

Coping With Military Deployment

If you or a loved one has been called to active military duty, this can be a very emotional and stressful time for you. This guide provides some basic tips on how to prepare yourself and your family for a loved one's departure, as well as tips for coping while he or she is away.

Preparing to Leave

While many military personnel have already departed, many are still preparing to go. If you have been called to duty, or anticipate that you might be called, try to make time—even if it can only be brief—to prepare yourself and your loved ones as much as possible. The pre-separation period is a stressful time for adults, and particularly difficult for children who may not fully understand why one of their parents must leave.

The following suggestions may help ease some of the stress of the pre-separation period:

Talk to your child about the assignment.

Communicate your thoughts and feelings about the separation. Be open and honest. Some parents worry that advance warning will only give the child more time to worry. However, children can often sense when something is about to happen and become more anxious if no one talks to them. Here are some tips for talking to your child:

- ◆ Keep in mind that children are not always good at expressing fears and feelings in words. Just because your child doesn't tell you about his or her concerns doesn't mean that your child is not troubled. Ask your child what he or she has heard about terrorism and war. This can be a good starting point for a discussion, and can help you clear up any misconceptions your child has about the situation.
- ◆ Explain your assignment (as much as possible) to your child so he or she understands your role in the military. Use this time to share pride in your work and the purpose for your assignment. It may help the adjustment if a parent's job is seen as a way of protecting our country. If you are unable to tell your loved ones about your exact destination, explain to them that it is for your safety—as well as the safety of the country.
- ◆ Encourage your child to ask questions and state his or her opinions, even if you disagree. Be honest about your own feelings and opinions, but be sensitive to your child's fears. If parents exhibit extreme nervousness or anxiety, your children's fears may escalate.
- ◆ Respond to your child's concerns and remind him or her of support systems—other family members, friends, caregivers, etc.—who will be looking out for his or her safety.
- ◆ Tell your child about any new or different care arrangements and make sure he or she is comfortable with them.
- ◆ If you cannot answer your child's questions, don't make up answers. Instead, let your child know that you will do your best to seek the answers. Children's fears are often exaggerated if they don't have facts.
- ◆ Be realistic about the length of your absence and how often the family can be in touch. If you are uncertain, do not make false promises. Be honest and promise to keep your child informed as you learn more information.
- ◆ Remind your child that family members will do their best to keep in touch regardless of the distance. However, prepare your loved ones that it may not always be possible to communicate.

Spend quality time. Spend quality time with your child before you leave. Hug and kiss your child often—a genuine display of affection is powerful communication. And don't be afraid to cry. It may help your child to realize that you are a real person who can cry as well as laugh, and it shows him or her an appropriate way to release feelings. Additionally, the parent who remains at home should give the child extra love and attention during stressful times.

Notify your child's teachers/caregivers.

Make sure your child's teachers and caregivers are aware that one parent is away. Children may react to a parent's assignment or deployment by misbehaving in class or performing poorly in their studies. A teacher who is aware of the situation is in a better position to be sensitive and encouraging during difficult times.

Monitor your child's use of the media.

Depending on your child's age, encourage him or her to learn about current events on the Internet, in the newspaper or on television—but make sure he or she is supervised by a parent, teacher or caregiver. This will help prevent your child from misinterpreting or stumbling across information that may scare him or her. (See the "Helpful Resources" section at the end of this guide for informational web sites for both adults and children.)

Help your child plan for your departure.

While you or your loved one is packing, allow your child to assist in some way. Suggest a "swap" of some token—something small of your child's that can be packed in a duffel bag in return for something that belongs to you or the loved one going on active military duty.

Making Child Care Arrangements When One Parent Is Away

If you share child care responsibilities with your spouse/partner, you may need to revise your child care arrangements to compensate for one parent's absence. Determine how care arrangements might be affected and how much help your family may require. For example, will you need child care before and after school? In the evenings? On weekends? Will you need a transportation service? How long will regular care arrangements be disrupted—days, weeks, months?

Once you have assessed your needs, consider your options. Can other family members, friends or neighbors help out? Can your current caregiver work extended hours? Will you need to find additional caregivers? Nanny agencies and employment agencies may be able to help you find temporary caregivers—and child care centers or family child care homes may also offer backup or temporary care services if space is available.

If you are a single parent—and you need to leave for active military duty—most likely you will have to make full-time care arrangements for your child. Call on family members and trusted friends, and consult your attorney regarding issues such as selecting a guardian and drafting a medical release.

Once your care arrangements are in place, explain to your family that this is a temporary situation. Children, in particular, may need time to adjust to the new situation. The following tips may help:

- ♦ Explain to your child in simple terms why normal care arrangements will be disrupted.
- ♦ Encourage your child to express any fears or anxiety he or she may be experiencing—and listen carefully. Reassure your child that these arrangements are only temporary.
- ♦ Have your child meet new caregivers ahead of time and spend some time together, if possible.
- ♦ Talk to your child's caregivers regularly to make sure he or she is adjusting well.
- ♦ Try to maintain a sense of family routine despite changes.

Recognizing Warning Signs In Children

Keep in mind, no matter how well-prepared your child is for the separation, he or she may still have difficulty adjusting to the changes once the parent is gone. Watch your child closely for signs that he or she is having trouble coping and, in addition, ask your child's teachers and caregivers to watch for any unusual or disruptive behavior. Signs to look for include:

- ◆ Excessive clinginess
- ◆ Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- ◆ Unexplainable aches and pains
- ◆ Disobedience
- ◆ Hyperactivity
- ◆ Speech difficulties
- ◆ Aggressive or withdrawn behavior
- ◆ Regressive behavior (i.e., your child may resume thumb sucking or bedwetting or may become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness or "monsters")

Closely monitor your child and speak to your child's pediatrician or a mental health professional about any unusual behavior your child exhibits.

Making Adult Dependent Care Arrangements When the Caregiver Is Away

If you or a loved one is going on active military duty, you may also need to make arrangements for someone to check on or care for your aging loved ones. For occasional caregiving assistance, consider supportive services such as home-delivered meals, chore maintenance or visitor/companion services, which are often provided by community services, volunteers or religious organizations. If your loved one needs hands-on care, contact home health care and/or employment agencies to inquire about professional in-home caregivers who may provide assistance. If your loved one is in a long-term care facility, inform your loved one and the facility of your plans, and make arrangements for friends, family members or professionals to check on your loved one regularly. Keep your adult loved one informed of family and caregiving changes, and reassure him or her that the situation is temporary.

Financial Arrangements

If you (or a loved one) is a reservist who is called to active military duty, you may not receive your usual salary from your employer—and your military pay may not be equal to your usual earnings. Speak to your employer about policies in your organization and be sure to submit any necessary paperwork. Furthermore, investigate programs that provide financial assistance to active and retired military personnel, their dependents and other family members. Assistance is typically provided as an interest-free loan, grant or a combination loan and grant. Eligibility for these programs may vary; please see the "Helpful Resources" at the end of this guide for information on whom to contact for more information.

Additionally, if you are a reservist called to active duty, you are protected by a law that can help with financial issues. Under the Soldiers' and Sailors' Relief Act of 1940, you may qualify for any or all of the following:

- ◆ Reduced interest rate on mortgage payments
- ◆ Reduced interest rate on credit card debt
- ◆ Protection from eviction if your rent is \$1,200 or less
- ◆ Delay of all civil court actions, such as bankruptcy, foreclosure or divorce proceedings

Beside the protections involving debt payments and civil litigation, the act guarantees service members the right to vote in the state of your home of record and protects you from paying taxes in two different states. Reservists who have questions about the Soldiers' and Sailors' Civil Relief Act should contact their nearest military legal office or the web site listed in the "Helpful Resources" section.

Additional Preparations

Before a family member leaves, work together to help ease the transition. Here are some preparations to consider:

- ◆ Complete household maintenance. Make sure the family car is tuned up, that all appliances are in good working order and that all home maintenance is done (i.e., gutters are cleaned, heating oil tank is filled, etc.). This can help give your family peace of mind and a sense of security.
- ◆ Communicate with each other. Spend an evening with your spouse/partner to discuss the deployment and how both of you feel. Talk about what you worry about, how to handle emergencies, repair problems and what you think needs to be done around the home.
- ◆ Role play. Doing chores that a loved one typically handles can be difficult. If the departing person typically handles auto maintenance, ask your loved one to show you how to check the oil in the car, where to add brake or transmission fluid, how to change a flat tire, etc. Similarly, if the departing person is usually responsible for meal preparation, laundry and other chores, make sure you are comfortable with the appliances in your home. Do a load of laundry, learn to sort clothes, do some shopping and cook a few meals for the family. This will help transition family members into new roles.
- ◆ Spend quiet time together. If possible, try to spend some quiet time together beforehand to address any unfinished business and leave on good terms.
- ◆ Organize paperwork and other documents. Discuss where important documents are located, what monthly bills need to be paid and when, preparing a will and who to contact if there is a problem (e.g., lawyer, financial planner, bank, etc.).
- ◆ Prepare a list of emergency contacts. Organize a list of contacts and telephone numbers in case of an emergency; include the names and numbers of relatives, neighbors and friends, doctors and hospitals, etc.
- ◆ Ask for help. Consider asking friends or family members to assist with dependent care arrangements and other responsibilities in one family member's absence. If financially possible, consider hiring help for some tasks.
- ◆ Make doctor and dentist appointments. Consider making doctor and dentist appointments for each member of the family, to reassure you that everyone is in good health and that no major health care procedures will be required while a family member is away.

If you live alone, safeguard your residence while you are away. Call the post office to request that they hold or forward your mail, and call the local newspaper to have delivery stopped while you are away. Newspapers and mail that have not been picked up in weeks may signal that you are not home, and may put your home at risk for robbery. It may also be wise to leave lights on—or to purchase lights that work on automatic timers, so your house is not dark for an extended period of time.

In addition, ask friends, neighbors or family members to check your house on occasion—and possibly water plants, monitor heat, etc. If you do not have friends or family nearby, consider alerting the local police that you will be gone for an extended period of time. If you have a pet, you will need to make additional arrangements; consider asking friends, family or neighbors to care for your pet, hire a pet sitter or put your pet in a kennel.

Staying Connected

Staying in touch is a great way of easing separation anxiety. Here are some tips that may facilitate communication among family members. Please note, however, that communication with loved ones on active military duty may not be possible in some cases. These tips are intended as a guideline only.

If you are called to military duty away from home:

- ◆ Assess communication capabilities. Determine what type of communication will be available to you (phone, e-mail, fax, etc.) and alert your family of any potential complications that may make communication difficult (power outages, remote areas without phones, no e-mail access, traveling, etc.).
- ◆ Contact loved ones as frequently as possible. If possible, let your family know when you will be phoning them, so they don't miss your calls. If you can't make a telephone call, consider alternate methods of communication such as e-mail or faxes that will help you keep in touch regularly. Letter writing is another easy way to keep in touch, although the mail will take longer. Keep a mental list of things you want to talk to your child about, such as friends, school, hobbies, etc. Ask your child to send you something from the activities he or she is involved with at school, home or in other programs, such as dance lessons, youth groups or Scouts. If your family has a pet, make sure to ask about it.
- ◆ Tape record yourself. Some people have difficulty expressing themselves in letters, but they often find they can talk to a loved one on tape much more freely. If possible, make cassettes detailing your daily events and feelings, and send it to your loved ones so they can hear your voice. Encourage them to do the same.
- ◆ Send photos and postcards. While you are overseas, send photos and postcards (if possible) to help loved ones, especially children, understand where you are and what your life is like there.
- ◆ Plan ahead. If you plan to be away during birthdays and other special events, wrap a few gifts and ask a friend or neighbor to deliver them to your loved one on the special day.

If your loved one is called to duty away from home:

- ◆ Remember to share everyday events. Keep your loved one posted on daily family events via telephone, e-mail, fax or letters. For example, talk or write about your daughter's soccer game, your toddler's play date or movies you saw so your loved one feels involved with day-to-day routines at home.
- ◆ Send mail. Send photos, school papers, drawings, care packages, etc. to your loved one, if possible.
- ◆ Make a countdown calendar. Have your children make a "countdown calendar" which will help them understand how long a parent will be gone and when he or she will return. Hang a calendar and have children mark off the days, or construct a chain of paper links that can be torn off each day. If you don't know your loved one's exact return date, keep children informed as you learn more information.
- ◆ Plan a reunion. Have the children help plan a reunion when your loved one returns. It can be a simple family dinner or a party with friends and family—as long as it is special.

Coping With Emotions

If your loved one has been called to duty, this is no doubt going to be a very difficult and emotional time for you. To help you cope, consider some of the following tips:

- ◆ Join a support group or network with others in similar situations. The military offers supportive services (as described in the "Helpful Resources" section), and you can usually find support groups through community centers, churches and synagogues, YMCA/YWCAs, etc., or you can start your own informal support group.

- ◆ Contact other families who you know have loved ones called to duty. If you don't know anyone, contact the military and ask them if they can refer you to others in your area—or to provide you with phone numbers or e-mail addresses of others outside of your immediate area. This will give you the opportunity to share information with people who may be experiencing similar emotions and concerns.
- ◆ Establish and/or rely on a support system of family, friends and/or colleagues. Studies have shown that people who have more support are less likely to experience detrimental effects of a traumatic event.
- ◆ Keep a journal. Write down your feelings or write entries that you can share with your loved one upon his or her return.
- ◆ Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- ◆ Realize you're not alone. Many others have also been called to active duty.
- ◆ Structure your time and keep busy. Do things that feel good to you. This will help keep your mind off the situation and occupy your time.
- ◆ Consider limiting your exposure to television or other sources of information about the current situation and the military plans.

While your loved one is away, you may experience a wide range of emotions including feelings of anxiety, fear, loneliness, sadness, anger or depression. You may find yourself withdrawing from others or worrying about how you will manage without your loved one. Symptoms of anxiety may include agitated behavior, feelings of apprehension, rigid thinking, fear of being alone, suspiciousness of others, insomnia and increased preoccupation with physical discomforts. If your feelings disrupt your daily life, consider seeking professional help.

Additionally, ask yourself the following questions:

- ◆ Am I having difficulty thinking or concentrating?
- ◆ Have I lost my interest or pleasure in activities that I once enjoyed?
- ◆ Have I noticed a change in my appetite or weight?
- ◆ Am I having difficulty sleeping or am I oversleeping?
- ◆ Am I having nightmares about the situation?
- ◆ Am I feeling overwhelmed?
- ◆ Am I turning to alcohol or drugs to relieve my feelings?
- ◆ Am I feeling hopeless and/or do I have recurring thoughts of death or suicide?

If you said “yes” to even one of these questions, it may be a sign that you are experiencing depression and need professional help. Ask your employer if they offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or call a mental health professional in your area.

In addition, the military offers a Family Support Center that can provide information and assistance to help you through this difficult time. Please refer to the “Helpful Resources” section for contact information.

Helpful Resources

The following resources can provide additional information:

Army Emergency Relief

200 Stovall Street
Alexandria, VA 22332
703-428-0000

<http://www.aerhq.org/> or
<http://www.lewis.army.mil/community/dpca/fsd/acs/aer/>

The Army Emergency Relief (AER) is the Army's own emergency financial assistance organization. They provide assistance to reservists and their families when needed.

Family Separation and Readiness Guide

http://www.afcrossroads.com/famseparation/predeployment_menu.cfm

This guide is helpful to those members and their families and friends who are separated due to military deployments, remote assignments, extended tour of duty and other personnel separated from loved ones.

The Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society

Arlington, VA

Contact: Mr. John Alexander

703-696-4904

<http://www.nmcrcs.org>

The mission of the Navy–Marine Corps Relief Society is to provide, in partnership with the Navy and Marine Corps, financial, educational and other assistance to members of the Naval Services of the United States, eligible family members and survivors.

Office of Reserve Affairs

<http://www.defenselink.mil/ra/>

This site for the reserve force provides information about the policies, programs and initiatives that Office of the Secretary of Defense/Reserve Affairs manages for the National Guard and Reserve Components of the United States Armed Forces.

Soldiers' and Sailors' Civil Relief Act

<http://www.defenselink.mil>

This article explains the benefits provided by the act and answers common questions.

U.S. Army Community and Family Support Center

<http://www.armymwr.com/>

This site helps military personnel with issues such as morale, welfare and support for family members.

Military Branches

The National Guard Bureau

<http://www.ngb.army.mil/>

United States Air Force

<http://www.af.mil/>

United States Army

<http://www.army.mil/>

United States Army Reserve

<http://www.army.mil/usar/>

This is the official information outlet for the Army Reserve. It is an information resource to Army personnel, the media and citizens of the United States.

United States Coast Guard

<http://www.uscg.mil/>

United States Department of Defense

<http://www.defenselink.mil/>

United States Marine Corps

<http://www.usmc.mil/>

United States Navy

<http://www.navy.mil/>