Living with Ambiguity and Uncertainty

Living through the deployment cycle comes with a great deal of uncertainty, and youth may find it especially hard because they do not have the coping skills that adults have developed over time. The post 9/11 era has been especially challenging because of the added element of terrorism and active wars. The idea of ambiguous loss describes the feelings family members may be faced with when unclear and vague stressors are present. For example, when military families cannot predict their next move or the next deployment, the sense of uncertainty may feel like a layer of tension that overlays everyday life. Another example of ambiguous loss is when family members worry about harm and safety when a loved one is deployed. In this case, the deployed loved one is physically absent while psychologically present in thoughts.

Although parents may return safe from deployment, at the very least they often miss milestone events in the teens’ lives. How do adolescents cope with this? Research suggests that teens feel the need to fill the absence of the missing parent and be strong for other family members. To deal with emotional stress and ambiguity, they may lash out at the parent who is home or struggle when the deployed parent returns. In some ways the transitions around the deployment and reintegration may be more difficult for adolescents than the actual deployment because of the changes in routines and responsibilities. Research suggests that coping skills such as those listed below can be learned, however.

Helping Teens Cope

Providing a layered support structure is crucial for teens. This means that support can come from multiple places, including friends, family, school, coaches, and youth leaders. Here are some tips for addressing ambiguous loss throughout the deployment cycle:

- Tap into your kin network for support if possible. Grandparents are often key players in providing support and extra care.
- Encourage teens to build a social network with others their age whose parent is deployed.
- Allow teens to talk out their tension with friends and family, but also allow them to not talk if they don’t want to.
- Distraction from worries can also be a helpful coping skill. Going out and having fun can give teens a break from stress.
- Consistency is important because teens notice when support seems ingenuous. They are quick to point out when something seems fake.
- Facilitating digital communication (email, Face Time, Skype) helps build a feeling of constancy in spite of distance.

Your Pre-Teen/Teen:

- Is starting to think about their future education and career
- Is testing limits and boundaries
- May be self-conscious of his or her appearance
- Is placing more importance on peers and hobbies than family
- Much more aware of the social and political climate

Parent Tips:

Be aware of how much you share about deployment details and war conditions. Younger youth may not be able to handle as much as older youth.

Pay close attention to signs that your teen is feeling troubled: changes in school habits and grades, withdrawal from friends and family, weight gain or loss. These may be symptoms of larger issues and may need professional support.
Resources

Dr. Pauline Boss on Ambiguous Loss:
http://www.ncfr.org/professional-resource-library/video-conversation-about-ambiguous-loss-research
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2vYyefAgZ0

Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg’s Seven Cs
http://www.fosteringresilience.com/7cs.php

Dr. Paula Rauch discusses Challenges vs. Trauma
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J169rx_Z-9M

Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief
By Pauline Boss

By Kenneth Ginsburg

Raising Our Children to be Resilient
By Linda Goldman

ADAPT is gearing up for the next wave of the project. You can help us better understand reintegration in military families and have a say in future resources and services provided to reintegrating military families!

If you live in Minnesota, are a parent of a 5-12 year old, and have been deployed (or your spouse/partner has been deployed) since 2001, we want to hear from you!

To learn more about the ADAPT project, go to www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/adapt.
If you know someone who might be interested, you can earn a $20 gift card for referring a family that joins the study.
For more information, you can call us at 612-624-4830 or e-mail us at adapt@umn.edu.

“Like” us on Facebook!

Contact Information:
Dept. of Family Social Science
University of Minnesota
Rm. 290 McNH
1985 Buford Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55108
adapt@umn.edu
612-624-4830

http://www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/adapt

Upcoming Topics Volume 17
Reconnecting as a Couple after Deployment