



When Your Spouse Deploys: Advice for the One Who Stays Behind

Managing the Household, Raising the Children, and Coping With Separation

By Curtis Jerry Smothers, LCDR, USN (Ret.)

When the Goodbyes Are Over

The tearful goodbyes and emotional scenes at the airport, hangar, or pier are now memories. Your spouse is aboard a ship heading toward distant waters or on the way to an overseas military assignment. The house seems strangely quiet, familiar routines have disappeared, and you face several long months before the much-anticipated homecoming. What now?

For first-time military spouses, the answer can seem overwhelming. Deployment brings more than loneliness and separation. It changes household responsibilities, parenting arrangements, finances, and the everyday decisions that couples ordinarily share. Even experienced military families may find that each deployment presents a new set of challenges.

Having spent years at sea during my Navy career, I know that the families remaining at home carry responsibilities that are sometimes overlooked. My wife managed our household and children through repeated separations, and I came to appreciate that the person who stays behind has a demanding assignment of his or her own.

Here are some practical suggestions for making that assignment a little easier.

You're Now in Charge of the Household

The first reality to accept is that the responsibilities you once shared have shifted almost entirely to you. Bills must be paid, appointments kept, children transported, and household problems resolved without the convenience of consulting your spouse across the dinner table.

And Murphy's Law has an uncanny way of making its presence known during deployments. The automobile breaks down, the water heater quits, or the washing machine decides that now would be an excellent time to retire.

Prepare for these possibilities before they happen. Keep a list of reliable repair services, trusted neighbors, emergency contacts, and people who can help with transportation or childcare. Maintain an accessible emergency fund and make sure you can manage household accounts, insurance policies, and important documents.

If possible, discuss these matters before deployment. Establish who will handle financial decisions, how emergencies will be communicated, and what arrangements are in place if something serious happens.

You cannot anticipate every problem, but preparation can prevent a routine inconvenience from becoming a family crisis.

Parenting Becomes a One-Person Responsibility

Deployment also creates a significant shift in family authority. You become the principal decision-maker, disciplinarian, counselor, and comforter for your children. The familiar warning, "Just wait until your father gets home," loses much of its effectiveness when Dad is thousands of miles away.

Children recognize changes in family relationships remarkably quickly. Some may test the limits of your authority, while others become unusually quiet, clingy, or anxious. Their reactions may reflect the uncertainty of having a parent absent rather than deliberate misbehavior.

Try to maintain familiar routines, reasonable expectations, and consistent discipline. Encourage children to express their feelings, and reassure them that the deployed parent remains an important part of the family.

Age-appropriate communication can help preserve that connection. Depending on the assignment, children may exchange emails, recorded messages, photographs, or occasional video calls with their absent parent. Younger children may enjoy marking days on a calendar or preparing drawings to send overseas.

One caution deserves particular attention: **The authority you exercise during deployment will not automatically return to its former arrangement when your spouse comes home.** You and the children will have developed new routines and habits. A returning parent who

immediately attempts to resume the old disciplinary role may encounter resistance, and you may resent what feels like interference with a household you have successfully managed alone.

Recognizing that possibility beforehand can make the eventual adjustment much easier.

Don't Try to Do Everything Alone

One of the most important lessons military families learn is that they are not alone in their difficulties.

Other spouses in your service member's unit may be experiencing the same worries, frustrations, and occasional moments of discouragement. Some have already survived several deployments and can offer practical advice about everything from household emergencies to coping with loneliness.

Find out whether your spouse's unit has an organized family support network. Depending on the service, these may include Family Readiness Groups, command-sponsored family programs, ombudsmen, or other designated contacts.

Military installations also offer family support services, counseling referrals, and information about community resources. [Military OneSource](#) provides confidential consultations and a variety of support services for eligible military families.

Do not hesitate to ask for assistance. Needing help with childcare, transportation, an unexpected repair, or emotional stress is not a sign that you are failing to manage your responsibilities. It simply means that you're human.

And if a fellow military spouse offers to help, consider accepting. There may come a time when you can return the favor.

Keep Busy, but Leave Room for Yourself

Loneliness can be one of the most difficult aspects of deployment, particularly during evenings, weekends, and family occasions that ordinarily would be shared with your spouse.

One effective way to manage those empty hours is to remain involved in activities that provide companionship, purpose, and a sense of accomplishment. Volunteer work, participation in your children's schools, community organizations, hobbies, continuing education, or part-time employment can help maintain a satisfying routine.

However, staying busy should not become an obligation to fill every available minute. You are already carrying additional responsibilities, and exhaustion can make ordinary difficulties seem much worse.

Make time for friendships, exercise, recreation, and occasional opportunities to relax. Arrange dependable childcare when possible, and don't feel guilty about taking an afternoon for yourself.

A little attention to your own well-being is not selfish. It helps you remain the dependable parent and partner your family needs.

Stay Connected Across the Miles

Modern technology has made communication during deployment considerably easier than it was when I served aboard aircraft carriers. During my Navy years, letters were often the principal connection between a deployed sailor and the family at home. Today, many military families can communicate through email, messaging, telephone calls, and sometimes video conversations.

Nevertheless, operational requirements, limited connectivity, time differences, and security restrictions can interrupt communication without warning. A missed call or several days without a message does not necessarily indicate that something is wrong.

Before deployment, discuss realistic expectations about how often you may be able to communicate. Agree on the best ways to handle urgent family matters and avoid interpreting every communication gap as a personal slight.

When you do communicate, share ordinary family experiences as well as important developments. The deployed parent wants to remain connected to everyday life, while the spouse at home benefits from knowing that the relationship continues despite the distance.

At the same time, avoid turning every conversation into a catalog of household problems. Some difficulties require immediate discussion; others can wait until both partners have the time and emotional energy to address them constructively.

Recognize When Stress Becomes Something More

Feeling lonely, frustrated, or overwhelmed during deployment is common. However, persistent sadness, severe anxiety, difficulty functioning, or a growing sense of hopelessness deserves attention.

Military spouses sometimes believe they must remain strong for everyone else, especially their children. That expectation can discourage them from acknowledging their own emotional difficulties.

If stress begins interfering with sleep, relationships, parenting, or daily responsibilities, seek assistance through military family support services, a healthcare professional, or a qualified counselor. Military OneSource and installation support programs can help eligible families locate appropriate resources.

There is no particular virtue in suffering silently through a deployment. Asking for help is often the most responsible thing you can do for yourself and your family.

Prepare for the Homecoming

The anticipated reunion is one of the happiest occasions in military family life, but it can also introduce unexpected tensions.

During the separation, you have become accustomed to making decisions independently. Your children have adjusted to your authority, and your deployed spouse has developed a different set of routines and responsibilities. Bringing those separate experiences together again requires patience.

Don't expect everything to return immediately to the way it was before deployment. Give everyone time to become reacquainted, discuss household responsibilities, and gradually establish a comfortable division of duties.

Most importantly, recognize that both partners have changed in small ways during the separation. A successful reunion involves learning how to function together again rather than simply resuming life at the point where it was interrupted.

They Also Serve Who Stand and Wait

There will undoubtedly be difficult days during a deployment. You may feel lonely, exhausted, frustrated, or occasionally resentful of the circumstances that have placed so much responsibility on your shoulders.

Those feelings do not diminish the importance of what you are doing.

Your spouse's military service may involve demanding, uncomfortable, or dangerous assignments, but your contribution is also essential. By maintaining the household, caring for the children, and providing a stable home to return to, you help make that service possible.

Years from now, when the deployments are over and military life has become a collection of memories, you may look back with considerable pride at what you accomplished together.

The poet John Milton expressed a thought that has special meaning for military spouses who remain at home:

"They also serve who only stand and wait."

And sometimes, standing and waiting requires more strength than anyone realizes.