



Coming Home: Readjusting to Family Life After Military Deployment

Why the Joy of Reunion Is Sometimes Followed by Unexpected Challenges

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The Homecoming We All Remember

As taxing and stressful as prolonged military deployment can be on a marriage, the return from deployment sometimes creates problems of its own. The joy and relief of reunion may gradually give way to unexpected tensions as couples discover that their lives have changed during the separation. Both partners expect things to return to normal, but normal may no longer be what it was.

Having experienced extended deployments aboard Navy ships during my nearly 25-year military career, I remember the excitement of returning home to my family. During the final days at sea, anticipation spread throughout the crew. We looked forward to sighting land, entering our home port, and preparing to man the rail.

There was something deeply satisfying about those moments. We had completed another demanding assignment, and as our ship approached the pier, we felt the pride of having done our job.

Then came the unforgettable sight of our families waiting ashore, waving signs and placards, searching the rails for familiar faces. As the mooring lines were passed from ship to pier, we were once again physically connected to the families we had reluctantly left behind six months earlier—or sometimes considerably longer.

The reunion was everything we had anticipated. But after the embraces, celebrations, and excitement subsided, another challenge awaited us: learning how to live together again.

The Family You Left Has Changed

During deployment, the spouse remaining at home assumes responsibilities that were previously shared. Household finances, automobile maintenance, school activities, home repairs, and decisions involving the children all become part of one person's daily routine.

At first, the additional burden may seem overwhelming. But military spouses are remarkably resourceful. As the months pass, they develop confidence, independence, and practical skills they may not have needed before.

The wife who once depended upon her husband to manage the checking account may now handle the entire family budget. The husband whose deployed wife ordinarily managed household affairs may discover that he can organize the children's schedules, supervise homework, and maintain a functioning household.

By the time the service member returns, the spouse at home may have become thoroughly accustomed to making decisions independently.

Then the returning partner walks through the door and expects to resume the old arrangement. That expectation can produce an unexpected struggle over authority, even in an otherwise happy marriage.

When Independence Becomes a Source of Resentment

One of the most significant consequences of deployment is the shift in family authority. The spouse who remains at home becomes the principal decision-maker, disciplinarian, and manager of everyday affairs. After successfully handling those responsibilities for months, that person may understandably resent having someone suddenly question decisions or attempt to take charge.

The returning service member, meanwhile, may feel excluded from the family. Decisions that once required discussion are now made almost automatically, and the children may turn instinctively to the parent who remained at home. Neither partner necessarily intends to create conflict. The problem arises because both have become accustomed to different circumstances.

The solution is not to insist that the family return to its previous arrangement. People mature and grow, and the independence developed during deployment cannot simply be switched off. Both

partners must recognize the change, discuss their expectations, and establish a new balance of responsibilities.

The Little Things That Suddenly Matter

Not every post-deployment disagreement involves an important family decision. Some begin with the smallest domestic irritations. During deployment, the spouse at home develops a familiar routine. Household chores are performed in a particular order, rooms are arranged to suit the family's needs, and everyday habits become established.

Suddenly, another adult returns to the household. Dirty clothes appear on the bedroom floor. Whiskers accumulate in the bathroom sink. Empty beer cans or coffee cups are left where they do not belong. The returning spouse may be equally irritated by changes in the household that occurred during the absence.

These are ordinary roommate problems, but they can acquire unexpected significance when two people are becoming reacquainted after months apart. A minor irritation can become an argument about respect, consideration, or authority. The real problem may not be the dirty clothes but the feeling that one's independence or established routine is being disregarded.

A little humor, patience, and willingness to compromise can prevent such annoyances from becoming serious disagreements.

Reestablishing Emotional and Physical Intimacy

Military couples also face the challenge of restoring the emotional and physical intimacy that existed before deployment. Months of separation may have changed expectations, habits, and comfort levels. Although both partners may eagerly anticipate being together again, the transition is not always instantaneous.

The returning service member may be exhausted, distracted, or preoccupied with experiences from deployment. The spouse at home may be equally tired after months of managing the household alone.

Even sexual intimacy, so eagerly anticipated during separation, may require patience as the couple adjusts to being together again. Neither partner should interpret a temporary awkwardness or difference in expectations as evidence that affection has diminished. The important thing is to communicate openly, respect each other's feelings, and allow the relationship to regain its familiar closeness without unnecessary pressure.

Children Must Adjust, Too

Children experience their own difficulties when a deployed parent returns. During the separation, they have become accustomed to the authority and routines established by the parent at home. Younger children may be shy around the returning parent, while older children may resist a sudden change in household discipline.

A father or mother who immediately attempts to resume the former parental role may encounter resentment or confusion. The returning parent should resist the temptation to correct every perceived problem or immediately impose a different set of rules. Spending time with the children, learning about their experiences, and gradually participating in established routines can make the transition easier.

Parents should also discuss disciplinary expectations privately rather than allowing children to witness disagreements about authority. The objective is to restore a cooperative family relationship, not to determine which parent is in charge.

Recognizing When Adjustment Requires Help

Some readjustment difficulties are temporary and resolve as family members become comfortable together again. Others may persist, particularly when deployment has involved combat, traumatic experiences, or prolonged stress. A returning service member may experience sleep disturbances, irritability, emotional withdrawal, or difficulty relaxing. The spouse at home may feel overwhelmed, disappointed, or resentful that the anticipated reunion has not produced immediate happiness.

When these difficulties become persistent or interfere with family life, professional assistance may be appropriate. Military family support programs, chaplains, healthcare professionals, and [Military OneSource](#) can help eligible families locate counseling and other resources.

Seeking assistance is not an admission of marital failure. Sometimes it is simply recognition that the transition from deployment to family life requires more support than either partner anticipated.

A Marriage Cannot Return to Yesterday

Looking back on my own deployments, I recognize that the excitement of returning home sometimes obscured the adjustments awaiting my wife and me. I had spent months performing military duties in an environment governed by established authority and routine. Meanwhile, she had been managing an entirely different set of responsibilities, making decisions and solving problems without my assistance.

We were both returning to the same marriage, but we were not necessarily returning as precisely the same people who had said goodbye months earlier. That is perhaps the most important lesson of military homecomings.

The independence developed by the spouse at home should not be surrendered simply because the deployed partner has returned. Nor should the returning service member feel like an unnecessary guest in his or her own household. Both partners must give a little, accept the changes that have occurred, and learn how to share their lives again.

Marital problems following deployment are not inevitable, but some degree of readjustment usually is. Couples who resist change may find themselves struggling against one another, while those who recognize and accommodate it have an opportunity to strengthen their relationship.

A successful homecoming is more than the joyful moment when the ship ties up at the pier. It is the patient, sometimes difficult process of becoming a family again.

And having experienced that process several times myself, I can say that the effort is well worth making.