



Ease Deployment Anxiety

What to expect and how to manage when duty to country means separation from family

Last year, a 14-year-old girl at Fort Bragg, NC, made a decision that broke her father's heart.

When he returned for R&R during a lengthy deployment, his daughter refused to see him, moving across town to stay with an aunt while he was home.

"It was too sad for her. She didn't want to have any interaction with her father, knowing she'd have to say goodbye again," says Dr. Mark Pisano, a school psychologist working in Fort Bragg schools.

If you've been hurt or mystified by your family's behavior during and after a deployment, you're not alone. Pisano says Guard Soldiers often face greater challenges than their Active Duty counterparts because they lack a centralized network of military support.

Although individuals cope differently, there are common feelings. Pisano developed a "Deployment Cycle" to explain the emotions military families experience during the five stages of deployment. Here's his guide, plus tips for coping from him and Major Mindi Copop, director of the Illinois National Guard Family Program. ➔

STAGE 1

Pre-deployment

EMOTIONAL IMPACT

On average, Guard families get a couple months' notice about a deployment, Pisano says. Anxiety builds. You may not hear this from your spouse or children, but to them, you've already "left the building."

"Oftentimes, the service member becomes psychologically deployed," Pisano says. "In their mind, they're already in Afghanistan, thinking about the mission, how to connect with Soldiers, how to stay in touch with family. Even though they're physically in the house, psychologically and emotionally, they're not."

COPING STRATEGIES

Make every effort to connect with your family. "Spend personal time with each child. Before you leave, exchange a special token or gift," Pisano says.

One child whose father was deployed reached into his pocket and showed Pisano a marble. He said, "My dad has one just like it in his pocket right now!"

"That was so cool," Pisano says. "Do anything you can to make children feel connected to the deploying parent." This could be a marble exchange, or giving kids a rabbit's foot, a picture or a Daddy Doll.

Reassure your children that this is your job, and it's not their fault you're leaving. Make sure they know you'll stay in touch as much as possible. Prerecord bedtime stories for youngsters to listen to after you're gone, or search the Web with older kids for photos and maps of where you'll be going.

Guard kids can also feel isolated at school, Pisano says, so talk with teachers and principals about the upcoming deployment. "The school has to know. This has been an ongoing challenge for school psychologists and others trying to support military children with mental health."

One reason it's important to inform the school is so teachers don't misdiagnose your child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD]. "Kids having a rough time dealing with deployment will show characteristics in the classroom of being inattentive or moody, or their work will fall by the wayside, or they'll have a poor appetite. They'll put their heads down, be disconnected and daydream. On the surface, it looks like ADHD, [but that's] not what it is. Instead it is evidence that a child is struggling with the trauma and grief of their parent being deployed," he says.

STAGE 2

Deployment

EMOTIONAL IMPACT

You've just left. Want to know what's happening at home?

"The family has an initial shock," Pisano says. "Reality



DEPLOYMENT SUPPORT

These resources can help you and your family.

- **Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program:** Connects Guard members and their families with resources before, during and after deployment. RealWarriors.net/guardreserve/reintegration/yellowribbon.php
- **Strong Bonds:** Chaplain-led program to build military family relationships. StrongBonds.org
- **Military OneSource:** Confidential DoD-funded program providing free, comprehensive information on every aspect of military life to Guard members and their families. MilitaryOneSource.mil
- **ZERO TO THREE:** Supports parents with nurturing early development and addressing infants' and toddlers' issues during deployment. ZeroToThree.org
- **USO Military Family Programs:** Provides a list of child and family programs, including summer camps and caregiver conferences. USO.org/about-us/the-organization/uso-military-family-programs.aspx
- **For children and youth programs:** Contact your state's National Guard Family Program, which offers education, support and resources for Guard parents and children. JointServicesSupport.org/FP

Source: MAJ Mindi Coop, Illinois National Guard Family Program director

hits that the Soldier is not coming back for a while. Even parents who have been through [multiple] deployments say this every time."

That reality results in "a severe feeling of loneliness," he says. As the months go by, if the nondeployed parent isn't managing the deployment well, the children probably aren't either. "When we have a kid struggling in our school, we know we have to check with the mom or dad. The anchor for the child is the nondeployed spouse."

COPING STRATEGIES

It typically takes three to four weeks for a family to feel "stable" after your departure. Being able to keep track of your travels will help them feel connected to you.

Your children can create books about their lives. Pisano did this with a struggling third-grader. Each day, the child would dictate his activities to him. "I said, 'Just pretend you're talking to your dad; I'll type everything you say on my computer, and we'll create a book you can give him when he gets home.' His father was very emotional when he got the book; it was a real treasure."

Spouses can ease their anxiety by being cautious about social media, Coop says. Rather than spending lots of time on Facebook, where rumors and posts can feed stress, she encourages virtual Family Readiness Groups (ArmyFRG.org), which are vetted by the Army.

STAGE 3

Sustainment

EMOTIONAL IMPACT

"Sustainment" is the duration of your time away. No matter how many times you're deployed, the process doesn't get any easier for your family.

"Mostly that's because we don't know if he'll come back alive or injured or with significant PTSD. That's the hardest part besides the loneliness—not knowing what will happen," Pisano says. "The anxiety and fear ... are unparalleled, and every time they leave, they come back different."

Regarding marriage, Coop has seen infidelity during deployments on both sides. "People who don't make it have problems before the deployment. Deployment exacerbates it. If you're not strong going into a deployment, it can test your marriage," she says.

COPING STRATEGIES

The key word here is "routine."

"This is something Guard families have to establish as quickly as possible," Pisano says. Dad or Mom "is gone and used to be the one to dump the trash. Who will do it now? Divide the responsibilities. Your family should renegotiate who does what."

For marriages, Coop recommends connecting with Strong Bonds, a chaplain-led relationship and intimacy program that can help you work on your marriage before and after a deployment.

STAGE 4

R&R

EMOTIONAL IMPACT

Guard Soldiers on long-term deployments in hostile areas may be plucked from the war zone and sent home for 15–20 days of rest and relaxation. It's a huge event, almost as big as the initial separation or the post-deployment reunion, Pisano says.

"It sounds like a wonderful thing—and it is—but the problems triggered by returning for a short period are incredible," he says. That's because it's difficult for Soldiers to blend in psychologically when they still have to return to the battlefield. Your kids have been anticipating doing lots of things with you, while you just need time to relax.

"The kids think something is wrong with them because the returning service member doesn't want to be with them. If the family is not prepped for the challenges, it's not going to go well," Pisano says.

COPING STRATEGIES

Patience. That's how to get through this stage.

Don't try to do too much. Instead of planning a vacation or a slate of activities for the day after the Soldier gets home, allow them to rest for three to four days, and make sure children know about this rest period prior to their return.

STAGE 5

Reunion and Reintegration

EMOTIONAL IMPACT

The same anxiety takes place as for the R&R, but this is for the long haul. "When the Soldier returns, there is a real renegotiation of responsibilities," Pisano says. "The family has been functioning without the Soldier, and typically, they're managing. There will be a bit of resentment with the spouse." That person will think, "I'm glad my partner's here, but here comes the stress of changing routine again." The Soldier's psychological well-being, he says, often dictates the ease/difficulty of reintegration with family and society.

COPING STRATEGIES

Realize that reunion is a process, not an event. Typically, it takes upwards of eight to 10 months for reintegration to go through full cycle. Discuss expectations before the Soldier comes home, and understand that each family member may need something different. Spouses should be aware that Soldiers need time to readjust.

Coop cautions that some relationship problems might not surface for months after a Soldier's return. "You're still in the honeymoon phase when they come home," she says. If the Guard makes special services available to you, like a PTSD support group or a Strong Bonds retreat, she says, take full advantage. **GX**