After deployment, the whole family is readjusting and often dealing with mixed emotions. So often military couples are focused on their children: tending their bumps and bruises, nurturing their school achievement, and worrying about their emotional adjustment to times of change. Time to reconnect as a couple may be scarce, but carving out time to nurture parents’ own relationship may be one of the best things a couple can do to provide stability and strength to their children.

Although lovers and spouses have missed one another and have looked forward to being together again, there may be some new strain in the relationship after being apart. Mixed emotions commonly come from a fear of losing the independence that partners had while on their own, and sometimes there are trust issues or fears of infidelity. Also, resentment of the separation may be heightened if the deployment was especially long or dangerous.

So what can couples do to reconnect? After a long deployment, couples should expect the need to get to know one another again. Prioritizing time together might mean putting off visits to extended family and friends. Talking with one another gives the opportunity to share how each partner has changed and new ideas each may have about family roles. Even intimacy and sex may be awkward at first—take time to be patient and charming, almost like you were first dating. Overall, being positive and grateful goes a long way to creating a safe space to reconnect. Therapists often recommend ten positive interactions for every one negative.

Building Rituals of Connection

Rituals are habits we build into our lives that bring us meaning and emotional richness. Here are some examples of rituals that could strengthen couple relationships:

- Remember your story—Revisit the story of how you met and fell in love. Share letters, emails, or memories from that time.
- Start the day on the right foot—try setting the alarm five minutes early and starting the day wrapped in each others’ arms. Ask if there is anything special going on today. This physical connection and interest in one another can help you feel close the entire day.
- Budget together—money can be a sore spot, but if you set aside a regular time to tackle bills and budgeting, it is less overwhelming.
- Make five-minute connections—when life is busy (especially with kids!), taking a few minutes each day to talk is important. This can be taking some time over coffee after dinner or at breakfast. Another time couples can unplug and focus on one another may be a few minutes before bed, reviewing the day.
- Go on a weekly date—it doesn’t have to be expensive. Taking a walk, getting a dessert, and just talking for a while are great alternatives to the typical dinner and a movie.

Your School-Aged Child

- Is working on improving his/her handwriting
- Is starting to use more complex sentences
- Is beginning to understand concepts related to time, like the near and far future (soon, later, not for a long time, etc.)
- May try to see what he/she can get away with (lying, stealing, etc.)

Parent Tips:

- For couples to find time they need for themselves establishing routines are important. Homework routines avoid evening stress, and bedtime routines leave time left over for mom and dad!
- All couples have conflict, but how you deal with conflict is key. School age children will observe parents dealing with conflict and internalize these skills. Communication skills include listening without giving advice and maintaining respect even when you don’t agree.
Resources

Resources:

Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness by B. Fowers

Bonds that Make us Free: Healing our Relationships, Coming to Ourselves by C.T. Warner

The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to your Mate by G. Chapman

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Last by J. Gottman

The Relationship Cure by J. Gottman

Family Matters Blog
http://afps.dodlive.mil/

Military One Source: Relationship Health and Family Wellness
http://www.militaryonesource.mil/health-wellness

One Plus One
http://www.oneplusone.org.uk/content_topic/day-to-day-life/

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.

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