The Emotional Cycle of Deployment: A Military Family Perspective


Overview

Stages of Deployment

- Pre-deployment (varies)
- Deployment (1st month)
- Sustainment (months 2 through 18)
- Re-deployment (last month)
- Post-deployment (3–6 months after deployment)

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 time frame 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 towards “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 1: Pre-deployment

- Anticipation of loss vs. denial
- Train-up/long hours away
- Getting affairs in order
- Mental/physical distance
- Arguments

Time frame: Variable

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 time frame 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 that is 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 **Stage 2** the first month of the deployment.

**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 residually numb, sad, alone 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 Time frame: anxiety about coping. Worries
about security issues may ensue, First month 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 other 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 towards the individual(s) whom the spouse or soldier do 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 Three: Sustainment

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

**Sustainment** - 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 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. 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, 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.

### Possible Negative Changes in Children Resulting from Deployment

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<th>Moods</th>
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<td>Infants</td>
<td>&lt; 1 yr</td>
<td>Refuses to eat</td>
<td>Listless</td>
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<td>Toddlers</td>
<td>1–3 yrs</td>
<td>Cries, tantrums</td>
<td>Irritable, sad</td>
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<td>3–6 yrs</td>
<td>Potty accidents,</td>
<td>Irritable, sad</td>
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<td>6–12 yrs</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>body aches</td>
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<td>Teenagers</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 “clinging.” 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 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
- Burst of energy/ "nesting"
- Difficulty making decisions

Time frame: Months 17 through 18

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
- Time frame: Three to six months after deployment

The post-deployment stage begins with the arrival to home station. Like the pre-deployment stage, the time frame 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 and 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. 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. 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 towards 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 and some of them are

• 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 and 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 which may be affected are improved bonding with others and new caregivers and cultural competence. The Developmental Assets framework emphasizes strengths which 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 which 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,
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 which 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.