotions is common during the deployment stage. Some military spouses report feeling disoriented and overwhelmed. Others may feel relieved that they no longer have to appear brave and strong. There may be residual anger at tasks left undone. The soldier’s departure creates a “hole,” which can lead to feelings of numbness, sadness, being alone, or abandonment. It is common to have difficulty sleeping and anxiety about coping. Worries about security issues may ensue, including: “What if there is a pay problem? Is the house safe? How will I manage if my child gets sick? What if the car breaks down?” For many, the deployment stage is an unpleasant, disorganizing experience.

On the positive side, the ability to communicate home from any military site is a great morale boost. The Defense Satellite Network (DSN) provides soldiers the ability to call home at no cost, although usually for a fifteen-minute time limit. For some soldiers who are unwilling to wait on line, using commercial phone lines is an option. Unfortunately, it is common for huge phone bills to result, which can further add to familial stress. Another potential source of anxiety for families is that several weeks may pass before soldiers are able to make their first call home.

For most military spouses, reconnecting with their loved ones is a stabilizing experience. For those who have “bad” phone calls, this contact can markedly exacerbate the stress of the deployment stage and may result in the need for counseling. One possible disadvantage of easy phone access is the immediacy and proximity to unsettling events at home or in theater. It is virtually impossible to disguise negative feelings of hurt, anger, frustration, and loss on the phone. For example, a spouse may be having significant difficulty (children acting out, car breaking down, finances, etc.) or a soldier may not initially get along with peers or a supervisor. Spouse and soldier may feel helpless and unable to support each other in their time of need. Likewise, there may be jealousy toward the individual(s) that the spouse or soldier does rely on, or confide in, during the deployment. These situations can add to the stress and uncertainty surrounding the deployment. Yet, military families have come to expect phone (and now even video) contact as technology advances. However, most report that the ability to stay in close touch—especially during key milestones (birthdays, anniversaries, etc.)—greatly helps them to cope with the separation.

Stage 2. Deployment

- Mixed emotions/relief
- Disoriented/overwhelmed
- Numb, sad, alone
- Sleep difficulty
- Security issues

Timeframe:
First month
Stage Three: Sustainment

The sustainment stage lasts from the first month through the 18th (penultimate) month of deployment.

Sustainment is a time of establishing new sources of support and new routines. Many rely on the Family Readiness Group (FRG), which serves as a close network that meets on a regular basis to handle problems and disseminate the latest information. Others are more comfortable with family, friends, church, or other religious institutions as their main means of emotional support. As challenges come up, most spouses learn that they are able to cope with crises and make important decisions on their own. They report feeling more confident and in control. During the sustainment stage, it is common to hear military spouses say: “I can do this!”

One challenge, during this stage, is the rapid speed of information provided by widespread phone and e-mail access. In the near future, one can even expect that individual soldiers will have the ability to call home with personal cellular phones. Over long distances and without face-to-face contact, communications between husband and wife are much more vulnerable to distortion or misperception. Given this limitation, discussing “hot topics” in a marriage can be problematic and are probably best left on hold until after the deployment when they can be resolved more fully. Obvious exceptions to this rule include a family emergency (i.e., the critical illness of a loved one) or a joyful event (i.e., the birth of a child). In these situations, the ideal route of communication is through the Red Cross so that the soldier’s command is able to coordinate emergency leave if required.

On a related note, many spouses report significant frustration because phone contact is unidirectional and must be initiated by the soldier. Some even report feeling “trapped” at home for fear that they will miss a call. Likewise, soldiers may feel forgotten if they call—especially after waiting a long time on line to get to a phone—and no one is home. This can lead to anger and resentment, especially if an expectation regarding the frequency of calls is unmet. Now that Internet and e-mail are widely available, spouses report feeling much more in control as they can initiate communication and do not have to stay waiting by the phone. Another advantage of e-mail, for both soldier and spouse, is the ability to be more thoughtful about what is said and to “filter out” intense emotions that may be unnecessarily disturbing. This is not to say that military couples should “lie” to protect each other, but rather it helps to recognize that the direct support available from one’s mate is limited during the deployment.

Furthermore, rapid communication can lead to unanticipated rumors, which then circulate unchecked within the Family Readiness Group (FRG). The most damning rumor involves an allegation of infidelity that is difficult to prove true or false. Other troubling rumors may include: handling the deployment poorly,
accidents or injuries, changes in the date of return, disciplinary actions, or even who calls home the most. Needless to say, such rumors can be very hurtful to soldier, spouse, and the FRG. At its worst, unit cohesion and even mission success can suffer. Limiting the negative impact of such rumors is a constant challenge for unit leaders and chaplains. It is extremely important to keep soldiers and family members fully informed and to dispel rumors quickly. In fact, rumors lose their destructive power once the “secret” is exposed.

There was a rumor that a commander’s wife reported that a deployed soldier was having an affair. Members of the FRG, who were very upset, related the details to their deployed spouses. Senior unit leaders decided not to tell the commander because the allegations were deemed too inflammatory. Unfortunately, unit morale and cohesion began to suffer greatly as the rumor spread throughout the ranks. A month later, the commander finally learned of this destructive rumor, which had been undermining his authority to lead. He immediately confronted his wife, senior leaders, and the soldier about whom the allegation had been made. Evidence about the validity of these allegations, or how the rumor started in the first place, could not be found. In response, the commander issued a very firm policy regarding exposing all rumors—whether they be true or false. Unit morale and cohesion, although badly bruised, then began to recover.

The response of children to extended deployment of parent is very individualized and also depends on their developmental age: infants, toddlers, preschool, school age, and teenagers. It is reasonable to assume that a sudden negative change in a child’s behavior or mood is a predictable response to the stress of having a deployed parent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ages</th>
<th>Behaviors</th>
<th>Moods</th>
<th>Remedy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infants</td>
<td>&lt; 1 yr</td>
<td>Refuses to eat</td>
<td>Listless</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Support for parent, pediatrician</td>
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<tr>
<td>Toddlers</td>
<td>1–3 yrs</td>
<td>Cries, tantrums</td>
<td>Irritable, sad</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increased attention, holding, hugs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>3–6 yrs</td>
<td>Potty accidents, clingy</td>
<td>Irritable, sad</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increased attention, holding, hugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Age</td>
<td>6–12 yrs</td>
<td>Whines, body aches</td>
<td>Irritable, sad</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spend time, maintain routines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenagers</td>
<td>12–18 yrs</td>
<td>Isolates, uses drugs</td>
<td>Anger, apathy</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Patience, limit-setting, counseling</td>
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**Infants (<1 year)** must be held and actively nurtured in order to thrive. If a primary caregiver becomes significantly depressed, then the infant will be at risk for apathy, refusal to eat, and even weight loss. Early intervention becomes critical to prevent undue harm or neglect. Pediatricians can perform serial exams to ensure growth continues as expected on height/weight charts. Army Community Services and Social Work can assist with parenting skills and eliciting family or community support. Lastly, the primary caregiver may also benefit from individual counseling.
Toddlers (1–3 years) will generally take their cue from the primary caregiver. One issue is whether it is the mother or father who is the soldier leaving—especially when children are very young. If the “non-deploying” parent is coping well, they will tend to do well. The converse is also true. If the primary caregiver is not coping well, then toddlers may become sullen, tearful, throw tantrums, or develop sleep disturbance. They will usually respond to increased attention, hugs, and holding hands. The “non-deploying” parent may also benefit from sharing their day-to-day experiences with other parents facing similar challenges. In particular, it is important for the primary caregiver to balance the demands for caring for children alone with their own needs for time for self.

Preschoolers (3–6 years) may regress in their skills (difficulty with potty training, “baby talk,” thumb sucking, refusal to sleep alone) and seem more “clingy.” They may be irritable, depressed, aggressive, prone to somatic complaints, and have fears about parents or others leaving. Caregivers will need to reassure them with extra attention and physical closeness (hugs, holding hands). In addition, it is important to avoid changing family routines such as sleeping in their own bed, unless they are “very” scared. Answers to questions about the deployment should be brief, matter-of-fact, and to the point. This will help to contain the free-floating anxiety of an overactive imagination.

School age children (6–12 years) may whine, complain, become aggressive, or otherwise “act out” their feelings. They may focus on the soldier-parent missing a key event, for example: “Will you (the soldier) be here for my birthday?” Depressive symptoms may include: sleep disturbance, loss of interest in school, eating, or even playing with their friends. They will need to talk about their feelings and will need more physical attention than usual. Expectations regarding school performance may need to be a little lower, but keeping routines as close to normal is best for them.

Teenagers (13–18 years) may be irritable, rebellious, fight, or participate in other attention-getting behavior. They may show a lack of interest in school, peers, and school activities. In addition, they are at greater risk for promiscuity, alcohol, and drug use. Although they may deny problems and worries, it is extremely important for caregivers to stay engaged and be available to talk out their concerns. At first, lowering academic expectations may be helpful; however, return to their usual school performance should be supported. Sports and social activities should be encouraged to give normal structure to their life. Likewise, additional responsibility in the family, commensurate with their emotional maturity, will make them feel important and needed.

Unfortunately, some children may have great difficulty adapting to the stress of a deployed parent. If they are unable to return to at least some part of their normal routine or if they display serious problems over several weeks, a visit to the family doctor or mental health counselor is indicated. Children of deployed parents are also more vulnerable to psychiatric hospitalization—especially in single-parent and blended families.
Despite all these obstacles, the vast majority of spouses and family members successfully negotiate the sustainment stage and begin to look forward to their loved ones coming home.

**Stage Four: Re-deployment**

The re-deployment stage is essentially defined as the month before the soldier is scheduled to return home.

The re-deployment stage is generally one of intense anticipation. Like the deployment stage, there can be a surge of conflicting emotions. On the one hand, there is excitement that the soldier is coming home. On the other, there is some apprehension. Some concerns include: “Will he (she) agree with the changes that I have made? Will I have to give up my independence? Will we get along?” Ironically, even though the separation is almost over, there can be renewed difficulty in making decisions. This is due, in part, to increased attention to choices that the returning soldier might make. Many spouses also experience a burst of energy during this stage. There is often a rush to complete “to-do” lists before their mate returns—especially around the home. It is almost inevitable that expectations will be high.

**Stage Five: Post-deployment**

The post-deployment stage begins with the arrival to home station. Like the pre-deployment stage, the timeframe for this stage is also variable, depending on the particular family. Typically, this stage lasts from three to six months.

This stage starts with the “homecoming” of the deployed soldier. This can be a wonderfully joyous occasion with children rushing to the returning parent followed by the warm embrace and kiss of the reunited couple. The unit then comes to attention for one last time, followed by words of praise from the senior commander present. Lastly, weapons are turned in, duffle bags retrieved, and the family goes home.

Homecoming can also be an extremely frustrating and upsetting experience. The date of return may change repeatedly or units may travel home piece-meal over several days. Despite best intentions, the spouse at home may not be able to meet the returning soldier (short notice, the children might be sick, sitters cannot be found in the middle of the night, unable to get off work, etc.). Soldiers may expect to be received as “heroes” and “heroines” only to find that they have to make their own way
home. Typically, a “honeymoon” period follows in which couples reunite physically, but not necessarily emotionally. Some spouses express a sense of awkwardness in addition to excitement: “Who is this stranger in my bed?” For others, however, the desire for sexual intimacy may require time in order to reconnect emotionally first.

Eventually, soldiers will want to reassert their role as a member of the family, which can lead to tension. This is an essential task, which requires considerable patience to accomplish successfully. Soldiers may feel pressure to make up for lost time and missed milestones. Soldiers may want to take back all the responsibilities they had before. However, some things will have changed in their absence: spouses are more autonomous, children have grown, and individual personal priorities in life may be different. It is not realistic to return home and expect everything to be the same as before the deployment.

During this period, spouses may report a lost sense of independence. There may be resentment at having been “abandoned” for six months or more. Spouses may consider themselves to be the true heroes (watching the house, children, paying bills, etc.) while soldiers cared only for themselves. At least one study (Zeff et al., 1997) suggests that the stay-at-home parent is more likely to report distress than the deployed soldier. Spouses will also have to adapt to changes. Spouses may find that they are more irritable with their mates underfoot. They may desire their “own” space. Basic household chores and routines need to be renegotiated. The role played by the spouse in the marriage must be reestablished.

Reunion with children can also be a challenge. Their feelings tend to depend on their age and understanding of why the soldier was gone. Babies less than 1 year old may not know the soldier and cry when held. Toddlers (1–3 years) may be slow to warm up. Preschoolers (3–6 years) may feel guilty and scared over the separation. School-age children (6–12 years) may want a lot of attention. Teenagers (13–18 years) may be moody and may not appear to care. In addition, children are often loyal to the parent that remains behind and do not respond to discipline from the returning soldier. They may also fear the soldier’s return: “Wait till Mommy/Daddy gets home!” Some children may display significant anxiety up to a year later (“anniversary reaction”), triggered by the possibility of separation. In addition, the soldier may not approve of privileges granted to children by the non-deployed parent. However, it is probably best for the soldier not to try to make changes right away and to take time renegotiating family rules and norms. Not heeding this advice, the soldier risks invalidating the efforts of his/her mate and alienating the children. Soldiers may feel hurt in response to such a lukewarm reception. Clearly going slow and letting the child(ren) set the pace goes a long way toward a successful reunion.

Post-deployment is probably the most important stage for both soldier and spouse. Patient communication, going slow, lowering expectations, and taking time to get to know each other again is critical to the task of successful reintegration of the soldier back into the family. Counseling may be required in the
event that the soldier is injured or returns as a stress casualty. On the other hand, the separation of deployment—not experienced by civilian couples—provides soldier and spouse a chance to evaluate changes within themselves and what direction they want their marriage to take. Although a difficult as well as joyful stage, many military couples have reported that their relationship is much stronger as a result.

**Strengths Resulting From the Deployment Cycle/Stages:**

Much has been written about the negative impact family separations have on military children. Less attention has been focused on the positive impact of these realities on military family life. Many children develop significant gains such as:

- Fostering maturity
- Emotional growth and insight
- Encouraging independence
- Encouraging flexibility and adapting to change
- Building skills for adjusting to separations and losses faced later in life
- Strengthening family bonds
- Awareness and understanding of the importance of civic duty

Although many risk factors may develop and cause stress, there are as many balancing protective factors which protect children from exposure to risk, either by reducing the impact of risk factors or by changing the way children respond to the risk. The importance of protective factors cannot be overstated because they promote positive behavior, health, well-being, and personal success. Research has identified protective factors that fall into three basic categories: individual characteristics, bonding, and healthy beliefs and clear standards.

Belonging to a military family and culture may bring out many protective factors that will promote positive well-being and resiliency in the child. Research has identified some of these characteristics children are born with and are difficult to change: a resilient temperament, a positive social orientation, and intelligence. Intelligence, however, has not shown to protect against substance abuse.

Positive bonding makes up for many other disadvantages caused by other risk factors or environmental characteristics. Children who are attached to positive families, friends, school, and community and who are committed to achieving the goals valued by these groups are less likely to develop problems in adolescence.

Positive bonding is a very important protective factor in reducing stress during the deployment cycle. To build bonding three conditions are necessary: opportunities, skills, and recognition. Children must have opportunities to contribute to their community, family, peers, and school. The challenge is to provide children with meaningful opportunities that help them feel responsible
and significant. Children must be taught the skills necessary to effectively take advantage of the opportunity they are provided. Children must also be recognized and acknowledged for their efforts. This gives them the incentive to contribute and reinforces their skillful performance.

The people with whom the children bond need to have healthy beliefs and clear standards about problem behaviors. They need to share the beliefs with their children and set positive standards for future behavior. Teaching skills to both caregivers and the children will foster bonding and other protective factors to reduce the stress of deployment.

The Developmental Assets Approach developed by years of research by the Search Institute is also helpful in understanding the assets and strengths children may experience due to the deployment process. Of the 40 developmental assets that promote resiliency and resistance to stressors, many of them, both external and internal, protect the military child.

The external assets are the support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time provided for young people. Internal assets are the commitment to school, positive values, social competencies, and positive self-identity young people develop to guide themselves. Fostering family support, positive family communication, other adult relationships, and caring community within the family affected by the deployment cycle will strengthen the child’s ability to manage the stress in a positive manner. Providing resources and involvement in youth programs are healthy external assets. Internal assets that may be affected are improved bonding with others and new caregivers and cultural competence. The Developmental Assets framework emphasizes strengths that foster resiliency in people.

**Helping Children Adjust While Their Military Parent Is Away**

Every child and family is different and each requires help based upon individual needs. Teachers, parents, or child-care providers may notice behavioral changes that indicate the child is not coping well. Teachers and counselors may need to get involved. If the child is being neglected by either a babysitter or parent who feels helpless, referrals can be made to social services, commanders, chaplains, community service, or civilian agencies.

Even when there is a healthy, stable family, the children can be helped during the absence of a parent. Here are some suggestions:

- Be available to listen to the child. Watch expressions and behaviors that may communicate more than words. Allow children to express feelings of fear, loneliness, sadness, or anger.
- Help young children realize the reason for the departure, that the parent did not leave because of a child’s misbehavior, and that the child is not being abandoned.
- Maintain family routines to provide consistency.
• Assure the children of your love.
• Keep joy and laughter in your life.
• Give children time to play.
• Watch that children do not assume adult roles and responsibility while a parent is deployed.
• Encourage regular correspondence while the military parent is away. If the location of the deployment is unknown, notes written before the departure may be forthcoming.
• Remember birthdays.
• Post a picture of the absent parent.
• Put up a world map and connect the child’s and parent’s location with a string.
• Use a large calendar to show how days and months do pass. Plan events and post them on the calendar to show that there are activities to anticipate.
• Ask the school or military center if they have groups for children of deployed parents. Other kids provide real assurance and support.

Helping the Nonmilitary Parent During a Spouse’s Extended Absence

• Make sure you take care of yourself. Join support groups, call on friends, family, religious, and community groups for help.
• Don’t overreact to a child’s drop in grades or misbehavior.
• Children do need reasonable limits, but strict punishment or long restrictions probably will not help. Most children will test the limits when one parent leaves.
• Plan something relaxing or fun for weekends. Full-time care of children, household, cars, pets, and jobs is overwhelming for the strongest parents.
• Help children communicate with the absent parent by writing letters, making cassettes, or sending packages together.
Talk To Your Children About The Deployment...Before It Happens!

Communicate your thoughts and feelings about the separation. Be open and honest. Some parents worry that advance warning will only give children more time to fret. However, children can sense when something is about to happen and worry more when they are left in the dark. Knowing about the assignment or deployment in advance helps in adjusting to the idea.

**Building an Emotional Bond:** The departing service member needs to spend some QUALITY time with each child before he/she leaves. Younger children (under eight) will be willing to accept a half-hour of face-to-face communication. Don’t be afraid to hug your child. A display of affection is powerful communication. Older children (eight and over) appreciate being consulted when deciding how long and where this “special” time together can occur.

Use this time to share pride in your work, the military, and the purpose for your deployment. Children of school age are beginning to understand that some events must happen for the good of everyone. It is a little easier to let go if mom or dad’s job is seen as essential to the mission of the military.

Often when asked if something is bothering them, a child will say “no.” But there are ways to get through. Make some casual references to your own worries or ambivalent feelings about the impending assignment or deployment. This enables both parent and child to share similar feelings. It also helps a child to realize their parent is a real person who can cry as well as laugh, and it models an appropriate way to release feelings by talking about them.

**Visit Your Child’s Teacher:** For our children, school is the second most important support system they have next to their families. Frequently children react to the assignment or deployment by misbehaving in class or performing poorly in their studies. Take the time to talk with your child’s teacher about the upcoming separation. A teacher who is aware of the situation is in a better position to be sensitive and encouraging.

**Children Need to See the Parent’s Workplace:** Very young children need to see where mom or dad eats, sleeps, and spends some of their day when away from home. You can do this through pictures or TV videos. This provides them with a concrete image of where the parent is when they can’t come home. If you have access to the Internet from your home, or the home of a friend, let the children visit the installation website. A wealth of information is available.
and the process is fun for the children. Older children can learn a great deal from the parent about the function of his or her job, the sophisticated technology, the interdependence of each division of the Army with the other, and career direction.

**Plan for Communicating:** Expect children to stay in touch with the departed spouse. A lively discussion needs to take place before departure. Encourage children to brainstorm the many ways communication can occur in addition to letter writing, such as cassette tape exchanges, photographs with their parents, encoded messages, “puzzle messages” (a written letter cut into puzzle parts that must be assembled in order to be read), unusual paper for stationery, and pictures drawn by preschoolers.

**Help Children to Plan for the Departure:** While the service member is packing bags, allow your children to assist you in some way. Suggest a “swap” of some token, something of your child’s that can be packed in a suitcase in return for something that belongs to the departing spouse.

Discuss the household chores and let your children choose (as much as possible) the ones they would rather do. Both parents need to agree with each other that division of household chores is reasonable. The role of disciplinarian needs to be supported by the departing parent.

**Being a Long-Distance Parent:** Parenting while away from home is not easy. Some separated parents find it so emotionally difficult they withdraw and become significantly less involved in the lives of their children while they are apart. This, of course, is not good either for the parent or the children, not to mention the difficulty this causes the parent/caregiver who is at home alone. The most important aspect of parenting from a distance is making those small efforts to stay in touch. Doing something to say the parent is thinking about and missing the child is what is most important. Here are some practical suggestions to help keep the absentee parent involved with their children.

Letters and cards from mom or dad are important. The length and contents are not nearly as important as the presence of something in the mail from the absent parent. When sending picture postcards, make little notes about the place or write that you stood right here: “x” in the picture. Any small thing that makes the card personal will have tremendous meaning to children at home.

Cut out and send things from the local paper or magazines. This is a tangible way to help feel connected and give them an idea of what life is like there.

For older children, a subscription to a favorite magazine is a gift that keeps on giving.

When using a tape recorder, remember to be creative: sing “Happy Birthday,” tell a story, read scripture, take it with you on your job or when visiting with
other employees of your unit. Don’t try to fill a tape completely in one sitting. Make sure you describe the surroundings, the time of day, and what you are doing. Try not to forget birthdays and special holidays that would be important to a child, particularly Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, Halloween, or Valentine’s Day.

Try to schedule phone calls when children are likely to be at home. Keep a mental list of things you want to talk about with each child, such as their friends, school, ball games. Ask each child to send you something from their activities at school, home, or elsewhere, like dance lessons, youth groups, or scouts.

If your child has a pet, make sure to ask about it.

Send an age-appropriate gift for each child. It should be something special, just for them. Some interesting and creative gifts include a special notebook for school, a book for coloring or reading, or something unique from where you are stationed.

Just because a child cannot tell you about their concerns doesn’t mean that they are not troubled. Children don’t usually recognize the cause nor will they tell you they are concerned. The spouse that is departing should communicate with each child individually. There is no substitute for a letter with your own name on the envelope. Send postcards, snapshots, and tape recordings of the sounds around you where you are deployed. Use unusual stamps, felt-tip pens, colored pencils, and different styles of alphabets and lettering.
Deployment Stress-Related Issues

Combat Stress
(Source: Hot topics: Current Issues for Army Leaders; Reunion: Putting the Pieces Back Together, Volume 5. No. 3)

Combat stress is a natural result of heavy mental and emotional work when facing danger in tough conditions. Like physical fatigue and stress, handling combat stress depends on one's level of fitness training. It can occur quickly or slowly, and it gets better with rest and replenishment. If combat stress does not subside, soldiers should seek medical help. Common signs of combat stress include:

- Tension headaches, backaches, trembling, fumbling, and jumpiness
- Rapid breathing or pounding heart
- Upset stomach, vomiting, diarrhea, frequent urination
- Emptying bowels or bladder at first sign of danger
- Fatigue, weariness, distant staring
- Anxiety, worrying, irritability, swearing, complaining
- Awakened by bad dreams
- Grief or guilt
- Anger at own team, losing confidence in self or unit

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
(Source: Hot topics: Current Issues for Army Leaders; Reunion: Putting the Pieces Back Together, Volume 5. No. 3)

If deployment was to a war zone, natural disaster, or urban riots, be alert for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the returning soldier. PTSD won't go away on its own. Professional help should be sought by those who experience four or more of the following symptoms:

- Depression
- Isolation
- Alienation
- Avoidance of feelings
- Rage
- Anxiety
- Sleep disturbances
- Intrusive thoughts
- Startle response