

Strategies for Working with Military Couples

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The authors are affiliated with the military; as a consequence, some of the assertions in this article are based on experience as well as the referenced professional literature. Military contacts interviewed asked to remain anonymous.

Nearly 60% of the 4.2 million American military members are married (Moring, 2003). Military couples are a special category of couples with unique needs and challenges; the therapist's awareness of these differences will increase therapeutic effectiveness. Military couples are at higher risk for divorce than civilian couples, and this rate has increased from 2005 to 2008 in most branches of the service, with military women twice as likely to divorce as military men (Associated Press, 2008). Many common issues lead to increased risk of divorce with military couples. Military individuals tend to marry early in life and often just before or after a deployment or extended training period. Frequently, marriage coincides with an experience that will likely change the service member greatly; the marriage can be an attempt to anchor an identity prior to the change. It is not unusual for individuals to marry someone they have known relatively briefly, such as someone that the military member met overseas. In addition to these background factors, the special stresses of a military lifestyle increase the risk of marital difficulties. The military requires commitment not found in other occupations, which competes with the family's needs (Segal, 1986). Three unique stressors for military couples are deployments, affairs, and numerous job changes.

Deployments: Service members frequently separate from their families for long periods of time, either due to deployment or unaccompanied tours. Certain types of deployments may also lead to mental health problems. Combat exposure can lead to violence, and the deployment cycle also creates strife.

- **Mental health:** According to Darwin and Reich (2006), 40% of Army Reserve soldiers return from deployment with significant mental health problems; reservists frequently have less access to support services and counseling support compared to active-duty soldiers. The service member is at particular risk for developing acute or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which often impacts interpersonal relationships by causing emotional distance, irritability, communication breakdowns, lack of interest in social activity, preoccupation with safety, and nightmares (National Center for PTSD, 2006). PTSD has been found to decrease family support, although family support helps with recovery from PTSD (Benotsch et al., 2006). Spouses can struggle with secondary traumatization, when they too develop PTSD symptoms due to hearing stories of the service member's trauma (Bramsen, van der Ploek, & Trist, 2002). PTSD has been shown to particularly impact marital satisfaction and sexuality (Dekel & Solomon, 2006).
- **Violence:** Because of the dissociation involved in PTSD and the military training service members have experienced, they are at greater risk for severe domestic violence when suffering from PTSD (Heyman & Neidig, 1999). Many military members have extensive training in harming others, and increased antisocial behaviors associated with combat can directly affect marital quality (Gimbel & Booth, 1994). The service members are also at

risk due to relationship problems; Schindler (2009), founder of Operation Military Family, reports that a discussion amongst Army officials reported that 60% of Army suicides were attributed to failed (generally romantic) relationships.

- *Deployment Cycle:* The clinician should be familiar with the common cycle of feelings and events that are associated with deployment. Pincus, House, Christenson, and Adler (2007) describe this cycle as having five distinct phases: pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment, re-deployment, and post-deployment.
 - During pre-deployment, the family and service member contend with both denial and anticipation. The military member often has to deal with a consuming training regimen while preparing for deployment, a time of frequent absence from the family. The family gets affairs in order, forcing them to face fears of death. Often, the pressures of this stage lead to arguing and increased distance between military member and spouse. In the first month of deployment, spouses often feel abandoned, worried, or jealous, and have difficulty sleeping.
 - In the sustainment phase (the remainder of the deployment), spouses often gain self-confidence and independence, establishing new roles or routines. They develop new support networks, often relying on people the deployed spouse does not know, to help them deal with their worries and concerns about the military member's well-being.
 - Redeployment begins a month before the service member's return and is filled with both excitement and apprehension. During this phase, the spouse often experiences difficulty making decisions and is often consumed with completing tasks before the service member returns.
 - Post-deployment begins with the military member's return. The couple often goes through a honeymoon period, when they experience a wealth of positive feelings. Then they must each adjust to a great deal of change—in self, partner, roles, and routines. One military spouse had this to say about life after deployment, “They tell you it's going to be hard to adjust after the deployment is over and the unit returns home, but here we are a year later and we're still trying to adjust. And it's not just us. Other couples in the unit are going through the same thing.” There are some common problems that occur in the readjustment:
 - One of the common post-deployment stressors is the effect that the return of the service member has on the bonds of friendships that both spouses formed during the deployment. The service member formed "bonds of brotherhood" because those service members who deployed together shared the unique hardships, grief, and joys of the deployment. After returning home, military members often mourn the loss of their friends and may expect the spouse to immediately fill that void, creating enormous pressure on the spouse. The spouse also formed friendships and support networks during the deployment. These bonds usually have to bend in order to accommodate the returning service member, and this bending can cause friction between the spouses. In addition, both spouses feel like outsiders to their partners' relationships and thus, can be jealous of the camaraderie that their partners share with others.

- There are two common post-deployment maladjustment styles with military couples that can create enormous strain on the marriage. First, some spouses feel that during the deployment, they carried the entire weight of the children, house, cars, etc. Therefore, as soon as the service member returns home, the spouse dumps all responsibility onto the service member. This can be overwhelming for the service member and create resentment between the spouses. On the other hand, the spouse may have created a routine that works well for the family and may refuse to allow the military member into this routine. This is common in military families where the service member deploys frequently because the spouse feels that by the time the family adjusts to the service member's return, the service member will be deploying again and the family will have to endure more adjustment. Therefore, the spouse feels it is easier to keep the routine in place and not include the service member. Children can also exacerbate this maladaptive readjustment style because they commonly ignore the newly returned service member and proceed directly to the spouse if they have questions or need to ask permission. The military member feels like an outsider in his or her own home.
- The therapist should understand the deployment cycle and know where the couple is in the cycle in order to normalize feelings and help the couple plan for these difficulties.

The Risk of Affairs: The second unique stressor for military couples is affairs. Long deployments make it very easy for affairs to occur because this can be a lonely time. Both spouses fear the other will cheat; fears that linger can cause problems even after deployment.

- *Service Member's Fears:* The service member fears that the spouse left at home will turn to someone else for comfort, or go out with co-workers of the opposite sex, leading to sexual intimacies. Even if military members trust their spouses, they know that others can take advantage of their spouses' loneliness. Other service members, handymen, landscapers, and other "helpers" have been known to prey on lonely spouses in the member's absence, and often have proximity and access to the spouse. Any time the military member cannot contact the spouse, questions about the spouse's company and activities cross the mind. Service members fear the dreaded "Dear John" letter while deployed, or returning home to find the spouse has started a new relationship. They often witness others on deployment experiencing these things, which are widely discussed.
- *Spouse's Fears:* The spouse at home also fears the military spouse's infidelity. Service members frequently have access to "Juicy Girls" who "entertain" military members in return for payment. This entertainment ranges from conversation to sexual intercourse. The Juicy Girls attempt to get clients intoxicated, leading them to spend more, lose their inhibitions, and do uncharacteristic things. Even if military members find the Juicy Girls disgusting, as one military member said, "The longer you are away from home, the lonelier you get and the better looking the girls get." Even those who would not normally be tempted by the Juicy Girls' charms can find themselves succumbing during a long deployment. The spouse at home fears competition not only from "Juicy Girls" types of situations, but also military members of the opposite sex with them on deployment.

Deployments place lonely men and women in close proximity, creating risk for an affair if both do not stay on guard.

- *After the Deployment:* Even when the deployment is over, the couple may struggle with the fear that infidelity occurred but is being hidden by the spouse. The news of others who had affairs in the unit, which often comes to light after deployment, causes these fears to surface. One spouse may become suspicious of the partner and withdraw. The partner believes the spouse is withdrawing due to an affair, so the partner withdraws. Mutual distrust creates a vicious cycle; trust often becomes a central issue for military couples.

Promotions, Job Changes, and Transfers: The third unique stressor for military couples is promotions, job changes, and transferring duty stations. Generally, service members are promoted every two to five years. Job changes can range from changing offices to changing specialties which means the military member may need to be retrained. Transferring duty stations is frequent and military couples can live in six to seven different locations in the span of a 20 year military career, averaging a move every three years (Gill, 1994).

- The stress of a job change or promotion affects both partners. One military member explains the stress of promotions:

Our promotions are not simply our position within the organization. They are also tied to our social structure. Getting promoted can have both positives and negative effects socially. Positive effects are more respect and influence, but the negative effects are the potential loss of friends because you are no longer the same rank and the promotion creates a new work environment where you may be expected to be in charge of friends. Their execution of your orders will directly reflect on you, and they may not take you seriously or they may resent your elevated rank.

Both job changes and promotions may require military members to work long hours and leave their spouses at home alone for extended periods. The spouse may resent the military member's absence. The service member often feels that the extra work is necessary in order to benefit the military career. Both spouses can become bitter that their partner does not understand. This dynamic causes stress in the marriage.

- Transferring duty stations also disrupts the couple's lifestyle, creating additional stress. Constant moves can cause the non-military spouse considerable strain in managing his or her own career, leaving friends behind, and adjusting to new community. Looking for employment is stressful, and some duty stations do not have adequate employment in the surrounding area. Little and Hisnanick (2007) found that the spouses of service members earned 30% to 50% less than their civilian counterparts. Most of this reduction in pay is due to the loss of tenure at their jobs when they move or due to underemployment (Payne, Warner, & Little, 1992). This can discourage the spouse. Second, leaving the old community and moving to a new one means leaving friends. At the new duty station, the military member has a unit of potential friends. The spouse lacks the "built-in" friendships that come with the new job. Though most duty stations have a wives'

network, which can potentially provide friends and needed information, each newly arrived spouse has to find her “place” in this network, which can create added pressure to manage the family image. In addition, if the spouse is a husband, then he becomes, at best, an outsider in the wives’ network. Third, it is stressful to have to learn the layout of a new community, which they often must discover independently because of the service member’s work demands. These stressors are magnified by children, who often react to the strain of community change with behavior problems that must be managed by non-military spouses. This pressure can leave non-military spouses resentful of what they have given up in order to further the military member’s career. The stressors, loneliness, and resentment associated with job changes can manifest as marital problems.

For the Therapist

Several changes to the course of therapy from the Hope-Focused Marriage Therapy text should be considered with these couples. Military couples are diverse; not all couples experience military life in an identical manner, so couples will require different interventions. The following are suggestions to help in composing the treatment plan according to the needs of your couple.

- The therapist should be flexible in scheduling with military couples. Often the service member can unexpectedly be called into work. Service members are also frequently sent on temporary duty which takes them out of town for a few days or a few weeks at a time.
- Because spouse abuse and current infidelity are contraindicators for marriage therapy in general, the therapist should ask each partner in the individual intakes about the history of abuse and affairs even if these were never mentioned in the assessment reports.
- Unique aspects of military life mean that couples need to be able to communicate well, and are likely to struggle due to limited opportunities to practice this skill. In order to help these couples with their communication, we recommend therapists spend time on communication interventions such as TANGO and LOVE. Additional strategies that focus on communication may be helpful:
 - 10-2 *Identifying Love Busters*
 - 10-5 *Discerning Languages of Love*
- Help couples develop more intimacy and commitment in order to offset the fear of affairs. Some suggestions for treatment include:
 - Combine CLEAVE with 13-10 *Discuss Intimacy*
 - 13-1 *The Ups and Downs of Spirituality and Emotional Closeness Between Partners* (understanding changes in intimacy over time)
 - 13-2 *Use Graphs to Show that Love Changes over Time* (tracking changes especially around deployments or change in duty stations)
 - 13-11 *Breaking up the Emotional Distancer-Pursuer Pattern-Sealed Orders*
 - 14-4 *Deal with Commitment Drift* (especially before or after deployment)
- If affairs have occurred in the past, then discuss with the couple the option of focusing primarily on forgiveness in treatment:
 - 9-4 *Helping with Trouble at Forgiving: Identifying Barriers to Forgiveness*

- 9-7 *Bringing Scripture to Bear on Your Hurtfulness*
- 9-8 *Reflecting on Your Own Receiving of Forgiveness*
- 9-9 *Reflecting on Your Own Forgiveness*

Annotated Bibliography

For the Therapist:

Bramsen, I., Van der Ploeg, H. M., & Twisk, J. W. R. (2002). Secondary traumatization in Dutch couples of World War II survivors. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 70(1), 241-245.

This article describes secondary traumatization in the spouses of combat veterans. It describes what contributes to this for spouses and how to help combat this. For the therapist, this can be helpful in learning more if you think that a spouse may be experiencing this or to help prevent one spouse with PTSD from passing it along to their spouse.

Pincus, S. H., House, R., Christenson, J., & Adler, L. E. (2007). *The emotional cycle of deployment: A military family perspective*. Accessed November 1, 2007, <http://www.hooah4health.com/deployment/familymatters/emotionalcycle.htm>

This article explains the deployment cycle and the likely effects on both spouses and children at different ages. This is a great article to read to learn more about deployment's effects on spouses, help spouses know what to expect, etc.

Baucom, D. H., Synder, D. K., & Coop-Gordon, K. (2009). *Helping couples get past the affair: A clinician's guide*. New York: Guilford.

This book is a comprehensive approach to clinical interventions for couples who have had affairs. Their 3-stage model of "impact," "making meaning," and "moving on" is simple yet effective for couples work. The approach has forgiveness as an integral part of the treatment, whether or not the couple were to decide to reconcile. The approach has some research backing their theory.

For the couple:

Fishback, J., & Fishback, B. (2004). *Defending the military marriage*. Little Rock, AR: Family Life Publishing.

For Christian military couples, a service member and his wife wrote this Bible study to help military couples strengthen their marriages. It emphasizes communication and sexual accountability.

Snyder, D. K., Baucom, D. H., & Coop-Gordon, K. (2007). *Getting past the affair: A program to help you cope, heal and move on-together or apart*. New York: Guilford Press.

This book accompanies the Baucom (2009) book described above for clinicians. It is our highest recommendation for clinically addressing affairs.

Harley, Jr., W. F. (2001). *His needs, her needs: Building an affair-proof marriage*. Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell.

Harley explains to couples how to build relationships characterized by romance and intimacy. To do this, he outlines the 10 essential needs of men and women. Then he describes how these needs can be met.

Lange, J. (2004). *The treasure of staying connected for military couples*. Kingsport, TN: Serviam Publishers.

The wife of a sailor shares her advice on how to keep the military marriage alive. Real examples are used to illustrate how to implement the advice. The book approaches military marriage from a multi-denominational view, applicable to people from many backgrounds.

Military One Source. (2009). Retrieved May 28, 2009, from www.militaryonesource.com

This is the official website for military families that provides contact information for base resources and also information on subjects such as moving and how to prepare for deployments. The site also offers a 24-hour hot line.

National Center for PTSD. (2006). *Returning from the war zone: A guide for families of military members*. Accessed November 1, 2007, from http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/manuals/nc_manual_returnwarz_gp.html

This is a great booklet that gives advice to military couples, particularly for those dealing with redeployment, but can also be helpful for the counselor who is not familiar with the military.

[For the Spouse New to the Military:](#)

Married to the Army (2009). Retrieved April 30, 2009, from <http://www.marriedtothearmy.com>

This site has a number of links to sites about basic training, pay and benefits, deployments, moving, as well as others. There is also a link to a career website that offers advice on how to maintain a career while following the military member and a job search database.

Military spouse. (2008). Retrieved April 30, 2009, from <http://www.milspouse.com>

This site has information on deployments, relationships, family life, finances, careers, and education. There is also a forum to ask questions and a glossary that defines military terms.

[For the Couple who is Having Problems Forgiving:](#)

Worthington, E. L., Jr. (2003). *Forgiving and reconciling: Bridges to wholeness and hope*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

This book helps those who struggle with forgiveness. It reviews the process of forgiveness and explains how to progress through forgiveness to reach reconciliation.

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