



A Program of Wheeler Clinic

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RETURNING FROM THE WAR ZONE

Information for Families, Friends and Military Members

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

HOMECOMING

The days and weeks after a homecoming from war can be filled with excitement, relief, and many other feelings. Following the veterans return from overseas duty, the entire family will go through a *transition*.

Reintegration following homecoming involves taking time for the veteran, family and friends to become reacquainted. Talk and listen to one another to restore trust, support and closeness. There may be times when you and your returning veteran feel stress, uncertainty, concern, and distance from one another. It may feel as if the service member is still fighting a war, rather than truly being home. All of these emotions are a normal part of readjustment following deployment to a war zone. At first, these reactions may be difficult to deal with. Some service members have real difficulties and struggle during their transitions back home. Because many service members face redeployment back to overseas duty, it is especially important to address these difficulties during this time back home. Learning more can help your family cope.

A common expectation is that the family will be exactly the same as it was before the deployment. However, during deployment families naturally change. Children have grown and spouses have taken on new responsibilities. New friendships may have formed. War zone exposure is a life changing experience for those deployed. Understanding what you might expect will help with the transition back to civilian life.

Understand that service members respond to experiences in a war zone in different ways. Some service members report feeling upset or "keyed up" even after they return home. Some may continue to think about events that occurred in combat, sometimes even acting as if back in a combat situation. These are common "combat stress reactions" (also called acute stress reactions) that can last for days or weeks and are a normal reaction to combat experiences.

Below is a list of common reactions:

Behavioral Reactions	Physical Reactions	Emotional Reactions
Trouble concentrating	Trouble sleeping, overly tired	Feeling nervous, helpless, or fearful
Jumpy & easily startled	Stomach upset, trouble eating	Sad, guilty, rejected or abandoned
Being on guard, always alert	Headaches and sweating when thinking of the war	Edginess, easily upset or annoyed
Bad dreams or flashbacks	Lack of exercise, poor diet or health care	Experiencing shock, being numb, unable to feel happy
Avoiding people or places related to the trauma	Rapid heartbeat or breathing	Feeling hopeless about the future
Work or school problems	Too much drinking, smoking, or drug use	Irritable or angry
Loss of intimacy or feeling withdrawn, detached and disconnected	Other health problems becoming worse	Not trusting others, being over controlling, having lots of conflicts

Most service members, who experience combat stress reactions like those listed above, will recover naturally over time.

(continued)

Others continue to struggle with memories of their combat experiences and their reactions. Research still does not tell us why some people struggle while others do not. BUT it is NOT because of any type of weakness. Combat stress reactions may create problems in relationships with partners, other family members, or friends; troubles at work; or troubles handling money. If the service member continues to experience these reactions and if it begins to cause problems for them or their family, it may become post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Other operational stress injuries can also develop.

EXPERIENCES IN THE WAR ZONE

During deployment, service members may have taken part in missions and operations that exposed them to very stressful or often life threatening experiences. It is important for families to understand what they have been through. Service members may have been shot at, seen the death or injury of American personnel or of civilian and enemy combatants, or even witnessed the death or injury of people they knew. IEDs (improvised explosive devices) are common; many convoys deal with piles of garbage blowing up just as they pass by. Many troops are on alert 24/7. Service members may have been injured as a result of bombings, blasts, weapons or accidents, maybe even surviving with very serious injuries. All of these experiences and others occurred in a hot, dry desert environment without the normal comforts of home.

The military teaches service members skills that help them to survive and succeed in war. These same skills can cause problems at home. For example, secretiveness and control are very important in the war zone; however, communication and sharing the decision-making are necessary for good family relations.

EXPECTATIONS ABOUT HOMECOMING

Families often want to hold barbecues and big welcome home parties for their loved one when they return. The service member often has mixed feelings about returning home because they now face a completely different day-to-day life than they have grown used to. Relaxing may be what they want, not a big party. Reworking "who does what", who handles the money now, who takes the kids to school, who mows the lawn; these issues will need to be dealt with. Make sure that all family members talk to each other about what they want and expect, even before returning home.

EFFECTS ON FAMILY LIFE

One challenge everyone faces is **adjusting to changes in the family**; both the person returning from war and the family left behind have changed. War experiences have changed the person who was deployed. Children have grown and developed new skills in school. Spouses or other family members may have taken on more responsibilities and control in the family. Everyone needs to work and get used to a new family pattern that works for all involved. Be aware that problems in relationships that were already there before deployment may return.

Returning service members need to relearn how to feel safe, comfortable and trusting again with family members. This involves getting reacquainted and communicating with spouses, children, parents, friends, coworkers and others.

Veterans:

Remember that family members also need your understanding. While you were deployed they might have had to take on extra responsibilities, had to deal with problems without your help, or felt lonely. It also takes time for them to readjust.

The service member should **not feel forced to talk about his or her combat experiences**. They should be given opportunities to talk about the war and their reactions and feelings with people who will not be judgmental or negative. You should join in these discussions if you are invited to do so. Service members may be more comfortable talking with their buddies about their time at war. It may be helpful for the service member to speak with a counselor about his or her experiences, or about any concerns about sharing the details of war experiences with family members. Family and friends need to remember not to take signs of withdrawal personally and to remember to be patient. Recovery takes time.

Sometimes the everyday stress of family life can feel overwhelming for the service member. He or she may become more irritated or react more strongly to common family issues. Anger and aggression are common combat stress reactions but these reactions may scare spouses and children, and even the service member. Continued angry outbursts or over-reacting to everyday situations might mean that you should get help.

Created by the experts at the National Center for PTSD, 2006

The complete guide can be viewed at : www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/manuals/GuideforFamilies.pdf