

Your Reintegration

We've all seen the pictures and videos that tug at your heart—soldiers, airmen, seamen and Marines returning from a deployment to the tears and open arms of their family members.

We can only imagine the joy they all feel at being reunited, but unless you've been there, few of us think of the difficulties many families face when their loved one returns home after an extended absence — and many military families are not comfortable discussing the challenges they face as they merge back into a family unit.

Reintegration is never easy, as family roles are redefined, children learn again to listen to two and not just one parent, and spouses learn to reconnect after flying solo for so long.

And if the returning service member comes home with an injury or PTSD, the complications can multiply. How do you explain to your children about your injuries? How will your injuries affect your marriage and family? Where can you turn for help, if you find you are having difficulty reintegrating into your family and “normal” life?

These are the things we aim to address in our first reintegration section.

—Jennifer G. Williams, Editor



With still and video photographers close at hand, a Fighter Squadron 114 (VF-114) pilot is reunited with his wife and children. VF-114 and the other squadrons of Carrier Air Wing II (CVW-11) are returning to their home air stations after a deployment aboard the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS ENTERPRISE (CVN-65). Photo courtesy DOD



Army Staff Sgt. Luke Summerlin spends time with his wife, Michelle Summerlin, and their 3-year-old son, Trent, during a Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program, a post-deployment event. Summerlin deployed to Iraq with the Texas Army National Guard's 72nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team. DOD photo by Elaine Wilson

A few books to help children with reintegration:

Life After Deployment: Military families share reunion stories and advice by Karen M. Pavlicin

We Serve Too! 2 is a sequel to the authors' beloved deployment book for younger children. It deals honestly with the issues surrounding the reunion of a family after deployment. by Kathleen Edick and Paula J. Johnson

Reconnect with Your Teen

While many websites and literature focus on helping returning service members reconnect with their young children, the parents of teens deal with different issues.

But the Real The Real Warriors Campaign — an initiative launched by the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE) to promote the processes of building resilience, facilitating recovery and supporting reintegration of returning service members, veterans and their families — offers many resources on how to deal with your teen upon returning from deployment. From understanding what behaviors and reactions to expect from your teen to how to establish a strong relationship after spending a long time apart, articles and resources abound.

www.realwarriors.net

Program Helps Couples Cope With Deployments

By Elaine Wilson

Michelle Summerlin ducked out of a massive Houston conference room filled with nearly 2,000 Texas Army National Guard soldiers, families and friends, and pulled up a chair close to her husband and their three-year-old son in a convention center lobby here.

Her son climbed into her lap, and Summerlin cuddled him while recalling the parenting challenges that arose, not while her husband was gone, but upon his return from Iraq.

Summerlin said she grew accustomed to parenting solo while her husband, Army Staff Sgt. Luke Summerlin, was deployed in Iraq with the 72nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team over the past year. She created a “three strikes and you’re out” rule for her son as she took on the role of primary disciplinarian.

Her husband returned in late July and immediately took that role back. His style was more “one strike” than three, a rigidity that didn’t mesh well with his wife’s more flexible approach.

The arguments began.

“At first I yelled at him a lot,” she said. “I’d correct him more than I’d correct my child.” Summerlin said she later learned to bite her tongue, and to talk to her husband about how she felt behind closed doors.

“Talking is really important,” she said. “It’s hard to live with someone, and that’s what you’re doing after a deployment, learning to live together again.”

The Summerlins traveled to Houston from Groves, Texas, to attend a Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program post-deployment event to learn how to better handle transition after a deployment. The Defense Department program aims to equip Guard and Reserve members with the skills they need to successfully reintegrate with their families, communities and jobs. But returning active duty service members

can learn from the lessons, as well.

The program features a series of events held throughout the deployment cycle: one at the alert phase, one during the deployment and three post-deployment events at 30, 60 and 90 days after the service member’s return. The Summerlins were attending the brigade’s 60-day event, Texas’ largest Yellow Ribbon event to date.

Events focus on topics such as strengthening relationships, financial management, health and education benefits, and stress and anger management, Glenn F. Welling Jr., the program’s executive director, said.

“The deployment experience will change you and it will change your family, your loved ones,” Welling said.



U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer 2 Ryan Pummill, a UH-60 Black Hawk pilot with the 101st Airborne Division’s 101st Combat Aviation Brigade, enjoys a light moment with his infant daughter after a homecoming ceremony. U.S. Army photo by Sam Shore

“It’s a big deal. But when prepared for correctly, the majority of stressors can be managed in such a way that newfound confidence skills, the ability to react under stress and pressure, can be very positive traits.”

Communication is a key theme at Yellow Ribbon events, where couples learn how to forge new bonds and overcome obstacles that can quickly break down relationships.

Refresher Course

Even couples seasoned by years of service and multiple deployments can benefit from a refresher course in communication.

Derrick Thomas is a 21-year Army veteran with several deployments under his belt, but when his wife,

Army Cpl. Mele Thomas, first left for a yearlong deployment to Iraq with the 72nd IBCT, he got scared.

Not so much for his wife, who he knew was a highly capable soldier, but about taking care of their three-year-old daughter by himself.

He was particularly apprehensive about doing his daughter’s hair. The first time he tried, it took him an agonizing 45 minutes. But after a few months, he could whip it into a style in 10. “We got into a routine,” he said. “I had to learn to be mom and dad.”

Still, he found it difficult to balance his radiology studies with the demands of full-time parenting, and was relieved when his wife returned home in late summer. In an effort to ace his finals and restore his good grades, he withdrew from his family to study. “Spend time with your daughter,” he told his wife.

But she had a much different plan. Mele was looking to make up for lost time.

“I felt I missed so much,” she said. “I wanted to spend time with all three of us and just catch up with our lives.”

“I drifted away and she kept pulling me back,” her husband added. “She wanted me to be with her.”

The couple eventually reached a compromise. Mele became more forgiving about her husband’s study demands and Thomas set his books aside more often to spend time with his family.

It’s important for couples to be able to articulate to each other what’s important to them and to learn the art of compromise, said Army Lt. Col. Cynthia Rasmussen, psychological director for the Army Reserve’s 88th Regional Support Command and a Yellow Ribbon presenter. Yellow Ribbon events lead people back to these basics of communication, she added.

These communication skills can be tough for service members who are returning from an environment where mission focus is paramount, and compromise can result in lost lives on the battlefield, Rasmussen said. But problems can arise when troops are unable to turn that mission focus off once out of the combat zone.

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"They're used to getting things done, not sitting around and talking about it," Rasmussen explained. At Yellow Ribbon events, she added, the counselors "teach service members new communication skills so they can learn how to handle various situations."

Service members who have issues with anger, for example, are taught to assess the situation rather than springing to a reaction, Rasmussen said.

"What you believe about a situation is what leads to the response," she said. "If someone cuts you off in line and you think they're being rude on purpose, you'll get angry. But if you realize that maybe they're just in a rush to pick up their kids or get home, then you won't get as mad."

Army Staff Sgt. Christopher Clack, a communications specialist who returned from Iraq in late July, said it helps to ease into the homefront rather than go in headfirst and headstrong. The leadership skills so valuable during deployments may not be as appreciated by a spouse and kids who aren't used to having orders barked at them.

"We have to remember they're family, not soldiers," he said.

Clack and his wife, Carolyn, found it helpful to develop a plan prior to his deployment so they'd be on the same page for handling everything from finances to school choice. That plan relieved a lot of the stress and prevented many arguments both during his deployment and after his return, he said.

"I knew not to go home and take over everything right away," Clack said. "But it's also a challenge to sit back and let them do things."

His family successfully weathered life without him, so it would be unfair for him to just come in and try to take over, he said, even when there are differences of opinion.

"I might look at things and think, 'You should be doing this or not that,'" he said. "But they've been doing this the whole time I've been gone and it has been working."

The onus also is on the spouses, his wife added. They should resist the temptation to dump a year's worth of stress and pressure on their service member.

"Give your spouse time to adjust," she advised. "Everything overseas is on a schedule, so don't make a ton of commitments when what they really need is time to decompress. Relax and give it time."

For more on this program or to locate a Yellow Ribbon event, visit www.yellowribbon.mil. ●

Elaine Wilson is a writer and blogger with the American Forces Press Service

An Added Burden Dealing with combat injuries

The injuries of war — combat or non combat-related, visible or invisible — are life-altering events that affect not just the service member but his or her family, children and friends. With overseas conflicts about to hit the decade mark, more and more service members are unfortunately in this group. For those affected, the challenges only begin with the injury itself. These can range from the short-term disruptions of individual and family routines and sense of safety, to longer-term issues concerning parenting and family health. The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress has developed strategies to help those involved with the injury—from the victim to their families and caregivers. These include how to communicate with others — including your children — about your injuries.



Army Sgt. Robert Strickland poses for a photo with his family after returning from a yearlong deployment to Afghanistan, at Fort Campbell, Ky., in March. Strickland, a utilities equipment repairer with the 101st Combat Aviation Brigade, is among nearly 17,000 members of the 101st Airborne Division returning from deployments through the summer. U.S. Army photo by Sam Shore

Important Tips for Supporting Your Loved One and Your Family

Acknowledge the injury and its impact. As an involved adult in the life of an injured service member, it is important for you to talk about the injury with those who can provide needed information, support and resources. When you are ready, begin to address the impact of the injury and your future plans.

Talk about the injury with your wounded warrior when he/she is able and ready.

Serious injury creates a sense of loss, frustration, and pain that is often directed at loved ones in the form of anger or withdrawal. Explain that you are there to

listen and to talk when your wounded warrior is ready. Your touch, your voice communicates comfort and caring essential for conversations to begin.

Encourage your wounded warrior to continue to parent.

Staying involved in parenting enhances the morale of the wounded warrior as well as the entire family. Encourage your wounded warrior to parent through use of the telephone, email, video chats or a hospital visit, if it can be arranged.

Utilize professional resources and support to keep your family strong. Injury recovery has a past, a present and a future. While you, your wounded warrior or your children may not be ready to seek help now, remember that WHEN YOU ARE READY there are professionals who can assist you.

Courtesy of The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

Not Feeling Like Yourself?

Know the Signs that May Indicate You Need Help

The Defense Department, military health care providers and unit leaders continue to emphasize the importance of a fighting force that is resilient in the face of adversity.

Studies indicate that approximately 20 percent of service members returning from Iraq or Afghanistan report adjustment concerns in the months following their deployment. Unfortunately, resilience is impeded when service members avoid psychological health care because of stigma or other barriers.

The need for privacy and accessibility when seeking care is necessary to counter such concerns. This can be accomplished by providing the military community with interactive and privately accessed tools that avoid common barriers associated with face-to-face office visits such as attending appointments during work, securing child care, transportation, confidentiality concerns and medical records documentation.

It's not unusual for a service member participating in combat or seeing its aftermath to be filled with complicated and conflicting emotions, including fear, sadness, helplessness, and horror. These are all legitimate reactions to the combat experience.

Even service members who haven't been in direct combat, but have been through a life-threatening situation, seen enemy or civilian casualties, had a friend die, processed dead bodies, or been in charge of prisoners of war, can experience the many feelings that come together as a combat and operational stress reaction. It's important to understand that strong reactions are natural when a person is confronted with danger or other traumatic experiences.

The feelings are part of the "fight or flight" response that makes you alert

and vigilant, and puts you in high gear. But some reactions to combat stress can be unsettling, especially when you're in a situation that requires you to appear as though nothing has changed. Sometimes reactions to combat stress can interfere with your ability to do your job — whether that job is on the front or back at home.

It's important to learn to recognize signs of a reaction to combat stress in yourself, in another service member, or in a family member who has returned home from a war zone. Knowing when and where to seek professional help — and knowing that it's the right thing to do — is a critical step toward getting better.

Helpful resources:

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) www.cstsonline.org

Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE) www.dcoe.health.mil

TRICARE www.tricareonline.com

Military One Source www.militaryonesource.com

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network www.nctsn.net

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry www.aacap.org

American Academy of Pediatrics www.aap.org

Stress injuries are the result of actual physical changes in the way the brain handles information and stress. This can change the way you function mentally, emotionally, behaviorally, and physically. Like a sprained ankle, depending on the severity of the injury, a combat stress injury will often heal quickly on its own if you take care of it. But sometimes it won't. Symptoms can remain persistently painful or disabling in daily life unless you get professional assistance.

The likelihood of having a combat stress injury rises as combat exposure increases. Often combat

stress injuries aren't fully recognized until after a service member returns home and notices that symptoms aren't going away, even with rest and recuperation.

Signs of combat/operational stress

The signs that someone is suffering from combat stress are many, ranging from loss of motivation to hallucinations, and they may change over time. But certain key symptoms are common to most cases. After a stressful event, changes in usual behavior or appearance are the key signs of a stress injury. They include:

- problems sleeping
- uncharacteristic irritability or angry outbursts
- unusual anxiety or panic attacks
- signs of depression (such as apathy, loss of interest in things once enjoyed, poor hygiene)
- other changes in behavior, personality, or thinking

When you see any of these symptoms in yourself or someone else, be alert to how severe the symptom is and how long it lasts. A stress reaction can last from a few days to a few weeks and will normally resolve on its own with some rest and recuperation.

But sometimes symptoms are more severe and persistent, with re-experiencing of events, avoidance of reminders, and hyper-arousal that interferes with the ability to work or interact with other people. These are signs of a more serious stress injury, and it's important to get help.

How you can help yourself and the people around you

There is no guaranteed way to protect yourself from the cumulative stress that can cause a stress injury. But there are things you can do to help yourself or others after being under stress or when you expect to encounter stressful circumstances.

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Online Resources:

American Psychological Association
www.apa.org/topics/ptsd/index.aspx
This Web site provides information on PTSD and a wide range of combat stress-related symptoms.

Army Medical Department Behavioral Health page
www.behavioralhealth.army.mil/ptsd/index.html
Official site with information about the signs of combat stress and how to deal with symptoms. Also includes links and downloadable information..

Defense Centers of Excellence For Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury
www.dcoe.health.mil
Deployment related information on combat stress, PTSD, and Traumatic Brain Injury. Includes information for families.

DoD Deployment Health Clinical Center (DHCC)
www.pdhealth.mil
Provides information and links to other sites addressing a wide variety of deployment-related issues.

DoD Military HOMEFRONT
www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil
Official DoD site for a wide range of quality-of-life information. For information specifically related to combat stress or about PTSD, enter those terms in the search box.

Marine Corps Community Services
www.usmc-mccs.org
Order booklets and videos, including Managing PTSD and Other Combat-Related Stress Reaction: A Service Member and Family Handbook. Click on "Family Life," then on "Combat Operational Stress."

National Institute of Mental Health
1-866-615-6464
www.nimh.nih.gov
Provides information on stress disorders, depression, panic disorders, and other mental health disorders. The site can also help you locate mental health professionals in your area.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
www.ptsd.va.gov
Provides a wide range of information about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the form of fact sheets and articles.

Not Feeling Yourself - continued from page 49

Learn about combat stress

The more you know about combat stress, the better prepared you'll be to deal with it in yourself and to help others.

- Know the signs of a combat stress reaction. This article can give you the basics. The organizations and Web sites described in our various sidebars will teach you more.
- Understand that the reaction is normal and that you can recover from it if you take care of it promptly.
- Don't demean anyone who has a severe reaction. Extreme stress can affect anyone, even the strongest. Remember that combat stress reactions are common to all ranks, all races, both genders, and to military personnel from all walks of life.

Maintain your physical readiness

Maintaining your physical readiness has been shown to reduce the risk of stress injuries. Be sure to:

- Stay in shape. Not only is this essential to your military performance, it also lowers your resting heart rate, which studies have shown reduces the risk of stress injury.
- When possible, rest and recuperate after stressful events with "three hots and a cot." Studies have shown that rest and recuperation can reduce the risk of developing a persistent stress injury. Staying under stress without a break increases the risk. Get some food, get some rest, and get cleaned up.
- Stay hydrated. Drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids and avoid exclusive use of caffeinated or carbonated drinks, which can be dehydrating.
- Get back to a routine as soon as possible, with regular meals, sleep, and exercise.

Help your family learn about combat stress reactions

If your family members know about combat stress reactions, they can give you help if you need it. You can tell family members that you'll do the best you can to communicate openly and let them know why you react the way you do. Ask them to:

- Let you establish your own schedule for talking about your experiences

and what you've been through.

- Listen when you're ready to talk.
- Recognize that you may need time to adjust to changes that have happened while you've been gone.
- Be patient — it may take some time for your family to understand.

When to seek professional help

If you're suffering from a combat stress injury that's interfering with your work or your interactions with other people, it's important — for you, your buddies, and your family — to get professional help as soon as possible. Don't wait until your relationships and career are ruined. The earlier you identify the signs of a stress injury in yourself or in another service member, the faster a full recovery can be. You'll also lower your risk for developing more chronic and hard-to-treat problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Finding help is the right thing to do. Help your buddies do the same.

In theater, talk to your medic, corpsman, chaplain, medical officer, or combat stress control unit. They will talk with you and help determine the best way to get you back on your feet, depending on your location and circumstances.

Back home or in garrison, you can talk to your medic, corpsman, chaplain, medical officer, or Primary Care Manager. They will know what to do. There are also free, confidential face-to-face counselors available for active-duty, Guard, Reserve, and veterans through the Military OneSource program and through the VA. ●

From Military OneSource. This article was written with the help of Commander Thomas A. Gaskin, Ph.D., retired Navy clinical psychologist and consultant on combat/operational stress control; Walter R. Schumm, Ph.D., retired Army Reserve Colonel and professor of family studies and human services at Kansas State University; James E. Smith, Ph.D., retired Army Lieutenant Colonel and assistant professor of social work at the University of Wyoming; and Lieutenant Commander Anthony P. Doran, Ph.D., clinical psychologist and program manager for the Navy's suicide prevention program.