

# HOT TOPICS

CURRENT ISSUES FOR ARMY LEADERS

2003

Volume 5, No. 3

# Reunion

Putting the Pieces Back Together

A photograph of a young girl with brown hair in pigtails, wearing a white lace-trimmed top, smiling warmly at a man in a military uniform. The man is shown in profile, looking back at the girl. He has a mustache and is wearing a tan uniform with a green sash and a patch on his shoulder that says "AIRBORNE" above a circular emblem with the letters "AA".

**Preparing for a Happy Reunion**

*Communication*

**Re-establishing Intimacy**

DEPLOYMENT and separation are facts of military life. Saying goodbye is difficult, no matter how long the separation lasts or how many times loved ones are apart, and the strain doesn't end when soldiers return home. While reunion brings joy and excitement, it can also bring apprehension and anxiety.

Soldiers and families spend a great deal of energy adjusting to separation. At reunion, soldiers may wonder if their families still need them or if their children will recognize them. Spouses may worry about having to give up newfound independence or fear they have made bad decisions during their soldiers' deployment. Children are also challenged by reunion and may wonder how the rules at home will change with the parent's return.

Communication is the key to regaining balance and love within family relationships. While it may be difficult to open up at first, families need to be patient and get reacquainted slowly while sharing their expectations, fears and hopes.

Leaders must also help soldiers reconnect with loved ones by providing reunion training, and by ensuring soldiers have the tools and support to reintegrate into their home stations. The Deployment Cycle Support Program, initiated in May, offers an all-encompassing look at the stresses and needs of soldiers and families during redeployment. It incorporates the knowledge of community and family support centers, chaplains, physicians and counselors.

Leaders can help smooth the way for happy reunions by following the standards of the DCS Program and ensuring soldiers have easy access to the information in this issue of *Hot Topics*. We hope this guide equips you and your soldiers with the tools to overcome the challenges of separation. May it inspire you to make reunion a time of personal, family and unit growth.

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Director,  
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# HOMECOMING

**DEPLOYMENTS** are difficult. They bring change, separation and loneliness. But when the anticipated reunion date finally arrives, many people find themselves overwhelmed with a rush of emotions — relief, hope, anxiety and even resentment.

Some may fear they have permanently lost a deep connection with their loved ones or that their loved ones have lost intimate desire. Others may fear they have changed so much during the separation that they no longer have anything in common with loved ones.

Soldiers and family members must recognize that reunion is a process that occurs over time. Adjustment depends on the length of separation, the ability to communicate and the willingness to accept change.

The Deployment Cycle Support Program was introduced to Army leaders in a Department of Army message in May 2003. Past events, high personnel tempo and increasing demands on soldiers require actions and involvement by commanders at all levels to assist with the successful return of deployed soldiers. DCS makes leaders accountable for positive reintegration.

**Redeployment readiness** — the process of preparing for the change in habits, lifestyle, behavior and expectations of loved ones following deployment or separation.

A photograph of a soldier in camouflage gear, looking down at a letter he is holding. The background is a clear blue sky. The text 'During the Separation' is overlaid on the image in a large, stylized, black font with a white outline.

# During the Separation

SEPARATION and reunion are challenging whether they last a week, a month or a year. Those who communicate throughout the separation often say they endure less tension. Sharing experiences and comparing expectations through letters or phone calls helps partners understand each other's hopes and fears. It also helps maintain emotional intimacy.

The type of reunion a family has often reflects members' approaches to change throughout the separation. Change can be viewed as a crisis or threat, as a hidden opportunity to grow and mature, or as a slight disruption to the way things used to be. People who view change as a crisis or threat tend to pretend the change did not happen. They may use inappropriate coping strategies, deny the change or wish things were the way they used to be.

People with good coping mechanisms usually view

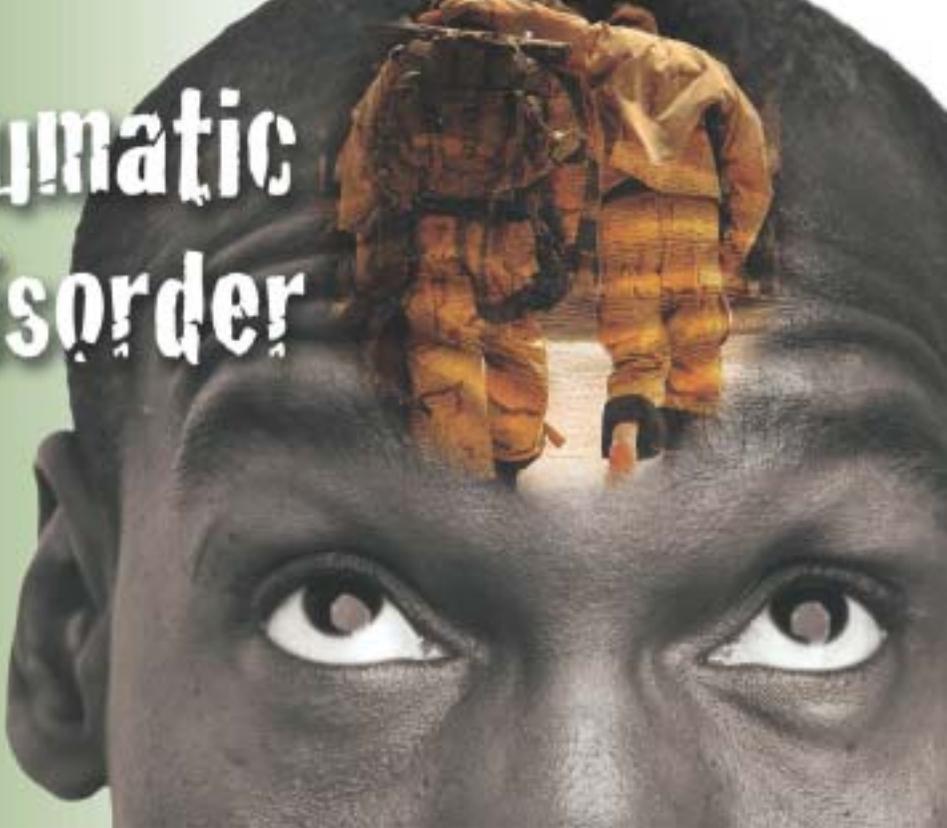
change as a hidden opportunity for growth or as a slight disruption to the way things were. A positive approach helps people accept that change has occurred and is a natural part of life. This view mobilizes people into new, healthy ways of thinking, and usually makes the transitions between separation and reunion easier.

Separation is also a time for soldiers and families to reach out to others who are in the same situation. Sharing feelings helps people realize they are not alone, and also affords the chance to share ideas for overcoming the challenges of separation and reunion.

Another key to a smoother reunion is taking pride in accomplishments made during separation and recognizing each family member is a hero for successfully enduring the separation. The soldier is a hero by carrying out his or her military duty. Loved ones are also heroes for taking complete responsibility of the household and children.

# Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

IF deployment was to a war zone, natural disaster or urban riots, be alert for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the returning soldier. PTSD probably 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 and startle responses.



## Phases of Reunion

- ❖ **Pre-entry** includes the days immediately preceding the reunion. It is usually a hectic period when soldiers complete equipment accountability and maintenance, and family members make preparations for their loved ones' return.
- ❖ **Reunion** is a time of adjustment. It includes the immediate meeting, which may have been rescheduled several times, and ranges from a patriotic reunion ceremony to soldiers arriving home individually or unexpectedly in the middle of the night. This phase also includes the first few days after the soldier's arrival and often feels like a honeymoon. This is the time to celebrate signs of positive growth in yourself, your partner and your children.
- ❖ **Disruption** occurs as problems surface and expectations of "normalcy" go unmet. Things to expect in this phase include jealousy, new desires for independence, concerns about trust, new routines, the return of unresolved issues and the need for new financial plans.
- ❖ **Communication** is a time of renegotiating new routines, reconnecting, redefining family roles and decision-making.
- ❖ **Normalcy** occurs when the family returns to a routine of sharing and caring. Things to accept in this phase are re-established routines and roles, new budgets and personal growth.

# Preparing for a Happy



LEARNING about reunion before redeployment can help prepare military families for successful homecoming. This seems to be true for couples both with and without children, single parents, and single soldiers coming back to family and friends. There is no way to predict what reunion will really be like, but one of the best ways to prepare is to develop a positive mindset.

**Expect doubts and worries.** Anxiety is a natural part of reunion.

**Forget your fantasies.** Give up fantasies or expectations because they may not happen. Let things happen naturally.

**Expect change.** You've changed, your spouse has changed and your children have changed. Accepting change is a major factor in re-establishing oneself and relationships after separation. People's tastes and interests may have changed. They may have different preferences in food and clothing, for example, different beliefs in politics and religion, or new thoughts about money and careers.

Remember that role changes are almost guaranteed during separation. A family member who learns about managing a home or working outside of it may find that they enjoy it and desire permanent changes upon the soldier's return. Additionally, a

# Reunion



soldier may have acquired new job skills and added responsibilities during deployment.

In the weeks following the initial reunion, it's best to make small, gradual changes. Large or rapid changes in roles are often a shock for the whole family, even if there's an impatience for everything to happen at once.

Another big change may be money. Such costs as food and utility bills are higher with the service member at home, and pay may change, too. This is the time to create a realistic budget.

There is no definite period for change to begin to feel normal. On average, it takes several weeks or months, depending on the length of separation and on your ability to accept change.

**Expect old problems to reappear.** Even though it's nice to remember people at their best, separation usually doesn't solve problems. All the issues that existed before separation probably have not disappeared. There may even be new ones.

**Share your feelings.** Communication is key to a healthy reunion. Talk about your feelings and let your partner talk, too. Listen. Make sure you understand what your partner is saying before responding.

**Accept your partner's feelings.** Soldiers and family members may experience feelings that are difficult to comprehend. Part of accepting a person's feelings is listening to what's being said and watching body language, as well as having the patience to let the other person explain him or herself without interruption.

Recognizing that family members are proud of how they handled things alone will help soldiers understand the importance of accepting changes made during the separation. Family members should also realize that soldiers may be surprised or hurt that loved ones have coped so well alone. This is a good time to reassure the soldier that he or she is still loved and needed.

# Communication

CONTINUOUS communication during separation plays a critical role in maintaining an emotional bond between partners. Open, two-way communication lines will encourage soldiers and families to start sharing their expectations, concerns and fears about reunion. By communicating these things early, partners can acquire the information and skills needed to cross barriers and minimize problems during reunion.

Basic points about communication:

- The message sent isn't always the message received. Our emotions can distort the message, especially when we're angry or upset.
- Feedback is a critical part of good communication. It helps the speaker feel heard and also helps guarantee that the message is not misunderstood. For example, a man might say to his wife, "When's dinner ready?" She hears, "You're late cooking; get busy!" What he meant was, "I'm really looking forward to dinner with you."
- Verbal and nonverbal communication are equally important. Body language, in fact, may show more than a person is willing to say verbally. Walking in the door, sitting down and watching TV without saying anything is still communicating, for example. Also, a person's voice can betray emotions if words and tone don't match.
- Men and women sometimes communicate differently.
- We sometimes talk or think our way into being angrier about a situation than we need to be. For example, we may resort to labeling or name-calling — categorizing someone in a negative manner while forgetting his or her positive traits. We may think we can mind-read and assume we know why a person acts a certain way, even believing they were just trying to hurt us.
- We may make "should" statements, translating preferences into demands.

## Re-establishing Intimacy

DURING separation, most military couples face the question, "How can two people work together toward achieving intimacy when one of them is absent from the relationship for extended periods?" Military couples often find that reunion may bring out feelings of awkwardness and that their personal relationships are strained. Through an understanding of the effects of separation, you can better cope with the stress that accompanies reunion.

Barriers to intimate communication and sexual relations may include:

- Unrealistic fantasies and expectations;
- Anxieties about engaging in intimacy and sex;
- Fear that your partner has become a stranger;
- Feelings of anger, hostility, stress or negative feelings about the separation;
- Concern about faithfulness to your relationship;

- Feelings that sexual relations need to be rushed to make up for lost time.

Because you've been apart from each other and have both grown, it will take time to get to know one another again. Partners shouldn't anticipate "normal" sexual relations for a few days, and should remember that communication will help bring them closer together. It gives you time to become reacquainted and fosters mutual understanding. Don't avoid discussing negative feelings and frustrations — admitting them may help put them to rest.

Fear of losing your partner plays a major role in developing negative feelings. Listen carefully to what your partner is saying. If you have concerns about fidelity, talk to your chaplain or find a counselor to help you work through these feelings.

# Roadblock to Communication

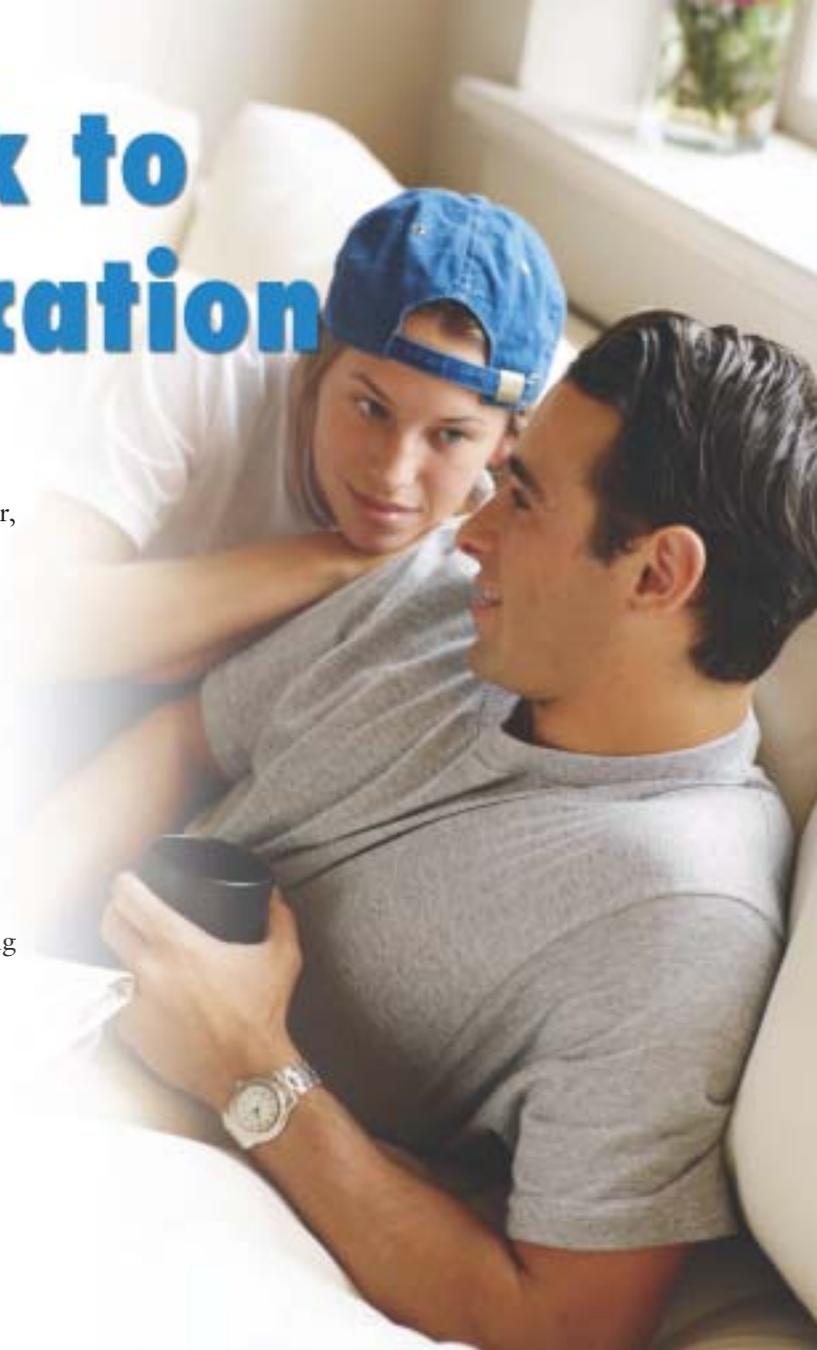
MEANINGFUL communication requires effort. If there is a problem in communication or there are feelings of anger, hurt or confusion, the communication may become increasingly strained. Conflict may arise from the way people say things, or the words people use may cause others to stop listening.

To become a good listener:

- Stop talking and do not interrupt;
- Get rid of distractions;
- Make eye contact with the other person;
- Concentrate on the message being sent;
- Listen “between the lines” by watching body language and tone of voice.

Feedback reflects the message as you understand it after you have listened at the deepest level you can. Misinterpretation and conflict about what was said can be avoided by paraphrasing and asking questions.

You cannot listen effectively if you are too tired, rushed or if you are not accepting of the person or situation. If one of these conditions exists, ask if you can talk later.



## Listening Levels

HOW well do you listen? Listening can be described on three levels, each one deeper than the last. Discuss the following levels with your partner to see how each of you listens to the other.

### Listening Level One:

Listening means that when your spouse is talking to you, you are not thinking about what you are going to say when he or she stops talking.

### Listening Level Two:

Listening is completely accepting what is being said without judging what is said or how it is said.

### Listening Level Three:

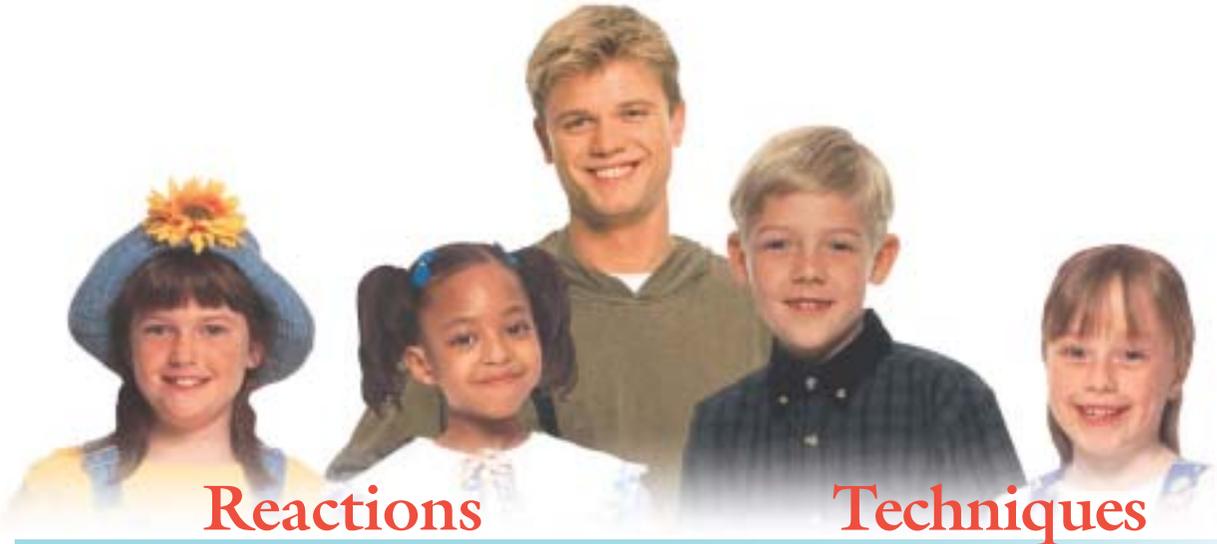
Listening is being able to repeat back to your spouse what he or she said, and what he or she was feeling.

# Helping Children Adjust



CHILDREN experience a variety of feelings upon a parent's return. While they are often resilient, change and uncertainty can be frightening for them. The parent who stays behind should talk about the deployed parent daily and leave pictures of the deployed parent at the child's eye level. Encourage children to stay in contact with their parent through e-mail, letters, packages, video, phone calls and audio messages. Also keep a calendar to record the passage of time and special events.

Toddlers and preschoolers might not understand "duty" and "mission." Elementary school children and teenagers may understand but still show anger or fear.



## Reactions

## Techniques

### Birth to 1 Year

Cries, fusses and pulls away from the parent  
 Clings to the parent or caregiver who stayed behind  
 Changes sleeping and eating habits  
 Does not recognize the parent

### Birth to 1 Year

Hold the baby, and hug him or her a lot  
 Bathe and change the baby  
 Feed and play with the baby  
 Relax and be patient — the baby will warm up

### 1 to 3 Years

Shyness  
 Clinging  
 Does not recognize the parent  
 Cries  
 Has temper tantrums  
 Regresses (no longer toilet trained)

### 1 to 3 Years

Don't force holding, hugging or kissing  
 Give them space  
 Give them time to warm up  
 Be gentle and fun  
 Sit at their level

### 3 to 5 Years

Demonstrates anger  
 Acts out to get the parent's attention  
 Is demanding  
 Feels guilty for making the parent go away  
 Talks a lot to bring the parent up to date

### 3 to 5 Years

Listen to them  
 Accept their feelings  
 Play with them  
 Reinforce your love for them  
 Ask about interests, from TV to preschool

### 5 to 12 Years

Has fears of inadequacy  
 Dreads the parent's return because of discipline  
 Boasts about the Army and the parent

### 5 to 12 Years

Review pictures, schoolwork, activities, scrap books  
 Praise what they have done  
 Try not to criticize

### 13 to 18 Years

Is excited  
 Feels guilty about not living up to standards  
 Is concerned about rules and responsibilities  
 Unwilling to change plans to accommodate parent  
 Is rebellious

### 13 to 18 Years

Share what has happened with you  
 Listen with undivided attention  
 Don't be judgmental  
 Respect privacy and friends  
 Don't tease about fashion, music

Because children need warm-up time like adults, changes should be gradual. The returning parent should understand that children may initially feel a sense of loyalty to the parent who stayed behind.

Both parents should stay involved in children's education, activities and interests. Ask them about what's going on and support their positive efforts. Most importantly, try to understand how they feel and what they're thinking.

# Tips



## Tips for Soldiers

- ❖ Take time to listen and talk to your loved ones. Communication is the basis of a healthy, growing relationship.
- ❖ Make separate time for each child and for your spouse. Have a true “family reunion” before taking time alone with your spouse.
- ❖ Support the good things your family has done. Show pleasure and interest in how your family has grown.
- ❖ Don’t change systems that have been working well. If your spouse has been doing the checkbook, or a teen doing some of the cooking, don’t demand an immediate return to the way things were before.
- ❖ Go easy on the discipline. Don’t try to “whip things into shape.” Take some time to understand how your family has changed during separation.
- ❖ Remember that romantic conversation can make re-entering intimacy easier. When two people have been separated, it usually takes some time to become relaxed and get reacquainted sexually.
- ❖ Take a marital-enrichment assessment.
- ❖ Manage your money carefully. It’s exciting to suddenly have money and places to spend it, but spending without planning usually causes trouble later.
- ❖ Do not overdo the reunion parties.
- ❖ Be prepared to make some adjustments.
- ❖ Expect others to be a little resentful. Others usually think of deployment as much more exciting than staying home — whether you think that or not.
- ❖ Realize those at home had a difficult time, too.
- ❖ Get a checkup at the local medical clinic.

## Tips for Spouses or Partner

- ❖ Avoid a busy schedule. Soldiers often look forward to having fewer demands on them after deployment.
- ❖ Plan family time — it helps bring everyone back together.
- ❖ Make time to be alone and talk with your spouse or partner.
- ❖ Plan special time just for children and the returning parent to get reacquainted.
- ❖ Make adjustments slowly. Don't expect the soldier to do things exactly as before.
- ❖ Expect unusual feelings. The soldier may be a little hurt by your success at home. This is natural — everyone likes to feel needed. Remind your spouse that he or she is still loved and needed by the family.
- ❖ Discuss the division of family chores after the initial reunion.
- ❖ Stick to your financial budget until you have had time to talk about money matters. Understand that the soldier may not remember how much money a family needs.
- ❖ Be patient in rebuilding your relationship.

## Tips for Commanders

- ❖ Be familiar with the Deployment Cycle Concept Plan. ([www.armygl.army.mil/default.asp?pageid=101f](http://www.armygl.army.mil/default.asp?pageid=101f))
- ❖ Psychologically prepare soldiers for redeployment. Reunion briefings are mandatory — they can lessen the shock and stress of reunion.
- ❖ Keep unit and family readiness program personnel continually informed of the redeployment schedule, especially since delays are common in redeployment.
- ❖ Ensure soldiers complete Deployment Cycle Support tasks prior to taking leave. These include mandatory health screenings, stress counseling, critical incident sessions, sensitive items check, etc.
- ❖ Allow leisure time. Soldiers need time to relax and return to normal routines upon redeployment to their home bases. Leaders should encourage soldiers to take leave.
- ❖ Publish the leave schedule with sufficient time for soldiers and families to make plans.
- ❖ Make sure soldiers have easy access to support services from unit chaplains throughout deployment, redeployment and reunion.
- ❖ Identify single soldiers without support systems.
- ❖ Don't expect soldiers to return to duty as though nothing has changed. Until they talk to nondeploying personnel, soldiers may not recognize how much they have changed. Other nondeploying soldiers may not understand how deploying soldiers feel upon returning. This can leave gaps of isolation and misunderstanding. Encourage unity and esprit de corps among unit members.
- ❖ Know your people and watch their behavior carefully. Encourage those who usually do not participate in support groups to seek help and comfort from others.
- ❖ Make soldiers and family members aware of such support services as mental-health professionals and chaplains.
- ❖ Identify financial concerns and provide financial training as required.
- ❖ Incidents of spouse and child abuse increase immediately before and after deployments. Monitor soldiers' behavior for signs of anxiety or tension that may lead to the physical, emotional or sexual abuse of family members. Also be open to signs that soldiers themselves are being abused.





# Back to WORK

NATIONAL Guard and Reserve members may experience additional anxiety and stress about returning to their premobilization jobs. Worries about changes that have taken place, how co-workers will respond to their return and whether they'll still be interested in day-to-day activities are common.

The transition is rarely as difficult as it's made out to be, especially if those returning apply the same ideas they used for reunion with family to their return to work. Once again, focus on communicating, being patient, anticipating changes and viewing the situation as an opportunity to start over again.

Before returning to work, Guard and Reserve

members should call their supervisors for an update on the current situation, asking how job responsibilities were handled during the absence, changes in personnel and other important developments.

Just as at home, Guard and Reserve members should understand that co-workers may feel resentful about giving up responsibilities. Be supportive and slow about making new changes.

Many employers provide assistance programs that help make Guard and Reserve members' transitions back to work and family a mentally healthy one. Take advantage of such programs, and know your military and civilian entitlements.

The National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve is an agency within the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs. Established in 1972, it promotes cooperation and understanding among reserve-component members and their civilian employers, as well as assists in the resolution of conflicts arising from an employee's military commitment.

Learn more about ESGR at [www.esgr.org](http://www.esgr.org).

# RESOURCES

**Deployment Cycle Support Concept Plan** — Outlines the responsibilities of Army leaders in helping soldiers reintegrate into their home stations. Includes a risk-reduction tip card. Go to [www.armygl.army.mil/default.asp?pageid=101f](http://www.armygl.army.mil/default.asp?pageid=101f).

**Soldier and Family Support Center** — ACS is the principal source of family readiness for the Army on or near installations. Among the services provided are financial-management assistance, the Exceptional Family Member Program, child-support services, family advocacy and relocation services. Go to [www.armycommunityservice.org](http://www.armycommunityservice.org).

**Operation Ready** — A curriculum of family readiness training materials that is available at soldier and family support centers on most installations. Includes training modules, videotapes, resource books and children's materials designed to help soldiers and their families cope with the financial demands of deployment and reunion.

The curriculum includes the following training modules and reference materials:

- ✓ Army Family Readiness Handbook;
- ✓ Army Leaders' Desk Reference for Soldier and Family Readiness;
- ✓ Soldier and Family Deployment Survival Handbook;
- ✓ Army Family Readiness Group Leader's Handbook;
- ✓ Family Assistance Center;
- ✓ Predeployment and Ongoing Readiness;
- ✓ Homecoming and Reunion.

Materials are distributed in hard copy and on CD-ROM. They are also available through the Soldier and Family Support Web site.

**National Guard and Reserve Family Program Coordinator Offices** — Provides information and referral to both civilian and military services.

**Family Assistance Center** — FACs may be established on and off Army installations during periods of lengthy deployment. They provide assistance and information on such matters as financial counseling and family support.

**Rear Detachment** — Units may create rear detachments when deployed for extended periods. It is the primary point of contact for family members who have questions or who need assistance during separations.

**Family Readiness Group** — The FRG is a command-sponsored organization of family members, volunteers and unit soldiers who provide mutual support and assistance. FRGs help create a network of communication among family members, the chain of command and community resources.

**Chaplains** — Chaplains are a good source for confidential counseling to individuals and families.

**Hooah 4 Health** — Sponsored by the U.S. Army Office of the Surgeon General and the U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine, this Web site offers information about post-deployment health. Go to [www.hooah4health.com](http://www.hooah4health.com).

**Social Work Services** — Provides marriage, family and individual counseling; crisis intervention; counseling for victims of sexual assault; and family advocacy services. Social work services are available on most installations.

**Equality in Marriage Institute** — Offers tips for managing relationships during and after war. Go to [www.equalityinmarriage.org/d/News/headlines.html](http://www.equalityinmarriage.org/d/News/headlines.html).





# Combat Stress Control

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 and 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, back aches, trembling, fumbling and jumpiness;
- Rapid breathing or pounding heart;
- Upset stomach, vomiting, diarrhea, frequent urination;
- Emptying bowels and bladder at the 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.

**BOTTOM LINE**

*Reunion is a time to build a stronger family.*