

THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT: A MILITARY FAMILY PERSPECTIVE

Military Families have experienced the emotional trauma of deployment on an unprecedented scale since the end of the Gulf War. Humanitarian missions and peace enforcement have sent our troops to Somalia, Cuba, Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo. In the last decade, military downsizing has increased the likelihood that each Member will eventually participate on an extended mission. The impact of these long separations is of increasing concern with two-thirds of Military members now married and deployments to the Former Yugoslavia entering a fifth year. Differing coping strategies are needed through five stages of deployment. Education of health care providers, military leaders, Military members and Family members to anticipate these stages is crucial to ensure the Member's safe return and to minimize familial trauma.

Introduction

Upon signing the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995, the Implementation Force (IFOR) deployed to Bosnia for one year. This multinational effort included 20,000 U.S. troops. Since that time, six to eight month rotations have been the norm for the follow-on Stabilization Force (SFOR). In March 2000, an estimated 4,600 U.S. troops - commanded by the Texas National Guard - deployed to participate in the seventh such Stabilization Force rotation or SFOR VII. Future deployments to Bosnia are scheduled through SFOR XII ending in October 2004.

With years of extended deployments, there is a growing body of experience regarding the impact of deployments on military Families. In this paper, the emotional cycle of deployment experienced by Family members at home is discussed in detail. In order to provide a common frame of reference; this cycle is divided into five distinct stages closely correspond to the Member's experience of deployment: pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment, re-deployment and post-deployment.

Purpose

To describe the psychological, and event-related aspects of deployments experienced by military Families for use as a tool in education, intervention and research.

Methods

This paper relies on narrative format to describe the process of deployment and its impact on military Families. The authors, all military psychiatrists, have integrated their professional and personal experience into a cohesive "story" which is readily identifiable by military leaders, Military members and their Families. This story has been tempered by numerous presentations of this materiel, as well as modifications provided by military leaders, Military members and Family members. Whenever possible, relevant literature on deployment stress is cited.

The Five Stages of Deployment

Stage 1:

Pre-Deployment – Begins with the warning order to service member for deployment from home through their actual departure.

- ▶ Anticipation of loss vs. denial
- ▶ Train up and long hours away
- ▶ Getting affairs in order
- ▶ Mental/physical distance
- ▶ Tension builds

Stage 2:

Deployment – Period immediately following service member's departure from home through first month of deployment.

- ▶ Mixed emotions/relief
- ▶ Disoriented/overwhelmed
- ▶ Family numb, sad, alone
- ▶ Sleep difficulties
- ▶ Security and safety issues

Stage 5:

Post-Deployment – Begins with the arrival of the service member back home and typically lasts 3-6 months (or more) after return.

- ▶ Service member re-integrating into family
- ▶ Family "honeymoon" period
- ▶ Independence developed in sustainment stage redefined
- ▶ Need for "own" space
- ▶ Renegotiating routines

Stage 3:

Sustainment – Lasts from first month through the end of deployment.

- ▶ New family routines established
- ▶ New sources of support developed
- ▶ Feel more in control of day to day life
- ▶ Sense of independence
- ▶ Family Confidence—"We can do this"



Stage 4

Re-Deployment – Defined as the month before the service member is scheduled to return home.

- ▶ Anticipation of homecoming
- ▶ Excitement
- ▶ Apprehension
- ▶ Burst of energy/"nesting"
- ▶ Difficulty making decisions



Pre-deployment – varies, from several weeks to more than a year.

Deployment - 1st month - the period from the Member's departure from home through the first month of the deployment.

Sustainment - months 2 through 5

Re-deployment - last month

Post-deployment - 3-6 months after deployment

The emotional cycle of an extended deployment, six months or greater, is readily divided into five distinct stages. These stages are comprised as follows: pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment, re-deployment and post-deployment. Each stage is characterized both by a time frame and specific emotional challenges, which must be dealt with and mastered by each of the Family members. Failure to adequately negotiate these challenges can lead to significant strife - both for Family members and the deployed Member. Providing information early about what to expect, especially for Families who have not endured a lengthy separation before, can go a long way towards "normalizing" and coping positively with the deployment experience. Furthermore, promoting understanding of the stages of deployment helps to avert crises, minimize the need for command intervention or mental health counseling and can even reduce suicidal threats.

Pre-deployment

The onset of this stage begins with the warning order for deployment. This stage ends when the member actually departs from home station. The pre-deployment timeframe is extremely variable from several weeks to more than a year.

Stage 1. Pre-deployment

Anticipation of loss vs. denial

Train-up/long hours away

Getting affairs in order

Mental/physical distance

Arguments

Time frame: variable

The pre-deployment stage is characterized alternately by denial and anticipation of loss. As the departure date gets closer, spouses often ask: "You don't really have to go, do you?" Eventually, the increased field training, preparation, and long hours away from home herald the extended separation that is to come. Military members energetically talk more and more about the upcoming mission and their unit. This "bonding" to fellow Military members is essential to unit cohesion that is necessary for a safe and successful deployment. Yet, it also creates an increasing sense of emotional and physical distance for military spouses. In their frustration, many spouses complain: "I wish you were gone already." It is as if their loved ones are already "psychologically deployed."

As the reality of the deployment finally sinks in, the Member and Family try to get their affairs in order. Long "honey-do" lists are generated dealing with all manner of issues including: home repairs, security (door and window locks, burglar alarms, etc.), car maintenance, finances, tax preparation, child care plans and wills, just to name a few. At the same time, many couples strive for increased intimacy. Plans are made for the "best" Christmas, the "perfect" vacation, or the "most" romantic anniversary. In contrast, there may be some ambivalence about sexual relations: "this is it for six months, but I do not want to be that close." Fears about fidelity or marital integrity are raised or may go unspoken. Other frequently voiced concerns may include: "How will the children handle the separation? Can I cope without him/her? Will my marriage survive?" In this very busy and tumultuous time, resolving all these issues, completing the multitude of tasks or fulfilling high expectations often falls short.

A common occurrence, just prior to deployment, is for Military members and their spouses to have a significant argument. For couples with a long history, this argument is readily attributed to the ebb-and-flow of marital life and therefore not taken too seriously. For younger couples, especially those experiencing an extended separation for the first time, such an argument can take on "catastrophic" proportions. Fears that the relationship is over can lead to tremendous anxiety for both the member and spouse. In retrospect, these arguments are most likely caused by the stress of the pending separation. From a psychological perspective, it is easier to be angry than confront the pain and loss of saying goodbye for six months or more.

However, the impact of unresolved Family concerns can have potentially devastating consequences. From a command perspective, a worried, preoccupied military member is easily distracted and unable to focus on essential tasks during the critical movement of heavy military equipment. In the worst-case scenario, this can lead to a serious accident or the development of a member's stress casualty who is mission ineffective. On the home front, significant spousal distress interferes with completing basic routines, concentrating at work, and attending to the needs of children. At worst, this can exacerbate children's fears that the parents are unable to adequately care for them or even that the Member will not return. Adverse reactions by children can include inconsolable crying, apathy, tantrums, and other regressive behaviors. In response, a downward spiral can develop - if not quickly checked - in which both military member and spouse become even more upset at the prospect of separating.

Although easier said than done, it is often helpful for military couples - in the pre-deployment stage - to discuss in detail their expectations of each other during the deployment. These expectations can include a variety of issues, to include: freedom to make independent decisions, contact with the opposite sex (fidelity), going out with friends, budgeting, child-rearing, and even how often letters or care packages will be sent. Failure to accurately communicate these and other expectations is frequently a source of misperception, distortion and hurt later on in the deployment. It is difficult at best to resolve major marital disagreements when face-to-face, let alone over six thousand miles apart.

Deployment

This stage is the period from the Member's departure from home through the first month of the deployment.

Stage 2. Deployment

Mixed emotions/relief
Disoriented/overwhelmed
Numb, sad, alone
Sleep difficulty
Security issues
Time frame: first month

A roller coaster of mixed emotions is common during the deployment stage. Some military spouses report feeling disoriented and overwhelmed. Others may feel relieved that they no longer have to appear brave and strong. There may be residual anger at tasks left undone. The Member's departure creates a "hole," which can lead to feelings of numbness, sadness, being alone or abandonment. It is common to have difficulty sleeping and anxiety about coping. Worries about security issues may ensue, including: "What if there is a pay problem? Is the house safe? How will I manage if my child gets sick? What if the car breaks down?" For many, the deployment stage is an unpleasant, disorganizing experience.

On the positive side, the ability to communicate home from Bosnia, or any other site, is a great morale boost. The Defense Satellite Network (DSN) provides Military members the ability to call home at no cost, although usually for a fifteen-minute time limit. For some Military members, who are unwilling to wait on line, using commercial phone lines is an option. Unfortunately, it is common for huge phone bills to result, which can further add to familial stress. Another potential source of anxiety for Families is that several weeks may pass before Military members are able to make their first call home.

For most military spouses, reconnecting with their loved ones is a stabilizing experience. For those, who have "bad" phone calls, this contact can markedly exacerbate the stress of the deployment stage and may result in the need for counseling. One possible disadvantage of easy phone access is the immediacy and proximity to unsettling events at home or in theater. It is virtually impossible to disguise negative feelings of hurt, anger, frustration and loss on the phone. For example, a spouse may be having significant difficulty (children acting out, car breaking down, finances etc.) or a deployed member may not initially get along with peers or a supervisor. Spouse and deployed members may feel helpless and unable to support each other in their time of need. Likewise, there may be jealousy towards the individual(s) whom the spouse or member do rely on, or confide in, during the deployment. These situations can add to the stress and uncertainty surrounding the deployment. Yet, military Families have come to expect phone (and now even video) contact as technology advances. However, most report that the ability to stay in close touch - especially during key milestones (birthdays, anniversaries, etc.) - greatly helps them to cope with the separation.

Sustainment

The sustainment stage lasts from the first month through the fifth (penultimate) month of deployment.

Stage 3. Sustainment

New routines established
New sources of support
Feel more in control
Independence
Confidence ("I can do this")
Time frame: months two thru five

Sustainment is a time of establishing new sources of support and new routines. Many rely on a Family Readiness group which can serve as a close network that meets on a regular basis to handle problems and disseminate the latest information. Others are more comfortable with Family, friends, church or other religious institution as their main means of emotional support. As challenges come up, most spouses learn that they are able to cope with crises and make important decisions on their own. They report feeling more confident and in control. During the sustainment stage, it is common to hear military spouses say: "I can do this!"

One challenge, during this stage, is the rapid speed of information provided by widespread phone and e-mail access. Now one can even expect that individual Military members will have the ability to call home with personal cellular phones. Over long distances and without face-to-face contact, communications between husband and wife are much more vulnerable to distortion or misperception. Given this limitation, discussing "hot topics" in a marriage can be problematic and are probably best left on hold until after the deployment when they can be resolved more fully. Obvious exceptions, to this rule, include a Family emergency (i.e. the critical illness of a loved one) or a joyful event (i.e. the birth of a child). In these situations, communication for emergencies is through the Red Cross so that the member command is able to coordinate emergency leave if required.

On a related note, many spouses report significant frustration because phone contact is unidirectional and must be initiated by the member. Some even report feeling "trapped" at home for fear that they will miss a call. Likewise, Military members may feel forgotten if they call - especially after waiting a long time on line to get to a phone - and no one is home. This can lead to anger and resentment, especially if an expectation regarding the frequency of calls is unmet. Now that Internet and e-mail are widely available, spouses report feeling much more in control as they can initiate communication and do not have to stay waiting by the phone. Another advantage of e-mail, for both Member and spouse, is the ability to be more thoughtful about what is said and to "filter out" intense emotions that may be unnecessarily disturbing. This is not to say that military couples should "lie" to protect each other, but rather it helps to recognize that the direct support available from one's mate is limited during the deployment.

Furthermore, rapid communication can lead to unanticipated rumors, which then circulate unchecked within the Family Readiness Group (FRG). The most damning rumor involves an allegation of infidelity that is difficult to prove true or false. Other troubling rumors may include: handling the deployment poorly, accidents or injuries, changes in the date of return, disciplinary actions, or even who calls home the most. Needless to say, such rumors can be very hurtful to member and spouse. At its worst, unit cohesion and even mission success can suffer. Limiting the negative impact of such rumors is a constant challenge for unit leaders and chaplains. It is extremely important to keep Military members and Family members fully informed and to dispel rumors quickly. In fact, rumors lose their destructive power once the "secret" is exposed:

There was a rumor that a commander's wife reported that a deployed Member was having an affair. Members of the FRG, who were very upset, related the details to their deployed spouses. Senior unit leaders decided not to tell the commander because the allegations were deemed too inflammatory. Unfortunately, unit morale and cohesion began to suffer greatly as the rumor spread throughout the ranks. A month later, the commander finally learned of this destructive rumor, which had been undermining his authority to lead. He immediately confronted his wife, senior leaders and the Member about whom the allegation had been made. Evidence about the validity of these allegations, or how the rumor started in the first place, could not be found. In response, the commander issued a very firm policy regarding exposing all rumors - whether they be true or false. Unit morale and cohesion, although badly bruised, then began to recover.

The response of children to extended deployment of parent is very individualized and also depends on their developmental age: infants, toddlers, preschool, school age, and teenagers. It is reasonable to assume that a sudden negative change in a child's behavior or mood is a predictable response to the stress of having a deployed parent.

Infants (< 1 year) must be held and actively nurtured in order to thrive. If a primary caregiver becomes significantly depressed then the infant will be at risk for apathy, refusal to eat and even weight loss. Early intervention becomes critical to prevent undue harm or neglect. Pediatricians can perform serial exams to ensure growth continues as expected on height/weight charts. Community Services and Social Work can assist with parenting skills and eliciting Family or community support. Lastly, the primary caregiver may also benefit from individual counseling.

Toddlers (1-3 years) will generally take their cue from the primary caregiver. One issue is whether it is the mother or father who is the member leaving - especially when children are very young. If the "non-deploying" parent is coping well, they will tend to do well. The converse is also true. If the primary caregiver is not coping well, then toddlers may become sullen, tearful, throw tantrums or develop sleep disturbance. They will usually respond to increased attention, hugs and holding hands. The "non-deploying" parent may also benefit from sharing their day-to-day experiences with other parents facing similar challenges. In particular, it is important for the primary caregiver to balance the demands for caring for children alone with their own needs for time for self.

Preschoolers (3-6 years) may regress in their skills (difficulty with potty training, "baby talk," thumb sucking, refusal to sleep alone) and seem more "clingy." They may be irritable, depressed, aggressive, prone to somatic complaints and have fears about parents or others leaving. Caregivers will need to reassure them with extra attention and physical closeness (hugs, holding hands). In addition, it is important to avoid changing Family routines such as sleeping in their own bed, unless they are "very" scared. Answers to questions about the deployment should be brief, matter-of-fact and to the point. This will help to contain the free-floating anxiety of an overactive imagination.

School age children (6-12 years) may whine, complain, become aggressive or otherwise "act out" their feelings. They may focus on the member-parent missing a key event, for example: "will you (the member) be here for my birthday." Depressive symptoms may include: sleep disturbance, loss of interest in school, eating or even playing with their friends. They will need to talk about their feelings and will need more physical attention than usual. Expectations regarding school performance may need to be a little lower, but keeping routines as close to normal is best for them.

Teenagers (13-18 years) may be irritable, rebellious, fight or participate in other attention-getting behavior. They may show a lack of interest in school, peers and school activities. In addition, they are at greater risk for promiscuity, alcohol and drug use. Although they may deny problems and worries, it is extremely important for caregivers to stay engaged and be available to talk out their concerns. At first, lowering academic expectations may be helpful; however, return to their usual school performance should be supported. Sports and social activities should be encouraged to give normal structure to their life. Likewise, additional responsibility in the Family, commensurate with their emotional maturity, will make them feel important and needed.

Unfortunately, some children may have great difficulty adapting to the stress of a deployed parent. If they are unable to return to at least some part of their normal routine or display serious problems over several weeks, a visit to the Family doctor or mental health counselor is indicated. Children of deployed parents are also more vulnerable to psychiatric hospitalization - especially in single-parent and blended Families.

Despite all these obstacles, the vast majority of spouses and Family members successfully negotiate the sustainment stage and begin to look forward to their loved ones coming home.

Re-deployment

The re-deployment stage is essentially defined as the month before the member is scheduled to return home.

Stage 4. Re-deployment

Anticipation of homecoming

Excitement

Apprehension

Burst of energy/"nesting"

Difficulty making decisions

Time frame: months five thru six

The re-deployment stage is generally one of intense anticipation. Like the deployment stage, there can be a surge of conflicting emotions. On the one hand, there is excitement that the member is coming home. On the other hand, there is some apprehension. Some concerns include: "Will he (she) agree with the changes that I have made? Will I have to give up my independence? Will we get along?" Ironically, even though the separation is almost over, there can be renewed difficulty in making decisions. This is due, in part, to increased attention to choices that the returning member might make. Many spouses also experience a burst of energy during this stage. There is often a rush to complete "to-do" lists before their mate returns - especially around the home. It is almost inevitable that expectations will be high.

Post-deployment

Stage 5. Post-deployment

Honeymoon period
Loss of independence
Need for "own" space
Renegotiating routines
Reintegrating into Family
Time frame: three to six months after deployment

The post-deployment stage begins with the arrival to home station. Like the pre-deployment stage, the timeframe for this stage is also variable depending on the particular Family. Typically, this stage lasts from three to six months.

This stage starts with the "homecoming" of the deployed member. This can be a wonderfully joyous occasion with children rushing to the returning parent followed by the warm embrace and kiss of the reunited couple. The unit then comes to attention for one last time, followed by words of praise from the senior commander present. Lastly, weapons are turned in and duffle bags retrieved and the Family goes home.

Homecoming can also be an extremely frustrating and upsetting experience. The date of return may change repeatedly or units may travel home piece-meal over several days. Despite best intentions, the spouse at home may not be able to meet the returning Member (short notice, the children might be sick, sitters cannot be found in the middle of the night, unable to get off work, etc.). Military members may expect to be received as "heroes" and "heroines" only to find that they have to make their own way home.

Typically, a "honeymoon" period follows in which couples reunite physically, but not necessarily emotionally. Some spouses express a sense of awkwardness in addition to excitement: "Who is this stranger in my bed?" For others, however, the desire for sexual intimacy may require time in order to reconnect emotionally first.

Eventually, Military members will want to reassert their role as a member of the Family, which can lead to tension.⁶ This is an essential task, which requires considerable patience to accomplish successfully. Military members may feel pressure to make up for lost time and missed milestones. Military members may want to take back all the responsibilities they had before. However, some things will have changed in their absence: spouses are more autonomous, children have grown, and individual personal priorities in life may be different. It is not realistic to return home and expect everything to be the same as before the deployment.

During this period, spouses may report a lost sense of independence. There may be resentment at having been "abandoned" for six months or more. Spouses may consider themselves to be the true heroes (watching the house, children, paying bills, etc.) while Military members cared only for themselves. At least one study (Zeff et. al., 1997) suggests that the stay-at-home parent is more likely to report distress than the deployed Member. Spouses will also have to adapt to changes. Spouses may find that they are more irritable with their mates underfoot. They may desire their "own" space. Basic household chores and routines need to be renegotiated. The role played by the spouse in the marriage must be reestablished.

Reunion with children can also be a challenge. Their feelings tend to depend on their age and understanding of why the member was gone. Babies less than 1 year old may not know the Member and cry when held. Toddlers (1-3 years) may be slow to warm up. Pre-schoolers (3-6 years) may feel guilty and scared over the separation. School age children (6-12 years) may want a lot of attention. Teenagers (13-18 years) may be moody and may not appear to care. In addition, children are often loyal to the parent that remains behind and do not respond to discipline from the returning Member. They may also fear the Member's return: "Wait till Mommy/Daddy gets home!" Some children may display significant anxiety up to a year later ("anniversary reaction"), triggered by the possibility of separation. In addition, the Member may not approve of privileges granted to children by the non-deployed parent. However, it is probably best for the Member not to try to make changes right away and to take time renegotiating Family rules and norms. Not heeding this advice, the Member risks invalidating the efforts of his/her mate and alienating the children. Military members may feel hurt in response to such a lukewarm reception. Clearly going slow and letting the child(ren) set the pace goes a long way towards a successful reunion.

Post-deployment is probably the most important stage for both Member and spouse. Patient communication, going slow, lowering expectations and taking time to get to know each other again is critical to the task of successful reintegration of the Member back into the Family. Counseling may be required in the event that the Member is injured or returns as a stress casualty. On the other hand, the separation of deployment - unlike civilian couples - provides Member and spouse a chance to evaluate changes within themselves and what direction they want their marriage to take. Although a difficult as well as joyful stage, many military couples have reported that their relationship is much stronger as a result.

Lessons Learned

There are many challenges for military Families to overcome during the five stages of deployment. Anticipating these challenges is important to minimize the emotional trauma caused by extended deployment. It is important not to over-interpret arguments which are often caused by the pain and loss of separation. Resolving marital issues that precede deployment is very difficult to accomplish over long distances and is probably best left until the Member's return. Dates of departure and return often "slip" forwards and backwards. Establishing or maintaining a support network helps Families cope. Rumors are hurtful and are best not repeated. If they cannot be resolved, then contact the chain of command to find out the truth or put a stop to them. Breaking up the time is a useful technique to prevent being overwhelmed. This can include: weekly get-togethers with other Families, monthly outings for the children (a favorite restaurant, the park, a picnic etc.), and a visit to, or from, parents and in-laws around mid-deployment just to name a few. In order to maintain their sanity, parents - now "single" because of the deployment - will need time without their children. Scheduling a regular "Mommy's (Daddy's) day out" can be achieved by daycare or sharing sitting with someone you trust. Overspending or increased alcohol use may provide short-term relief; but in the long-term, they will only exacerbate the stress of deployment. Lastly, and most importantly, Member, spouse and children will change and grow during the deployment. It is critical to go slow, be patient and allow several months to reestablish Family bonds.

Pitfalls

- Over-interpreting arguments
- Hot topics/long distances
- Rumors/loss of trust
- Investment in date of return
- Not accepting changes in marriage

Helpful Hints

- Establish a base of support
- Make plans to break up time
- E-mail/phone calls/letters
- Avoid overspending/alcohol
- "Single" parents need time without kids

Discussion

Several questions remain to be answered regarding the impact of extended deployments on Military members and their Families.

Many Family members complain of the emotional distance during the pre-deployment stage. How long is the optimal time for Families to be notified in advance of a deployment? What is the impact on Military members who may feel torn between their Family and their unit? How much time do commanders need to get their units ready to deploy?

In addition, there are many questions about the remaining stages of deployment. What is the relative impact on Families with four month (most Air Force deployments) versus six-eight months (SFOR, Navy Sea Duty) versus one year (IFOR, the initial Bosnia deployment)? Do Families of different services cope better with separation? Why? What is the minimum recovery time in which a Family needs to be stabilized from moves, military schools or even routine field training, after a Member returns home? What is the impact on children? How about their school performance or disciplinary problems? What if a spouse is pregnant or delivers during the deployment? What if the

spouse works versus stays at home? How about single parents? What if both spouses are in the military and deploy? What is the impact of extended deployments on marital longevity, spouse and child abuse when compared with civilian Families? What about Member retention? What about the Families of Military members who have had multiple or back-to-back deployments? How about the Reserves or National Guard who may not have as extensive support as their counterparts on Active Duty? Is there sufficient notice for them to transition from their civilian roles in anticipation of deployment? What about the potential economic dislocation to include: loss of job and loss of income? How about the loss of unit cohesiveness when Reserves or Guard deploy as individual augmentees assigned to other units? A good starting point to begin answering some of these questions is provided by defining the five stages of deployment and challenges they present to Military members and their Families.

Conclusion

Over the past years since the Gulf War, Military members and their Families have had to adapt to a major shift in U.S. foreign policy and the role of the military in extended multinational deployments. Furthermore, Family well-being is not only essential to mission success with two-thirds of Military members now married, but also to the future health of the military through retention of trained Military members. Health care professionals (including civilian providers accepting TRICARE insurance) and military leaders must be prepared to support Military members and their Families through five stages of deployment. Providing information early, about what to expect, will help Families cope with the deployment experience. More research is needed, about the impact of deployment on Military members and their Families, to ensure that our forces are better prepared and ready for challenges of the next century.