

Getting Back Together

Post-deployment reintegration tips for couples and families.

by Julie Steed

Sarah Mitchell is no stranger to deployments or the reintegration phase that follows. Mitchell's Army husband has been deployed 20 of the last 31 months, leaving her to raise their four children. Despite the family's extensive history with deployments, the reintegration is difficult each time; however, Mitchell says it all boils down to one thing: **patience.**

"You want so desperately to have alone time [with your spouse] to reacquaint, your kids are begging for time of their own and your spouse is trying to catch up on the time missed," says Mitchell. "This requires a lot of patience on everyone's part."

Beyond being patient, what should you do to make the reintegration process easier?

Start before homecoming.

During deployment, communication is key to keeping a sense of connection and smoothing the transition for reintegration. "Communication during deployment is critical to maintaining connections with children," says Army National Guard service member Dr. Christian J. Dean, LMFT, LPC with Counseling for Growth, LLC. Communication is equally important for couples.

Dean's ideas for helping families stay connected during deployment include:

- Writing letters on a regular basis
- Talking on the phone or Internet
- Emailing
- Keeping the deployed parent up-to-date regarding school and extra curricular events

"Having a shared experience or process can also be helpful with staying connected," says Dean. These shared

experiences will also provide topics for conversation during phone calls and computer chats and will provide common ground for homecoming. A shared experience can be anything from watching the same television shows or reading the same books to learning a new skill together.

Letting children know that "out of sight, out of mind" doesn't apply during a deployment can also help during reintegration. "Deployed parents can keep a running reminder list of situations that remind them about their children," says Dean. "Deployed parents can share those situations and events to help reinforce that they are thinking about their child."

Have realistic expectations.

While it's tempting to make extravagant plans and fill the calendar with social obligations and family events, it's better to have lower expectations for homecoming and reintegration. "I try not to have crazy expectations for what we will do together as a family," says Air Force spouse Anna Loicano. "That way, any little thing we do together is great."

In addition, families should assume that the path to reintegration could be bumpy. "Realistic expectations regarding reintegration include the expectation of challenges," says Dean. "However, if a couple focuses on solutions, without competing about who had it worse, while coming to each other from a place of love and cooperation, then couples can be better prepared to get to a healthier place faster."

Give the reintegration process its due.

It's easy to assume that reintegration will happen quickly; however, it's a process that is often difficult. "The process of reintegration is similar to the grieving process," says Dean. "Both couples

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A Marine with Combat Logistics Battalion 2, 2nd Marine Logistics Group greets his family after returning from the unit's deployment to Afghanistan. Photo by Cpl. Devin Nichols

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— Dr. Christian J. Dean,
LMFT, LPC with Counseling for Growth, LLC.

have their idea (fantasy) about what reintegration will look like. However, many times their fantasies don't match up. There can be a sense of loss when it comes to that fantasy. There may be some denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and hopefully, acceptance."

Meet in the Middle.

The return of a deployed spouse can be a huge relief to the family member who has held everything together on the home front. It's tempting to hand off all of the responsibility to the returning spouse in hopes of down time or recognition of a job well done. However, the returning spouse may have plans of his own. "The service member who has faced adverse living conditions in a very controlled and potentially hostile environment may be looking forward to sitting down and relaxing," says Dean.

It's essential couples meet in the middle during this time to smooth the way into easier integration.

Loicano has learned to stick with her normal routine and let her husband work himself back into their schedule over time. "I think it's always better to stick to the routine and let the returning spouse come alongside as he can," says Loicano. "Don't demand an immediate and even distribution of duties. It works well for us to be together but be doing our own thing (like reading or working on a project)."

Focus on your spouse, not yourself.

If you find the reintegration process isn't going smoothly, take a step back and examine whether you're working together or against each other. Seek ways to meet in the middle and focus on making your spouse happy instead of making yourself happy. "In order to minimize complications from reintegration, couples are encouraged to discuss (not argue about) their ideas and explore how they can work to meet each other's

needs," says Dean.

Mitchell has her own way of helping her husband work his way back into family life. "We find it best that in the beginning we stay together, as a whole family, as much as possible . . . then we start spreading the time out, returning to routine, play dates with friends, etc.," says Mitchell. "The second or third week, the adults take one or two date nights away from the kids to talk, bringing up tough conversation and be open and honest." Mitchell has discovered two questions that give

What about the extra money earned from a deployment?

One of the benefits of a long deployment is the extra income it generates; however, it's advisable to go slowly and not blow all of your extra cash. "Many members of the military return from a deployment with a sizable pool of financial resources," says Army Major Hank Coleman, a personal finance writer working on earning his Certified Financial Planner credentials. "What should a family do with that new found money? Take it easy and go slow spending it," says Coleman.

- Have a plan for the money before you start spending
- Take about 10 percent of the extra income and enjoy spending it on yourself and your family
- Decide if you need to pay down debt or save the remaining money for a down payment on a home, etc.
- Consider saving for a rainy day or as a boost for your emergency fund
- Take advantage of the Thrift Savings Plan and other investment opportunities you may have

[Editor's Note: for more information on budgeting during your deployment, see our article on page 10]

her insight into what is going on inside her husband's mind. "What shocked you the most when you got home? What has been the toughest to sit back and watch?" These two questions give me a depth into his soul, his heart and most of all help me help him reintegrate back into the family," says Mitchell.

Find balance.

For the spouse left at home, taking over all of the roles required on the home front can be overwhelming. Giving up control of those roles when a deployed spouse returns can be equally difficult. Couples often hit road bumps when a spouse comes home and attempts to reclaim the role he naturally filled in the past.

"The pain and challenges it took to learn to finally keep everything together [at home] is naturally avoided by an urge to maintain the responsibility and control," says Dean. "Learning to compromise regarding the roles and responsibilities is a healthy approach to addressing such concerns. Perhaps the service members [can take] on different tasks that can be more easily integrated into the life of the spouse in case another deployment occurs."

Expect your experience to be different.

Just as Loicano and Mitchell have different approaches for reintegration success, so will your family. What works for one may not work well for another. "Service members and their families are encouraged to focus on solutions (not the problem) and to work together to meet each other's needs (not just their own). By approaching reintegration as a collaborative team, the specifics and uniqueness of the family's reintegration process will take a back seat to the power of unconditional love," says Dean. ●

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