

COMING BACK HOME



Dealing with the military deployment of a loved one puts stress on the entire family. Months, and sometimes years, are spent looking forward to your loved one's return, but the hardships don't necessarily end upon homecoming.

The Build Up——

■The period between news of homecoming and arrival is an emotional time filled with both excitement and anticipation. Homecomings, however, don't always go as planned – young children may be uncomfortable around a parent who has been away, flights may be delayed, and the service person returning home may be too exhausted from the trip to notice or fully appreciate the preparations you have made.

In order to avoid disappointment, try not to put pressure on yourself to create a perfect event. Keep your plans simple and flexible.

The Transition——

■While the early days after the return of your loved one can resemble a honeymoon, everyday struggles, old problems, and new issues brought about by the deployment are likely to emerge after a few weeks. This is normal. It doesn't mean that you've failed.

Managing expectations is critical to the long term success of your relationship. The transition back to "normal" life will be hard at times, but with education and preparation you can manage and overcome these difficulties

The Road to Victory——

1. Expect change. Your loved one may have experienced things that have reshaped his or her outlook, and he or she may not react or behave in the same manner you are accustomed to. Avoid commenting negatively on these changes and instead focus on reestablishing familiar routines to help smooth the transition.

2. Reassure your loved one's importance. A spouse who has been away may feel hurt that you've managed so well without him or her. Be sure to reinforce not only how much you've missed your spouse, but also the important role he or she plays in everyone's lives.

3. Don't be too structured: Your loved one may need a few weeks of "down time" to regain his or her equilibrium. Go slowly and be sure not to over schedule the loved one's time. You may need to play the role of gatekeeper to keep visits from extended family and friends from overwhelming your spouse.

4. Carve out alone time: You may find it awkward to be with your spouse at first. Give yourself time away from family, friends, and children to just be alone and get to know one another again. If you have children, make sure your spouse is able to spend individual time with each one of them to reestablish bonds.

5. Help reestablish parental authority. Children who have adjusted to life without one parent may be resistant to submitting to the returning parent's authority. Reinforce your spouse's equal parental authority to your children by presenting a united front on discipline and decision making.

6. Watch your budget: Returning service members may want to celebrate with a spending spree. Be careful to maintain reasonable spending levels. Financial hardship can strain an already difficult situation.

7. Communicate about responsibilities: Returning to a sharing of responsibilities and duties can be difficult. One partner may either find it difficult to give up control or instead want to hand over duties before the homecoming spouse is ready. Don't force immediate changes. Discuss the sharing of responsibilities with your partner and plan for a gradual transition.

8. Be an available listener: If your partner experienced warfare during deployment, unresolved emotions and issues may still exist. Reassure your partner that you are available to listen to anything he or she wants to tell you, but don't push the time frame or ask repeated and detailed questions about the experience.

9. Exercise patience: Getting back to normalcy takes time. Give yourself, your children, your spouse, and your relationship time to settle into a comfortable existence. Everyone will struggle at times. Be gentle and try to avoid judgmental criticism.

10. Maintain vigilance: Be aware of excessive drug or alcohol use, signs of depression or symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and be prepared to intervene immediately if you sense a problem. For additional help and educational resources visit www.sgtmoms.com, www.militaryonesource.com or www.nmfa.org. Never hesitate to seek professional help if you aren't sure how to handle a situation.