

The Deployment Spiral: Getting Through it as a Couple

When images of military couples appear in the media, we often see two stereotypical images: a weeping embrace as the spouse heads out, and an ecstatic couple reunited upon the partner's return. In real life, as military families know, reality is often a lot more complicated. Emotions about deployment may range from anger to joy to pride to frustration.

The recent and lengthy wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have not made this situation easier, bringing long and difficult seasons of deployment for millions of couples. In fact, these days, experts and family members no longer refer to deployment as a "cycle," but as a "spiral."

Living through this spiral and coping with the ups and downs it brings can be hard. However, knowledge of how couples commonly feel during deployment's phases may help.

Typically, experts consider the stages of deployment to include the following:

- *Predeployment*: The weeks or months after a unit receives notice, but before a spouse deploys.
- *Active deployment*: The time from spousal departure through the first month of deployment.
- *Sustainment*: This longest stage begins after the "active deployment" stage ends, and lasts till about a month before he or she gets back.
- *Redeployment*: This is the stage of anticipation—the month before a service member returns home.
- *Postdeployment*: A service member's return home and the time afterwards... until the spiral or cycle begins again.

More About Each Stage

Predeployment

During this stage, you and your spouse may experience feelings of denial about the reality of the deployment, followed by increased tension as the facts set in. The service member may become emotionally involved with preparation for service, while the spouse may feel somewhat abandoned.

Did you know that it's common to argue or fight during this time? This may actually be a way to avoid dealing with feelings of sadness about the upcoming separation. Each of you may also begin to distance yourselves from the other as a defense mechanism.

To cope: Make sure both of you have a support system in place for when times are hard. Talk about how you will stay in touch, and what your expectations and wishes are as far as what happens when you are apart. (Consider special touches like handwritten letters or voice recordings.) Be aware that tension is normal. Don't put too much pressure on yourselves to achieve "perfect" last experiences together.

Active deployment

This is a time of major adjustment for both spouses. Everything will probably feel out of whack and a bit out of control. Both of you are still figuring out your new realities, and bumps in the road and mixed emotions are inevitable.

To cope: Practice patience—this stage is short, but tumultuous. Believe in your resilience as a couple and family. Start practicing the habits of keeping in touch that you planned during predeployment.

Sustainment

During this stage, both of you will start to "settle in" to your current roles and find your balance. Situations will feel more familiar, and it will seem less strange to be away from each other. The spouse left behind will begin to discover that he or she is able to manage quite well without the other partner, and will experience feelings of pride and competence. However, some anxiety and sadness will linger for both of you.

To cope: Keep in mind that communication, while important, can also present challenges. It may be helpful to spend time focusing on past happy memories and the great things you will experience together in the future. To share small current details, try writing them down each day and emailing or mailing them when you have a chance. Remember that the servicemember may have a hard time keeping in touch.

Redeployment

Now you're both anticipating being together again. Although you're excited, most people are also pretty nervous. (*What will my spouse think of how I've been managing while they've been gone? How will my partner, home, and kids have changed when I return?*) There may be worry that the relationship will be different, or that the spouse will feel like a "stranger."

To cope: Remind yourself to take things slow, and to be okay with some differences.

Postdeployment

You're finally reunited! So why do things feel so weird? Postdeployment may look great from the outside, but experienced military couples know it can actually be pretty tricky at first.

The most important thing is patience. The returned spouse will need time to get used to civilian society again, especially if his or her experience was traumatic. If the servicemember has been injured or is suffering from combat-related stress, there is even more to deal with. And it will take a while to rebalance home responsibilities, reestablish lines of communication, and simply get to know each other again.

To cope: It's often best to keep things quiet at first, postponing big parties and gatherings in favor of quiet evenings at home together. If there are children in the house, they'll also need time to readjust to having the parent back and accepting discipline from him or her.

Getting Support

During all these stages, don't forget to draw on the many resources available to you from the government and in your community. Military and family life counselors, Family Support Programs, and other support programming from the Department of Defense should help make this stressful experience a little easier. Your own support network of friends, informal groups, and religious counselors can also help.

At times, you may want or need assistance from an individual or couples counselor as well. In such cases, you might want to check out therapistlocator.net (<http://therapistlocator.net>) to find a counselor near you.

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