

FAMILIES

COPING WITH DEPLOYMENT



When her husband was deployed to Kandahar, Debbie Hoffman considered for the first time in a dozen deployments that he might not come home.

Hoffman couldn't pinpoint why that deployment was any different than her husband's two deployments in support of Desert Storm, ten times on six-month floats or other small deployments.

"I wasn't alone," she said. "The whole unit was afraid."

For Hoffman, this host of fears and concerns was new and bewildering.

"I kept getting ready for bad news," Hoffman said.

But as many experienced military families know, feelings of loneliness, resentment, fear, anger and grief are not uncommon when a service member deploys.

HOW SPOUSES DEAL WITH DEPLOYMENTS

Spouses may experience a range of emotions prior to a deployment that begin approximately six to eight weeks before the military member leaves.

Initially, both parents spend this time gearing up for the departure. They feel a mixture of excitement and concern or worry. Both the military member and his/her spouse are busy thinking about details that need to be taken care of before the military member leaves.

Approximately three to four weeks prior to the departure, the spouse and military member may begin to distance themselves from each other in preparation for the extended absence. Conflict may arise as a result.

"We tried to spend as much time together as possible," said military spouse, Stephanie Thum, who spent two years separated from her husband of 5-1/2 years. "We were determined not to grow apart as we had heard others do in the same situation."

Two to three days before the deployment, the military member and spouse may be anxious for the day to arrive so they can begin adjusting to the lengthy absence and change of responsibilities.

Finally the day of departure arrives. There may be a mixture of awkwardness and guilt for the distance placed between the couple during the previous few weeks or days.

Above: Tyler Still, 4, smiles with pure joy as he hugs his Dad, SGT Chris Still, while his mother, Kim, and 2-year-old brother, Jacob, look on. Still was among the 270 soldiers from various Fort Hood units who participated in a "Welcome Home" ceremony at Abrams Field House. Photo by Grazyna Musick, CIV TSC-EIDC, Ft. Hood, Tx.

Right: Wife and daughter welcome Captain Maddox, a soldier with the elements of the 3rd Infantry Division (M), 1st Battalion, 39th Field Artillery (MLRS) redeploying home. Photo by Sharon T. Bass, CIV DAC, Fort Stewart.



DoD photo by Lt. Perry Solomon, U.S. Navy.

During the day of and days following the deployment, the at-home spouse may feel like he or she is operating on auto pilot. He or she may feel overwhelmed by the new responsibilities, loneliness and anger at the spouse or command for deploying his/her spouse. This may last a few weeks until the spouse settles into a new pattern.

Hoffman recalls her first experience in January 1976 as a new wife left alone while her husband was called away for an eight-month float that included a trip to Beirut.

"I was by myself," she said. "The Corps didn't have Key Wives or networking as they do now. I didn't know a soul. I felt so detached from everything."

To avoid isolation while your spouse is deployed, Hoffman strongly suggests military spouses "get out and get involved." Below are a few more ways to cope with a deployment:

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

- Exercise. It helps keep one mentally, physically and emotionally fit.
- Eat well. Resist the temptation to eat high caloric and fatty foods.
- Take up a new hobby. Getting out and talking to other people can help keep one's mind off of missing a deployed family member.
- Accept limitations. Understanding strengths and weaknesses and knowing when to seek help from others can help one accept a new host of tasks and responsibilities.
- Go on an outing. Getting out of the house can ease tension and get through down time.
- Establish quiet time. Take the opportunity to leisurely read or work on a hobby.
- Prioritize tasks. Don't try to accomplish everything at once.

SINGLE PARENTS/ DUAL CAREER MILITARY COUPLES

Single parents and dual-career military couples may experience even greater anxiety and stress over a deployment. Without a spouse to stay behind, they must make sure their children will be cared for.

Single-parent, dual-military parent, and single- and dual-military pregnant service members must create a Family Care Plan to provide guidance to caregivers during a deployment. Ideally, this should be finished long before orders are received, but in the event it is not, it is essential to develop one before separation occurs.

The plan should include information about a guardian that has agreed to care for dependent children under the age of 18, and powers of attorney for medical care, guardianship and the authorization to start or stop financial support.

In addition, military identification cards should be issued for children who reside with a single parent or dual-military couple. A letter of instruction to the guardian or escort should be included. This letter should contain specific instructions needed for the guardian to ensure the care of the dependents.

Other items that should be readily accessible to the guardian include: birth certificates, Social Security cards, immunization records, other medical or insurance cards, medication dosages for the child, if necessary, and lists of family member's addresses and phone numbers in case of emergency.

It is advisable for parents to make advance contact with their financial institutions, children's doctors, schools and day care providers prior to deployment. Consider giving these agencies a copy of the Family Care Plan. 

