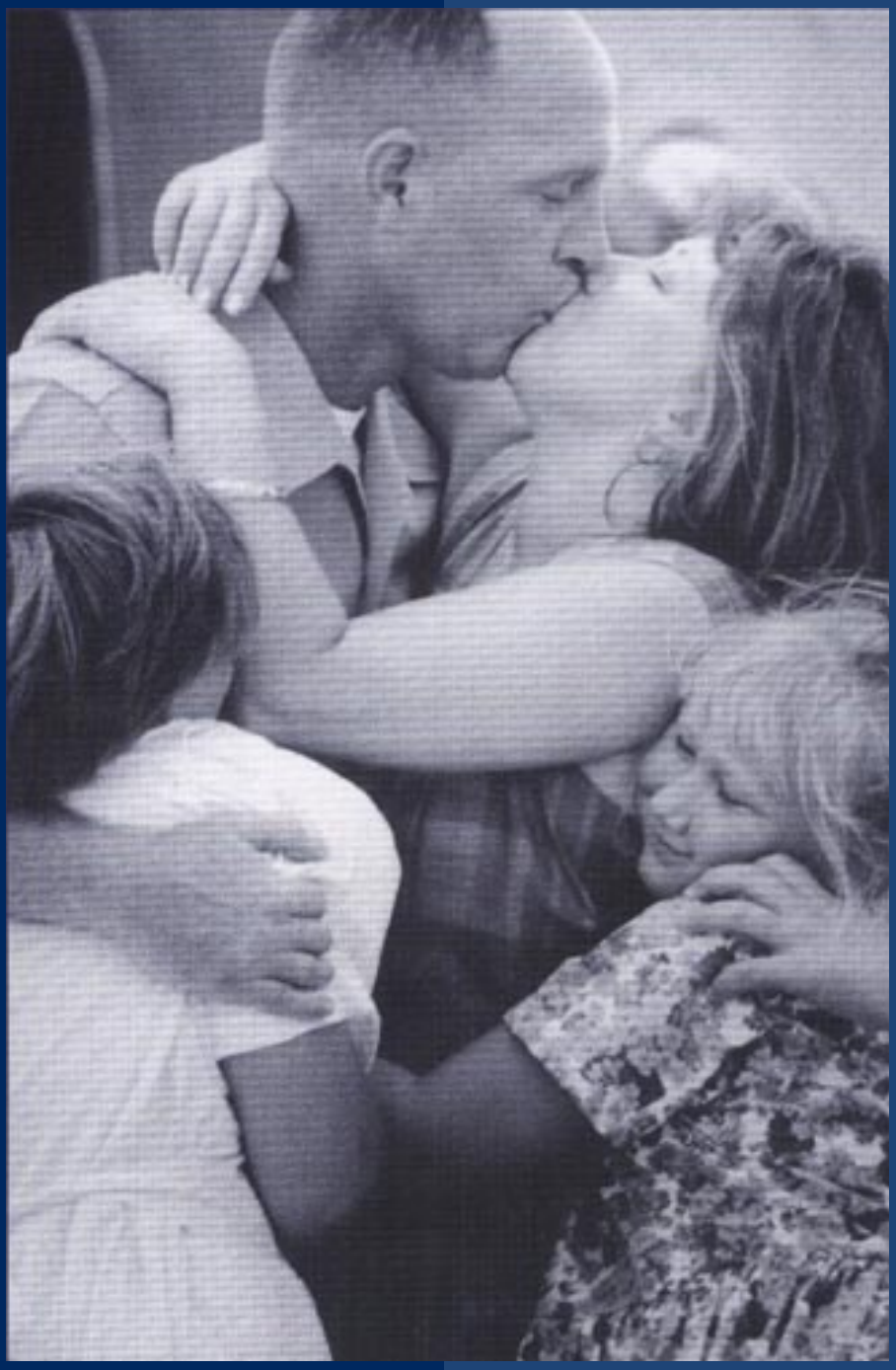
Welcome Home

A Guide to a Healthy Family Reunion



American Red Cross

Armed Forces
Emergency Services

Making Life "Normal" Again

Now that you've been home a few weeks, the rush of excitement you felt stepping off the plane or ship has probably begun to fade a little. The flags have been put away, the bands have stopped playing, and the newspapers are focusing on other things. Your life has suddenly become very private again, giving you the chance to put things back in order.

Where do you start? How do you begin making life normal again, when "normal" now means something completely different than before you received your orders? You're not the same person you were before you left, and neither are the people you love and work with. How do you make sure your reunion and the time afterward are "mentally healthy"?

Begin by realizing that your reunion is more than just coming home; it's a major event in your life and for those around you—maybe even bigger than the separation. In fact, research shows that reunion can cause more stress in people's lives than deployment. That's not to say that returning service members and their family and friends aren't happy about the homecoming—they're usually ecstatic. The stress comes from the changes that have taken place and concern about what life will be like after you have been separated.

Stress is normal, but if it goes unrecognized and unmanaged, it can lead to serious physical and mental health problems, or show itself through alcohol abuse or domestic problems. If handled correctly (which really isn't very hard), it can be turned into a source of energy and enthusiasm about starting a brand-new life with your family and friends.

In fact, most people find that separation and reunion can actually be a constructive experience.

Changes

Although the changes that have taken place in your family members and friends may seem negative or even threatening at first, they're almost always improvements.

Changes to expect:

- *More independence.* Those at home or at work were forced to become more independent in your absence. They've taken on new responsibilities, made their own decisions, and set their schedules. As a result, they've become more confident and proud of their accomplishments—you might even feel hurt that they did so well on their own. Try to feel proud of their growth, acknowledging it with positive words.
- *New rules.* Things have changed at home while you were gone, including the rules and procedures the family uses to keep things going. Some were temporary "amendments" to the old rules to compensate for your absence, while others arose because the needs of your family changed. In either case, don't rock the boat. The rules that are no longer needed will fade away and those that stay probably have a good reason.
- *New roles.* Those at home had to take on your roles, and reversing them immediately to the way they were before the deployment isn't easy or even advisable. Take some time to renegotiate the roles that each of you play in the family or relationship.

Mixed Feelings

Separation and the changes it brings about can create strong—and what may seem like conflicting—emotions in you and those you care about. You may feel complete happiness about being home and at the same time worried that you might not fit back in. Those at home might be extremely excited about having the family together again, even though they're worried you might resent some of their growth and accomplishments and try to "take over" everything. These mixed feelings are normal, healthy responses to separation and reunion, and usually require nothing more than a little time to sort out.

Common Coping Strategies

Every individual and family will have a unique situation to address. Some of you are returning to spouses, to children, to parents, to civilian jobs, or to all of these things. Each part of the life you're returning to will require special attention from you and those around you. Even so, there are some common strategies you can use to ease this period of transition, regardless of your personal circumstances:

- *Communicate.* The key to making the transition a healthy one is to discuss everything openly. Communicating openly isn't easy for most people, but it's vital that everyone make an honest effort to talk about (and listen to) each other's experiences while avoiding the "I had it worse" syndrome.
- *Approach each other as equals.* At home or at work, avoid the "I'm home and I'll take charge" or the "I'm not budging" attitudes. The fact that everybody managed to cope during the deployment doesn't mean that everybody enjoyed it. Focus on the fact that now you can do things together.
- *Find out what new skills everyone has learned.* Make a point to learn how everyone has grown during the deployment—and use it as the starting point for new personal (or professional) relationships.
- *Be patient.* Starting over will be difficult for everyone.
- *Arrange quiet time.* For the first month or so, set aside a regular time to discuss the past few days and any questions or concerns that have come up. At home, this can be done over dinner with family. At work, schedule a meeting or set aside 20 minutes at lunch to talk things over with your boss or co-workers.
- *Stay positive.* Keep criticism to a minimum; if it can't be avoided, keep it constructive. Even if you don't agree with decisions that were made during your absence, remember that you probably don't know all of the circumstances, and that these decisions were made under a great deal of stress.
- *Don't expect old problems to have gone away.* If you were having difficulties with people or situations at home or at work before you left, it's not likely that your being away solved them. On the other hand, being away can give you a chance to look at things from a new perspective. The growth that you and those around you experienced during the deployment may better equip you emotionally and psychologically to face old problems.

Children

Those returning to children probably had a homecoming picture in their minds of their toddlers running toward them shouting "Daddy" or "Mommy," or of their older kids huddling close and begging for field stories. Those with "perfect pictures" may have been disappointed by what sometimes happens—an initial display of happiness followed by sulky, withdrawn, or even hostile behavior.

To understand why, you must first realize that even just a few months seem like a lifetime to a child, and that children instinctively adapt rapidly to new situations. Their behavior doesn't mean that they've stopped needing or loving you; they just need some time to adjust to having you around again. Obviously, the reactions of your child will depend on his or her personality, past experiences, and relationships with other family members. To some degree, the situation will be further influenced by whether the parent deployed is a mother or father (see the sections on "Returning Mothers" and "New Fathers") but there are several things that all parents ought to keep in mind:

- Children have the same confusing feelings adults have: worry, happiness, fear, excitement, etc. Make sure they know how happy you are to see them again.
- They're unsure what to expect from the returning adult. Because of their brief memories, you might seem like a complete stranger. They may even fear that they will be punished for six months' worth of bad behavior. Put their minds at ease by praising them for helping out while you were gone.
- Change is just as stressful for children as it is for adults—probably more so because they have so little experience in coping with it.
- They've grown physically, emotionally, and socially while you were gone; this is not the same child you left, so don't expect the same behavior.
- There will be a readjustment period (usually four to six weeks) for the whole family. You can make this easier by reviewing schoolwork, family scrapbooks, or asking about their activities.
- Children don't know how to deal with the stress they're feeling. They may exhibit unacceptable behavior as part of their reaction. Remember this before you punish a child for acting up.

Returning Mothers

If you're a mother returning to children or young adolescents, you may find that the special, nurturing role children look for in mothers was disrupted during deployment, causing reactions that might not happen with a returning father. This isn't to say that these reactions are "abnormal" if they happen when a father returns—they're just more likely when it is the mother who is coming home.

For infants or toddlers these reactions might not be obvious at first, but they can escalate into developmental problems if you don't make an immediate effort to reestablish this link with them. You can't cuddle a baby too much!

Preschoolers may act coolly toward you. Acting aggressive or disinterested is their way of showing their hurt and anger at your absence. Their behavior usually doesn't last

long, but it's still unsettling. Don't try to force positive responses from the child; simply say how much you missed him or her and how you're looking forward to hearing about the things he or she did while you were away.

Older children and adolescents usually have a mature understanding of war, conflicts, and military responsibilities, but this doesn't mean they didn't miss you. This period is turbulent for children anyway. Use strategies similar to those for reestablishing contact with younger children: Express your interest in their lives by discussing schoolwork and social activities, and let them feel they are part of your life by telling them about your own experiences. Again, tell them how much you missed them—it might seem like they know that already, but they need to hear it from you directly.

New Fathers

If you are a father who was deployed at the time your son or daughter was born (or for a good part of the child's first year), you are coming home to a whole new family. There are some obvious changes to the family in these cases, and each of the situations described earlier applies to you, but there are subtle—yet important—dynamics to be aware of as well:

- Baby's needs come first, and they're expensive. Be prepared for a much tighter budget.
- Other children might feel "lost" with the changes and may need help coping with the transition.
- You may feel jealous of the attention given to the infant or guilt for being away during the pregnancy. Accept two facts: The infant's needs will demand attention, and the separation was inevitable. Take an active role in caring for the child as soon as possible.

Single Parents

If you're a single parent, you're probably experiencing unique concerns and worries about a reunion with your children. In addition to the combination of joy and stress that a parent feels when returning to a child after a long absence, you may feel particularly anxious about the bond formed by the child and the temporary caregiver, and how it will affect your relationships with both of them.

Strategies for coping with these situations aren't that much different from those used in the situations described earlier. Focus on communicating with both the caregiver and the child and, most importantly, be patient. This period of transition will last several weeks—some of which will be awkward. In the meantime:

- Involve the caregiver with the transition. Forcing the child to suddenly separate from the caregiver can be just as traumatic as their separation from you.
- Ask about how things were done while you were gone. It will help you plan how to ease the child back into the rules and schedules of your home again.
- Ask the child about his or her feelings regarding your "new" relationship and how life at home should be. The changes in caregivers and living arrangements may make them feel as though they have no control over their lives; assure them that you will set up house together again.

Reestablishing Intimacy

One of the first things you and your partner learned during separation is that sex and intimacy are two different things. You and your partner may have succeeded in maintaining a sense of intimacy, or closeness, during the deployment by writing or calling, which let the two of you remain "connected," but the sexual part of your relationship obviously ended when the unit deployed.

Because sex is such a powerful and instinctive way to keep couples feeling intimate, it tends to dominate both partners' thinking and fantasizing during the deployment. As a result, it becomes the focus of the reunion as well. This can lead to disappointment, especially if your expectations and needs are different than your partner's.

For what is probably the single most personal aspect of any individual or couple's lives, there is no one set of guidelines for rebuilding intimacy, and few people will need help getting the sexual part going again. But to avoid disappointment or hurt feelings down the road, you both should consider several points:

- Be prepared for temporary "performance" difficulties. The tension of the deployment combined with the stress of reunion can lead to temporary impotence. This is a normal reaction. Don't jump to the conclusion that your partner was unfaithful. The problem almost always corrects itself.
- Make intimacy—not just sex—your goal. Sex can resume immediately, but intimacy might take longer to reestablish. Take some time to get to know each another again, and treat the sexual part of your homecoming as a honeymoon.
- Understand the differences in male and female sexuality. Some may tend to focus on the sexual act itself, while others might concentrate on the "atmosphere" of the encounter. Both partners should understand and be sensitive to the other's needs.
- Expect to feel strange together at first. It's normal to feel physically and emotionally akward together. If you can both escape the anxiety the "strangeness" causes, it can be a very exciting aspect to your relationship.
- Make the most of your homecoming. This is your opportunity to address the things about your relationship that you or your partner didn't like before, or to build upon the intimacy you've always shared.

The Myth of Infidelity

Worries about a partner's unfaithfulness are common, though acts of infidelity are not likely. Cheating doesn't happen nearly as often as people are afraid it does. The fear comes not from the frequency of infidelity but the devastating impact it has when it does happen. There is no recommended procedure for handling the emotional effects of infidelity, but there are some common mistakes to avoid:

- *Being totally unprepared for its possibility.* This is not to suggest that partners should be suspicious of each other. Work under the assumption that you've both been faithful to one another, but understand that you both have human weaknesses, such as giving into stress and pressure. Those who are completely unprepared for its possibility are subject to overwhelming dismay or shock on those rare occasions that it does happen.

- *Dumping a confession to relieve guilt.* If you've been unfaithful and now feel the need to relieve the guilt by confessing, consider speaking first to a chaplain, family service representative, or other counselor who can help you both work through the problem constructively.
- *Thinking that being unfaithful is something that "just happens."* Infidelity in a relationship, particularly marriage, is not something to be taken lightly. It may signal a bigger problem that deserves special attention. Again, consider talking to a chaplain or someone else trained to help families and couples through these kinds of problems.

Service Members Who Are Single

Those returning to parents or to lives on their own will face many of the same problems described earlier, only in a slightly different context. The same messages apply, whether dealing with spouses and children or your parents, siblings, or roommates: Focus on communicating, being patient, recognizing and adapting to the changes that have taken place, and not rushing the necessary transition period.

Because single service members may not have a convenient "support system" of close family or friends immediately upon return, it's important that they make extra efforts to plan a relaxed, comfortable return back to their community.

Some tips:

- *Go slowly.* You deserve a good time after these months away, but trying to fit too much into your plans too soon only adds to your stress level.
- *Spend time with your family.* One of the most heartbreaking things in the world is for a parent to lose a child, and your parents have been living in fear of this possibility for the past few months. Make a special effort to either spend time with them or, if geographically separated, call frequently to support and reassure them.
- *Watch what you spend.* The "urge to splurge" now that you're back will be strong—don't make any purchases you can't afford.
- *Go easy on the alcohol.* You may not have had anything to drink for a while and your tolerance will be lower, so drink moderately, if at all.
- *Set long- and short-term goals.* Coming home marks a new beginning for you. Now is the time to start making plans for tomorrow and ten years from now. For the short run, make a list of all the things that need to be done in the next few weeks, such as banking, making living arrangements, contacting friends and relatives, etc. For long-range plans, begin researching your options to help you grow in the direction that seems best. Possibilities might include going back to school, making a change in jobs, or settling down to make a home—the choices are endless.

Business as Usual: Returning to Work

Going back to your job might cause anxiety and stress similar to that caused by going home. Worries about changes that have taken place, how co-workers will respond to your return, and whether you'll still be interested in the day-to-day activities are common.

Fortunately, 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 and accepting changes, and using this as an opportunity to start over.

Other suggestions:

- *Before returning, call your supervisor for a briefing on the current situation.* Ask about how your responsibilities were handled during your absence, changes in personnel, and any other important developments.
- *Avoid "taking charge."* Just like at home, your absence may have forced co-workers to take on new tasks or responsibilities, and they may resent it if they feel you've come back only to "take control" again. Be supportive of decisions that have been made in your absence. And remember that even what appear to be bad decisions were probably made under stress.
- *Know your entitlements, both civilian and military.* Ask the appropriate person at work to review the status of your benefits and how your absence affected them. You've probably been briefed about your military entitlements, but it's a good idea to keep the phone numbers provided at the end of this booklet handy. You might have questions later on.
- *Take advantage of EAP or related programs.* If your employer provides an employee assistance program (EAP) or if similar services are available in the community, take advantage of them. Such programs often provide excellent resources for making your transition back to work and family a mentally healthy one. Contact your local Red Cross to find out more about these programs.

Homecoming Letdown

Most, if not all, returning service members will experience something of a "letdown" after homecoming. In most cases, it reflects that you're no longer "running on nerves" and that things are beginning to settle down—the positive feelings will resume as soon as you're rested and comfortable with your new surroundings.

At other times, the letdown comes from the fact that the problems that existed before the deployment are still there, or because your reunion wasn't the way you thought it would be. In these cases, you may want to consider getting additional assistance from a chaplain or other trained professional, or from a mutual support group to help you during the time of transition. Your local Red Cross can direct you to places that can help.

Occasionally, this letdown may indicate or develop into serious problems that require immediate professional attention:

- *Long bouts of depression.* Letdowns that last longer than two weeks or so may indicate something more serious called clinical depression. Warning signs of depression include frequent or long-lasting feelings of despair or hopelessness, persistent lack of interest in day-to-day activities or loved ones, and major weight change. In extreme cases, thoughts of death or suicide are common. These should always be taken seriously.

- *Frequent moments of anxiety or panic.* Feelings of extreme fear, even though there's nothing around to cause it, are normal reactions to extremely stressful events. When they persist for several weeks after the event, however, they may indicate something called an anxiety disorder. With professional attention, this disorder is usually treatable.
- *Flashbacks and frequent nightmares.* Traumatic events such as combat often trigger vivid and sudden memories (called flashbacks) and nightmares of the event. If they persist over several weeks or months, and are accompanied by feelings of indifference or avoidance to people and responsibilities, extremely "jumpy" reactions and panic attacks similar to those described above, they may indicate posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This, too, is usually treatable.
- *Alcohol and drug abuse.* People often tend to "self-medicate" their problems with alcohol or drugs, almost always resulting in even worse trouble. Intervening as early as possible is the best way to reduce the risk of something worse happening as a result of drinking or drug abuse.
- *Domestic violence and abuse.* Those troubled by their feelings or experiences occasionally want to lash out angrily at spouses or children. When controlled, these feelings are normal reactions to traumatic events or memories, and tend to fade away after a few weeks. In other cases, the frustration is expressed physically in the form of child abuse or domestic violence. As in the cases described earlier, the earliest possible intervention is the best way to minimize the damage and get everyone back on the road to recovery.

For More Information

National Mental Health Association
1021 Prince Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-2971
(703) 684-7722, (800) 969-NMHA
(Open weekdays 9:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.)

NMHA offers helpful publications on a variety of mental health topics including depression, anxiety disorders, and posttraumatic stress disorder; and computerized listings of local NMHA chapters, community mental health centers, and private psychiatric hospitals.

National Association of Social Workers (NASW)
750 First Street, NE
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20002-4241
(202) 408-8600

Information on NASW/Red Cross reunion programs.

United Service Organizations (USO)
World Headquarters
Washington Navy Yard
901 M Street, SE
Building 198
Washington, DC 20374-5096
(202) 610-5700

Provides programs for the military community that include travel assistance, child care, libraries, educational workshops, foreign language classes, scholarships, celebrity entertainment, recreation, and child and family services.

National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse
Box 2866L
Chicago, IL 60604

Printed information regarding child abuse prevention.

On Bases or Installations

Contact your post chaplain, family support center, or military hospital mental health clinic.

American Red Cross National Headquarters
Armed Forces Emergency Services
8111 Gatehouse Road, 2nd Floor
Falls Church, VA 22042-1203
(703) 206-8504

The Red Cross has over 2,000 offices assisting service members and their families. Contact national headquarters or your local Red Cross.

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For information on the Armed Forces Emergency Services and other Red Cross programs, visit us on the Internet: **http://www.redcross.org**

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