

Reintegration of Service Members into Family Life Following Deployment

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*Data collection procedures were approved by
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Rationale

The post-deployment transition is a time of considerable turmoil for service members, and the challenges of readjusting to family life may take a toll on both the mental health and the relational health of military personnel. The goal of this project was to document the communication issues and challenges that service members experience during the six months following reunion after deployment.

Method and Sample

We collected responses to an online questionnaire from March to July 2010. The sample contained 220 service members ($n = 185$ males, 35 females) living in 27 states who had returned home from deployment within the past six months. Most service members were affiliated with the U.S. Army (29%) or the National Guard (64%); others were affiliated with the Air Force (3%), the Navy (3%), or the Marines (2%). Individuals received a \$15 gift card from Target or Walmart for participating.

Noteworthy Findings

Data analysis for the study is currently ongoing, but two major findings are apparent at this point. First, participants identified a number of topics that they avoid talking about upon reunion. (Table 1 contains a list of avoided topics and examples.) These data show that military couples may have difficulty sharing information about topics such as dangers faced during deployment, the potential for future deployments, the service member's mental health, the status of the couple's relationship, infidelity, and money during the post-deployment transition.

Other findings indicated that people were dissatisfied with their relationship when they (i) avoided talking about the relationship with their partner, and (ii) judged communicating with their partner to be threatening to themselves and their relationship. These results imply that military

couples who feel uncomfortable talking openly about relationship issues may be less satisfied with their partnership.

Future Research

The next step in this program of research is to track military couples experiencing the transition over time. We have secured a seed grant from the Family Resiliency Center at the University of Illinois to conduct an online survey of military couples once per month for the first three consecutive months after reunion.

Data collection is scheduled to begin in October of 2010 and to conclude when 100 couples have completed all three questionnaires. Couples will be recruited by circulating announcements to family readiness officers, chaplains, and military personnel in the state of Illinois and across the country. Gift cards will be offered as an incentive for participation.

We welcome any comments you have about our research or any ideas you have about recruiting participants for the upcoming study. Please contact Dr. Leanne Knobloch at knobl@illinois.edu or Dr. Jennifer Theiss at jtheiss@rutgers.edu.

Table 1: *Topics Service Members Avoid Discussing with their Romantic Partner during the Transition*

1. *Classified military information:* confidential details about the mission, military operations, personnel, discipline issues
 2. *Dangers faced during deployment:* combat action, near-death experiences, dangerous convoy trips, enemy attacks, close calls
 3. *Deaths or injuries during deployment:* casualties from the war, friends who died in combat, diseases or injuries that the service member sustained during deployment
 4. *Service member's feelings and mental health:* anxiety, anger, depression, post-traumatic stress, loneliness, fear of the future
 5. *Romantic and family relationships:* feeling disconnected from the family, household stressors, the family's plans for the future, the couple's future together
 6. *Extra-dyadic activity:* previous romantic relationships, ex-partners, sexual temptations while deployed, infidelity, sex, pornography
 7. *Money:* financial problems, spending too much money, difficulty following a budget
 8. *Time spent apart during deployment:* day-to-day experiences during deployment, routine activities during the time apart, family events that the service member missed out on
 9. *Future deployments:* the possibility of subsequent deployment
 10. *Politics and world news:* current events, politics, media coverage of the military
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