The Impact of Deployment and Combat Stress on Families and Children Part 2: Enhancing Resilience

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Section 1: Introduction

About This Course

Welcome to Part 2 of The Impact of Deployment and Combat Stress on Families and Children.

As mentioned in Part 1 of this course, since 2001 there have been over 2.4 million deployments in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

With the demands from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as humanitarian and peacekeeping missions, the number of Service members and their families who have endured multiple deployments is unprecedented.

Greater than half of all Service members who deploy leave behind spouses and/or children.

Approximately 2 million children have experienced a parental deployment in support of OEF and OIF with an estimated 220,000 children with at least one parent deployed at present (Bergdahl, 2013).

Being able to assist children, couples, and families in successfully adapting to the challenges and adversity presented by deployment is critical for mental health providers working with this population.

The goal of this course is to introduce you to some general information regarding resilience in families and, specifically, how to increase resiliency in couples and children negotiating the challenge of deployment.

It is highly recommended that you take Part 1 of this course prior to taking Part 2. Also, if you are not familiar with the military, it is highly recommended that you take the course “Military Cultural Competence” prior to taking this course.

Learning Objectives

After you have completed this course, you should be able to:

• Describe the concept of resiliency in families.

• Summarize general strategies that promote resiliency in couples and children.
Discuss at least three specific skills to promote healthy adjustment for families throughout the deployment cycle.

Section 2. Understanding Resilience in Military Families

What Is Resilience?

Before beginning the discussion of how to promote resilience in military families, it is important that you understand the concept of resiliency. While there are many working definitions of “resiliency,” in general most incorporate two elements that include:

1. Exposure to an adverse situation or traumatic event, and
2. Successful adaption to the situation or circumstances.

In other words, when a person is presented with adversity or challenges, resilience is their ability to “bounce back” or overcome and continue to show healthy development and adjustment.

In this course, the “adverse situation” is having a family member deploy.

How Do You Promote Resilience?

When working with families negotiating the challenge of deployment, it is always important to remember that the concept of “resilience” includes a dynamic relationship between individual traits and environmental factors.

A first step for you is to identify the intrinsic factors (individual competencies) that family members have that promote or impede adjustment. The next step is for you to identify the external and situational factors that can impact resiliency.

Once you get a sense of the biopsychosocial make-up of the family, this will allow you maximal points of entry to promote resilience.

Intrinsic:
- Self-efficacy
- Coping skills
- Cognitive ability
- Temperament
- Personality

External Factors:
- Social support
- Safety of environment
- Quality of parenting/parental warmth (for children)
- Quality of work or school environment
- Quality of community

Risk and Resiliency Factors Reviewed

In Part 1 of this course you reviewed resiliency and risk factors that may promote or impede family functioning during deployment.

While reviewing these factors, you also should consider which are intrinsic and which are external.

Also, think about how you as a provider could increase or decrease the impact of each.

Key factors associated with family resilience and risk include:

Resiliency:
- Family readiness (preparedness) for deployment
- Active coping styles
- “Making meaning” of the deployment situation
- Strong community or social support
- Acceptance of military lifestyle
- Optimism
- Self-reliance
- Flexibility of gender roles
- Use of rituals and routines
- Genetic determinants & biomarkers

(Cicchetti, 2010; DoD, 2010; Hammer, Cullen, Marchand, & Dezsofi, 2006; J-MHAT 7, 2011; Masten & Narayan, 2012; Sheppard, Malatras, & Israel, 2010; Weins & Boss, 2006)

Risk Factors:
- Rigid coping style
- History of family dysfunction/discard or behavioral health problems
- Young families
- Families with foreign-born spouses
- Families experiencing first military separation
- Reserve Component (RC) families
- Pregnant spouses
- Families with young children
- Families with special needs/disabled children
- New to duty location
- Families of junior enlisted or lower pay grade
- Single parent families
- Dual career families
- Multiple deployments
- Lack of community or social support
- Deployment-related traumatic brain injuries (TBI)
- Psychological Health Issues (e.g., PTSD)
- Genetic determinants & biomarkers


Keeping these factors in mind can help you to identify families that may be more or less at risk for poor adjustment.

Scope of This Course

While you may be aware that many family members are impacted by deployment (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters, etc.), the focus of this course will be on spouses and children.

Also noteworthy are single parents and blended families whose unique challenges are not discussed specifically. However, the tips and skills presented in this course may still be applied as applicable.

Meet the Lopez Family

To better illustrate how to promote resiliency in military families we introduce the Lopez Family. You will follow the Lopez family throughout the deployment cycle and apply strategies as you go.

MSgt Brenda Lopez is a 42 year old female on Active Duty in the Air Force. Her spouse, Eddie, is 45 years old and is an electrician. They have two children, a son, Luke, age 14 and a daughter, Clara, age 7. The Lopez family lives in Texas where MSgt Lopez has been stationed at Lackland Air Force Base for 1.5 years.

MSgt Lopez is the NCOIC (Non Commissioned Officer in Charge) of the Pediatric Clinic at Wilford Hall Ambulatory Surgical Center (WHASC) Lackland AFB and was recently notified that she will be deploying for 6 months to Afghanistan in approximately one month. MSgt Lopez has deployed previously but not in the past 5 years.

The family PCS’ed (moved) to Lackland from Germany where they were stationed for 3 years. Luke and Clara are in the 8th and 2nd grades respectively.

You’ll continue to gather information on each member of the Lopez family as you progress through the course.
Promoting Resilience in Couples and Children

In this section you will review models and general strategies that you can use to enhance relationships for couples and promote resiliency in children.

These models and strategies will then be applied to recommendations that you can use for working with families in specific stages of the deployment cycle.

You will start by discussing couples.

Resiliency in Couples

In general, families, including spouses, of Service members have been found to be a fairly resilient group of people who manage stressors and adapt to difficult circumstances.

As mentioned in Part 1 of this course, there have been several studies done on marital satisfaction among military Service members, though findings have proven inconsistent. Karney and Crown (2007) found some evidence that suggested that marital dissatisfaction increases with the number and length of deployments. Regardless of the mounting obligations that military families face, though, their rates of marriage dissolution are comparable to those of the general population.

Also mentioned in Part 1 of this course is the DoD’s 2011 demographic report stating that:

- Although “all Service branches have seen an increase in divorces compared to 2000, the Army has had the greatest increase in percentage of divorces (+1.5%), followed by the Navy (+1.3%).”
- 86% of respondents reported being “very happy” or “happy” in their relationship compared to 14% reporting being either “unhappy” or “very unhappy.”
- 68% of respondents reported working out arguments with “little” or “no difficulty” compared to 32% reporting having “some” or “great difficulty.”

Military relationships get “put to the test” repeatedly due to military specific demands such as moving frequently, separations due to training and long working hours, and ultimately by deployments (and now multiple deployments).

As demonstrated here, these couples have usually negotiated many challenges - some better than others.

Identify Positive Coping Strategies

When working with Military spouses or couples during the deployment cycle it is important that you become familiar with the positive coping strategies that they have used in the past. Identifying and building on their strengths is your key to their success.

Assessing their strengths and problems associated with previous challenges will provide you with specific areas to target during deployment.
- What kinds of adverse situations have they successfully coped with in the past?
- What skills did they utilize to cope with this situation?
- What was helpful?
- What would they do differently?

**Strategies for Promoting Resilient Couples**

While deployment itself is a specific stressor that military couples face, some of the more general strategies used to enhance relationships still apply.

In this section you will review several Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) concepts in order to utilize some additional tools to help promote resilience in couples.

Some of these strategies can be applied pre- and post-deployment with the couple together, while other strategies may need to be used more creatively when the couple is geographically separated.

Later in this course, you will see how you can apply some of these strategies at each stage of the deployment cycle.

**What Is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?**

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a structured, collaborative, present-oriented therapy that is based on the idea that there is a dynamic relationship between an individual’s thoughts, behaviors, and feelings. In CBT the provider and client examine how unhelpful thoughts (cognitions) and behaviors can negatively impact how an individual feels and functions.

Targeting specific negative thinking patterns and behaviors (or absence of behaviors) helps improve mood and functioning. **CBT is an empirically supported treatment for many disorders and has a large evidence base for promoting resilience in couples.**

**Cognitive Behavior Therapy**

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is a structured, collaborative, present-oriented therapy that is based on the idea that there is a dynamic relationship between one’s thoughts, behaviors, and feelings.

**Introduction to Cognitive Behavior Therapy Strategies**

Again, by using CBT the provider and client examine how unhelpful thoughts (cognitions) and behaviors can negatively impact how an individual feels and functions.
Remember that targeting specific negative thinking patterns and behaviors (or absence of behaviors) helps improve mood and functioning.

You will now review the specific CBT strategies that are used with couples including:

**Cognitive Distortions**

**Communication Training**

**Problems Solving**

**Pleasant Activities**

**Cognitive Distortions**

Cognitive distortions are described as errors in thinking that often lead to negative feelings.

In other words, HOW you think about something that happened (your interpretation) has a direct impact on how you feel about the situation, the person, and yourself.

In the context of couples’ therapy, erroneous or unhelpful thoughts about the spouse or their behaviors can result in negative feelings and actions toward the spouse.

Reciprocal negative interpretations, emotions, and actions from that spouse then start a dangerous spiral for the couple.

Helping couples to identify these cognitive distortions and replace them with more balanced interpretations does the following:

- Stops the downward spiral
- Promotes a more positive relationship

**Examples of Cognitive Distortions**

Beck (1967) originally defined cognitive distortions, and Burns (1980) renamed and further developed the terms.

For the purposes of this course, you will review several of these errors in thinking with some examples on how it may apply to couples.

1. **Arbitrary inference** - Coming to a conclusion that something is true without the facts or evidence to support it. For example, one partner thinks that their spouse/partner has been out with friends just because they came home 2 hours later than expected.
2. **Emotional reasoning** - Someone bases their thinking on what they feel is true. If you feel it is true, it must be true. For example, if one partner feels that the other is angry with
them, then it must be true.
3. Overgeneralization - Taking one situation and generalizing. For example, one partner tells the other that they never do the laundry because they didn’t help that weekend.
4. Personalization - Taking external events personally. For example, if a wife calls her husband and he does not pick up the phone she thinks, “He doesn’t want to talk to me.”
5. Dichotomous thinking - This error in thinking has been called all-or-nothing thinking, black-and-white thinking, or polarized thinking. The situation is viewed in two different categories. For example, when a husband is discussing his work duties with his wife and she gets a term wrong, he thinks “she never will understand what I go through.”
6. Mind reading - Thinking that you know what is going on in the mind of another person. For example, a partner/spouse thinks, “She’s thinking that I can’t handle the household without her.”

Communication Training

Effective expression of thoughts and feeling can enhance a relationship.

It’s important to remember that communication can be both verbal and nonverbal (e.g., eye rolls, walking away).

According to Dr. Frank Dattilio, the author of *Cognitive-Behavior Therapy with Couples and Families: A Comprehensive Guide for Clinicians*, strategies can be used to promote effective communication.

**Click on the strategies below for some effective ideas:**

- Speak attentively
- Ask meaningful questions
- Do not over-speak
- Accept silence
- Avoid cross examination

Communication Training

In addition to the verbal and nonverbal strategies, research conducted by Dr. John Gottman underscores that couples who were considering divorce showed more negative than positive interactions. He identified four specific negative interactions that can be targeted and reduced:

1. Criticism: This is when a complaint about something specific becomes more global and general. For example, a partner is told that they are messy because the trash was not taken out that evening.
2. Contempt: This type of communication often exemplifies a sense of sarcasm and/or mockery. For example, as the couple is discussing their childcare responsibilities, one
partner says to the other, “Let's see you handle being home with the three kids for more than two hours.”

3. Defensiveness: This type of communication is used when the listener feels verbally or emotionally attacked and protects themselves by denying responsibility and possibly counter-attacking with criticism or complaint. For example, one partner tells the other, “Don’t you dare blame me, I’m sure you’ve done the same thing in the past.”

4. Stonewalling: The listener puts up a wall between them self and the speaker, and is perceived to be emotionally detached. For example, the listener walks away when the speaker is talking about a specific issue.

Communication Training

Assessing the couple’s communication strengths and pitfalls is a good first step.

What strategies do they need to hone? What negative interactions do they need to notice and replace?

How can you help the couple apply these strategies throughout the deployment cycle?

Problem Solving

Problem solving can be a collaborative approach that the couples can utilize to promote a sense of togetherness and empowerment. Both partners are given the opportunity to voice their thoughts, feelings, and concerns.

Using the CBT model, you as the provider can model problem solving skills through verbal instruction and in-session practice.

- Instruct the couple to define a specific problem. If each partner comes up with a different problem, help them negotiate the one they would like to work on together.
- Have the couple identify possible solutions to their identified problem.
- Encourage the couple to examine advantages and disadvantages of the identified solutions.
- Once the couple selects a reasonable solution, encourage them to apply the solution and examine its effectiveness.

Scheduling Pleasurable Activities

As mentioned earlier, behaviors (or the absence of behavior) directly impact how individuals think and feel.

When individuals or couples are feeling stressed, they tend to focus all of their energy on the “have to’s” in life and stop doing things that are fun, rewarding, and enjoyable.

The absence of pleasurable activities results in negative moods and interactions.

Helping couples to identify and schedule pleasurable activities can improve the quality of their relationship, especially during times of stress.

Encourage both partners to make a list of activities they enjoy (e.g., running, writing,
painting, etc.).

Are there items on the list that they enjoy doing together?

Have the couple schedule a time to do one fun activity together until the next session. Find out if the couple participated in the activity. What surprised them? What did they enjoy? What did they not enjoy? What would they have done differently?

Case Example

Now that you have a good understanding of some CBT strategies to enhance relationships, apply what you've learned to the case example, the Lopez family.

In one of your first meetings with the Lopez family, you review common negative interactions that couples often have (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling). As homework, you ask the couple to record statements made to one another that started an argument. They return the following week with the statements below.

1. When Mr. Lopez begins to discuss the lack of intimacy between he and his wife, Mrs. Lopez starts focusing on her phone and emails. Stonewalling: This is when the listener puts up a wall between them self and the speaker, and is perceived to be emotionally detached.
2. Mr. Lopez said, “You never want to take the kids to school, you just don’t care about anything.” Criticism: This is when a complaint about something specific becomes more global and general.
3. Mrs. Lopez said, “I’m not getting upset, you’re the one getting upset.” Defensiveness: This type of communication is used when the listener feels verbally or emotionally attacked and protects them self by denying responsibility, and possibly counter-attacking with criticism or complaint.
4. Mr. Lopez states, “It’s all about you” in a sarcastic tone. Contempt: This type of communication often exemplifies a sense of sarcasm and/or mockery.

Resiliency in Children

Now that you’ve reviewed some general strategies for enhancing relationships, you will move on to understanding and promoting resiliency in children.

The concept of resiliency is one that has been studied extensively in children and adolescents.

The good news is that youth, in general, are a robust group of individuals who “bounce back” from many different types of challenges.

As mentioned in Part 1 of this course, military children, like their parents, appear especially adept at managing change and dealing with adversity.

You could say that military children, by the nature of growing up in a military family, have the opportunity to “flex their resiliency muscles” (or practice resiliency skills) often.
Resiliency in Children, Continued

As with military couples, getting a better understanding of the skills these youth have utilized in the past can help you to develop strategies to bolster them during the deployment process.

What positive things have these children done to cope in the past?
What helped them negotiate these types of challenges previously?

Some of the unique challenges they regularly face include:

- Frequent, unpredictable moves
- Change of schools/friends
- Parental absence due to training obligations
- Parent(s) with long working hours
- Parent(s) with potentially dangerous jobs

A Model of Resilience for Children

While a working definition is helpful in understanding the concept of resiliency, having a model of how to promote resilience in children helps the provider identify areas to assess and target.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg have outlined 7 key principles for promoting resilience in children and adolescence called The 7 C’s of Resilience.

7 C’s of Resilience

These “C’s” include Confidence, Competence, Connection, Character, Contribution, Coping and Control. Assessing each “C” can help identify areas of strength, as well as areas that can be fortified further to promote resiliency.

The “tips” for coping throughout the deployment cycle presented later in this course will be anchored in this model as appropriate.

You will review each “C” individually.

- Confidence: A youth’s genuine belief in their own abilities. Confidence can be enhanced by an authentic sense of competence. Parents and other important adults can increase confidence by recognizing what a youth has done right, by seeing the “best” in them, by avoiding instilling shame, and by having positive
expectations for the youth.

- Competence: This speaks to a youth’s ability or skill, how well they can do something. Parents can promote competence by helping youth recognize what they CAN do versus what they are not achieving, and building on strengths instead of focusing on deficits. “Skills” come in many shapes and forms (e.g., educational, work, stress management, relational). As mentioned above, competence increases confidence.

- Connection: Connection, while important for adults, is critical for resilience in youth. Parents and/or other adults being there and believing in a child is essential for resilience. Feeling connection to family, the community, or other groups is extremely protective for youth faced with adversity.

- Character: These are the positive qualities, such as integrity, that serve as a moral compass for an individual. As Dr. Ginsburg points out, while confidence, competence, and connection are protective for youth, these traits alone are also held by a gang member. Helping youth build and define their character ensures their resources will be used for good.

- Contribution: Parents and other adults who express the expectation that a youth can make their home, community, or the world a better place set the stage for the child/adolescent to behave accordingly. Experiencing gratitude from others is rewarding for youth and contributes to feelings of positive self-worth.

- Coping: Helping to develop a wide range of positive coping skills is one of the easiest and most powerful ways to build resiliency. A child who has a repertoire of coping strategies to choose from will be less likely to engage in negative or destructive behaviors. Simple stress management skills like relaxation strategies, exercise, eating well, balanced thinking, and balanced activities are critical tools to use when faced with adversity. Teaching these skills can be easy but parental modeling of positive coping can be more difficult to achieve during stressful times.

- Control: While all children experience an external locus of control that is their parent(s) making decisions about where and how they live, military children experience this to a greater degree since the military and not their parents are actually in control of such decisions. Allowing or encouraging youth to see how their actions can and cannot impact events helps build self-efficacy and reduce self-blame.

(Ginsburg, 2006)

**Deployment Cycle**

In this section you will review specific strategies that can be used with families throughout the deployment cycle. Some strategies are more appropriate for couples, while others are targeted at children.

As mentioned in the first part of this course, the deployment cycle is generally broken down into 3 “stages”: pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment.

Today’s military families find themselves going through this cycle repeatedly.

You will begin by seeing some strategies that promote resiliency in couples and children.
during the pre-deployment stage.

Pre-Deployment

As mentioned in Section I of this course, the pre-deployment stage is a busy time for both Service members and their families.

During this time the Service member usually experiences an increase in training demands that often compete with demands at home to “ready” the household for their departure.

While families scramble to accomplish practical tasks prior to the Service member’s departure, they are also trying to prepare emotionally for the upcoming separation.

Pre-deployment can be a challenging and emotionally labile time for couples and children.

Mental health providers can have an important impact during this stage by helping the family establish plans to manage both the practical and emotional challenges of deployment, and possibly prevent more serious future deployment-related problems.

Tips for Coping Pre-Deployment: Couples

When working with couples in this phase of the deployment cycle, it is common to find that some individuals emotionally prepare for deployment by withdrawing from their spouses/partners in an effort to make the transition easier.

You will now review some specific things you as a provider can do with a couple during this stage.

- Encourage communication: Use the Communication Training strategies discussed earlier in this course to help the couple express their feelings and thoughts, including their concerns regarding the upcoming deployment. Help the couple to identify any negative interactions (e.g., criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling) and develop strategies to reduce these types of interactions.
- Create a communication plan: Encourage the couple to develop a communication plan. This plan may include whether they will stay in touch by telephone, e-mail, or letters, and how often they will communicate. For example, will they send emails daily, or will it be once a week? How soon do they plan to respond? How often will the spouse/partner send care packages? Also, explore with the couple how they will cope when communication is cut off due to technological difficulties or the demands of the mission (i.e., Service member unable to call or email at the set time). Identify typical cognitive distortions the spouses tend to have and help them to identify more balanced interpretations to have “at the ready” if and when these unhelpful thoughts surface during deployment.
- Help the spouse/partner identify and set personal goals: As mentioned in Part 1
of this course, a common risk factor for military spouses is loneliness. In an effort to help the spouse/partner manage the stress of being on their own, it may be helpful for them to explore pleasant activities they can engage in (i.e., take new classes, pick up new hobbies).

- **Identify a support system for the spouse/partner:** Educate yourself on the different support services available for military spouses/partners in your area. Many branches of the Service offer support in the form of social groups, counseling, or advice. Encourage the spouse/partner to find out if there are any pre-deployment activities offered by the Service member’s unit. Help the spouse/partner reach out to people who are going through or have already gone through a deployment. Military families who have already experienced a deployment may have valuable tips and advice about handling the separation.

- **Explore activities the couple can do together prior to deployment:** Help the couple explore and schedule pleasant activities they enjoy doing together and see if they can do some of those activities prior to deployment. It can be as simple as taking a bike ride together, walking, or playing a card game.

### Tips for Coping Pre-deployment: Children

Now that you’ve reviewed some ideas for couples/parents, you will learn about children.

Below are some specific ideas to review with parents prior to deployment. Note how the 7 C’s fit into some of these activities.

- **Alone time with each child before departure:** Encouraging the deploying parent to spend alone time with each child helps provide time for CONNECTION. Taking time to connect with each child, despite all other competing demands, underscores the value the parent places on this relationship. It also provides time for the deploying parent to instill CONFIDENCE (“This deployment will be hard but I know you have what it takes to get through it”), COMPETENCE (“You have many abilities like x, y, and z that are going to help the family during deployment”), CONTRIBUTION (“I’m grateful that the family can count on you to help with x, y, z during deployment”) and discuss COPING skills that both the parent and youth can use.

- **Pictures / Videos:** Encourage the family to take pictures or make videotapes of the child(ren) and deploying parent doing everyday activities. Having them document ordinary things, like getting ready for bed, reading a story, eating dinner, or playing a game and displaying them somewhere the child(ren) can easily see them promotes CONNECTION and routine. Many families also make recordings of the parent who will be deployed reading favorite stories so that children can listen to their voices when they are gone. For older children and adolescents, taking pictures of important activities that promote COMPETENCE (e.g., picture of child and deploying parent holding up difficult assignment or test), CONTRIBUTION (picture or child and deploying parent doing a chore or community service activity together), or positive COPING (picture of child and parent exercising) can serve as reminders of things that need to be kept in place during deployment.
• Keepsakes: Helping the deploying parent identify a meaningful keepsake to give each child before deployment helps promote CONNECTION. This can be a doll or animal for younger children (see Resources section for more information), or something like a watch, journal, or bracelet for older children. Essentially, the keepsake provides a tangible way for the child to relate to their deployed parent.

• Develop a communication plan: Encourage the deploying parent to discuss communication expectations with each child in a developmentally appropriate way. Getting input from an adolescent on how they would like to communicate information to the deployed parent (e.g., letters, email, voice recordings, etc.), as well as how frequently this will take place, may help them feel more in CONTROL. Also, discussing with them potential communication limitations the deployed parent might have due to operational needs, availability of equipment, etc. is important. What would be considered meaningful communication for the five year old in the family? A picture drawn by the deployed parent or a photo of their activities?

• Develop a self-care plan: Assist the family in developing a self-care plan for all family members no matter what age. What is one specific skill or activity each person is going to do to help manage their stress and mood? What is currently in their COPING repertoire? What skills could be added? If a big source of fun and stress relief for a child is wrestling with dad when he gets home from work, what will take its place when dad deploys? If mom isn’t there to take a nightly walk and talk, what can be done instead? Of equal importance is what the non-deployed parent or caregiver will do to manage stress.

Tips for Coping Pre-deployment: Children

A note on parental self-care: A study by Flake and colleagues (2009) of children with a parent deployed to OIF/OEF found that the biggest predictor of child psychosocial functioning during wartime deployment was parenting stress.

Child and parental stress was found to be double national norms.

Military, family, and community supports also were found to help mitigate family stress during periods of deployment.

Case Example: Pre-deployment

Now return to the case example and identify strategies that might benefit Luke, the Lopez’s 14-year-old son.

Luke was recently referred to you due to concerns regarding an increase in depressed mood and withdrawal from his family.

During your first meeting with Luke you learn the following: Luke is in the 8th grade and reports disliking school and missing his friends in Germany. He states that he doesn’t feel optimistic that school will improve, and he can’t identify anyone in his class who he
really connects with.

Luke emails his friends from Germany “every day” since they are “real friends.” He states that he is sick of the military “messing things up” for him, but that he understands his mom must deploy as part of her job.

Luke reports being “bored” at school and finds this year repetitive of material he already learned in Germany. He describes school as “easy” and is getting good grades.

He is proud that he was recently made the starting running back for the 8th grade football team, but reports being “very bummed” too because his mother is his “biggest fan” and will miss all of the games. Due to his work schedule, his father cannot attend games.

Luke and his mom run together in the morning. Luke is not sure who will take her place. He’s afraid he won’t train as hard without his mother around.

Luke indicates that he and his father “bump heads” often and expressed concern that he and his dad will fight the entire deployment.

Luke speaks warmly of his younger sister and appears protective of her. He expresses concern that she will have a difficult time without their mom around.

Luke is looking forward to a camping trip with his youth group at church. He reports liking that group and feels connected to his youth group leader. He is using the money he earns doing yard work in the neighborhood to buy a good camping sleeping bag.

As Luke’s mental health provider, what are some areas you see as strengths? Complete the “Resiliency Assessment” based on the information you have so far by sorting each item into the proper category.

As Luke’s mental health provider, what are some areas you see as strengths? Review here:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Weakness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONFIDENCE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Feels good about football</td>
<td>- Doesn’t think he’ll make friends at school</td>
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<tr>
<td>- School is “easy”</td>
<td>- Mom will miss all football games, nobody to cheer him on</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>COMPETENCE</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Gets good grades</td>
<td>- “Bored” at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Athletic ability</td>
<td>- Under-stimulated</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CONNECTION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Involved in youth group at church</td>
<td>- Does not feel connected to classmates</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Keeps in touch with friends in Germany</td>
<td>- Not as connected to dad</td>
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**Deployment**

Having negotiated the pre-deployment stage, the military family now enters into the deployment stage and will be faced with the challenges associated with being physically separated from the deployed Service member.

Experiencing loneliness, managing increased demands, and concerns for the safety of a loved one are just a few of the difficulties these families face in this stage.

**Research on Long Distance Relationships (LDRs)**

You will begin by reviewing the experience that military couples face as they enter into a long distance relationship (LDR) and are confronted with the challenge of maintaining a sense of connectedness at a distance. Guldner (2003) conducted a study with 200 couples in LDRs and 200 couples in geographically close relationships, examining hundreds of different aspects of the relationships. He also followed couples in LDRs over time to examine what contributed to their break-up. Understanding these findings will help you to educate couples about long distance relationships.

Sharing the “good news” will help instill optimism that they, like many couples, can successfully manage this time apart. Moreover, laying out the “bad news” will assist you in possibly preventing more negative behaviors and outcomes.
The Good News

- Equivalent relationship satisfaction
  When compared to couples in geographically close relationships, couples in LDRs reported identical levels of relationship satisfaction, intimacy, trust, and commitment.

- No greater risk of infidelity
  Although couples in LDRs tend to worry much more about affairs than those in geographically close relationships, there was no greater risk of infidelity for couples in LDRs. Infidelity is associated with the quality of the relationship and individual personalities rather than mere opportunity.

- Successful despite distance
  No difference was found between how often couples visited each other and how likely they were to stay together.

The Bad News

- Tendency to isolate
  The extent of social support from family and friends predicts both the emotional difficulty an individual will have while separated, as well as the likelihood that the relationship will stay together.

- Difficulties communicating
  Although talking on the phone often helps couples feel connected, it can also cause some challenges. For example, partners may be judged as less sincere, they may feel misunderstood, and arguments may be more difficult to resolve.

- Feelings of mild depression
  Most people in LDRs experience some mild depression. Often, it is not severe enough to cause any significant difficulties. However, because it is a reaction to separation, it does not seem to improve with time or experience. It is recommended that individuals address this mild depression rather than wait for it to subside on its own.

- Maintaining connection
  Maintaining a sense of connection requires a great deal of effort for LDR couples. Often they are faced with the challenge of negotiating and maintaining "interrelatedness," this idea of being involved in one another’s daily activities, hopes, struggles, and general life experiences.

  (Guldner, 2003)

Tips for Coping Deployment: Couples

During the deployment stage, both the Service member and spouse/partner face different stressors and demands in their day-to-day life. Since the Service member is
downrange during this time, you will most likely be seeing the family members. Therefore, the “tips” in this section are targeted towards the partners/spouses left behind.

The following are some areas you as a provider can explore to help couples in this stage:

Review communication plan: Explore the strengths and challenges of the communication plan. What situations/communications have led to unhelpful thinking? What cognitive distortions have surfaced? How has the couple dealt with them? Assist in the continued development of balanced thinking. How is the couple dealing with negative interactions (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling)? Are they using their problem solving strategies (separately or together)?

Assess support system: Find out if a support system is implemented. Reiterate that establishing or maintaining a support network helps families cope. Often, the mere perception of a support system helps individuals cope with stressful life events.

Address concerns: Both the military and the Service member may not be able to give detailed information about the whereabouts and activities of specific units during a deployment. This may lead to rumors and gossip. Explore the spouse/partner’s concerns and encourage them to ignore rumors and to rely on official sources of information. You also may want to identify and challenge any cognitive distortions.

Self-Care: The partner/spouse may feel overwhelmed after the Service member’s departure. What does self-care look like for them (i.e., physical, mental, emotional)? Are they taking care of themselves? Do they feel that they manage their time effectively? Discuss with them the benefits of self-care. Find out if they are following up with the goals they have set for themselves for scheduled pleasant activities (i.e., volunteering, book club, taking a class). What do they like about it? What are some new things they want to try? What are barriers and solutions?
Tips for Coping Deployment: Children

As the family begins to adjust to the Service member’s absence, children/adolescents will need reassurance that life in their family, school, and community will continue as close to the “usual” routine as possible.

Parents and caregivers need to remember that change can be difficult for children and while all expectations should be for positive adjustment, some negative behaviors and “bumps” may occur.

Click on each recommendation below for some specific tips you can offer parents/caregivers:

**Allow the youth time to adjust:** Children need some downtime after the departure of a parent. Educate the non-deployed parent/caregiver that the child might experience distress initially or just seem out of sorts. Encourage parents to allow children to express themselves and to give them some space and time to adjust.

**Good communication:** Children often have a lot of questions during deployment. Honest (yet age appropriate) discussions about feelings can help ease tension and relieve concerns. Encourage parents to be available for their children should they want to talk or seek out affection (CONNECTION). Teaching parents/caregivers how to model appropriate ways to express their concerns and feelings can help them create an open environment for their children. At the same time, it is also helpful for parents to express CONFIDENCE that the family can handle this challenge.

**Reassurance that the non-deployed parent is not leaving too:** Help the non-deployed parent explain why their spouse had to go work somewhere else for a while in a developmentally appropriate way. This explanation should include a message that the deployed-parent’s leaving is not a punishment and has nothing to do with the child’s behavior. The deployed parent also can emphasize this in communication with the child as well. It is also important to have the non-deploying parent reconfirm that they plan, to the best of their ability, to stay home with the family (unless they are dual-military and might deploy themselves). Assess if the parent has noted any “clinging” behavior from the child(ren) or difficulties separating. If needed, help them to develop a plan to address separation to include such strategies as a consistent exit ritual, how to express CONFIDENCE that the child can manage the separation and a commitment to follow through on promised return times.

**Consistency and routine:** Children need to know that someone will care for them and that the family won’t fall apart because a parent is absent. They are likely feeling insecure because of all the uncertainties regarding the deployment and need a predictable routine & home life. Even if routines change during deployment, you should encourage the non-deployed parent to be as consistent as possible. Help the non-deployed parent with a plan to keep important family traditions alive. How is the family going to celebrate holidays, birthdays, and other important events? Brainstorm creative ideas to promote CONNECTION with the deployed parent such as taking videotapes/photos of events, having a child draw a picture or write a description of what happened, or setting up a phone call for special occasions if possible.
**Setting Limits:** One of the most important skills that you can teach parents to utilize is how to set limits. Educate parents that children feel more secure when they are expected to honor rules & maintain their CONTRIBUTIONS to the family (e.g., complete homework, clean bedrooms, do chores, etc.). Adolescents will most likely exercise their freedom to test limits but function best when they are held accountable and know where boundaries are (CHARACTER, CONTRIBUTION). Assist non-deployed parents in setting challenging but realistic expectations for their children and help prevent the pitfall of putting older children in surrogate parent roles. Help parents identify and articulate what the child/adolescent is doing “right” and instruct them on how to reinforce these behaviors to increase feelings of COMPETENCE in the youth.

**Healthy habits:** How is the youth COPING now that the parent has deployed? What positive things are they doing and what are any behaviors of concern? Encouraging parents to really observe their children and notice changes can help prevent more serious problems with adjustment. One role you might serve as the provider is to help the parent assess their child’s mood and functioning. Has there been a change in appetite? Is the child staying home when they usually go out and play with friends after school? Do they seem unable to concentrate on homework the way they used to? Helping to develop a family plan to maintain healthy diets and exercise and reduce sedentary or isolating activities can be helpful. Remind parents that their children are looking to them for models of how to manage stress (with actions speaking louder than words).

**Check in on communication with deployed parent:** Assess how communication is going between the family and deployed Service member. Recommend that the non-deployed parent encourage each child to send their own items (e.g., pictures, letters, schoolwork, etc.) to the deployed parent. The deployed parent also should communicate with each child individually. How is the family coping with delays in communication? How is the frequency and quality of communication? Do further ground rules need to be established to make the most of the time the family gets to talk?

**Track the time:** “How many more days until mommy comes home?” can be difficult for a parent to manage on a daily basis. Help the family identify developmentally appropriate ways to track the time until the deployed parent returns. This will help the child feel more in CONTROL of the situation. Some popular strategies include:

- Marking off the days on a calendar
- Filling a jar with chocolate kisses and giving each child a “kiss” from their deployed parent until the jar is empty and they return (# of kisses = # of days deployed). This also may be considered a CONNECTION strategy.
- Making a paper chain and tearing off a chain each day
- Filling a jar with little notes from the deployed parent and reading one each day. This also may be considered a CONNECTION strategy.

NOTE: With the ever-changing length of deployments, strategies that include flexibility may be more helpful for younger children (e.g., can add more chocolate kisses to jar if dad’s deployment is extended a week or two).
Case Example: Deployment

The Lopez family is now 2 months into MSgt Lopez’s deployment. While the rest of the family appears to be adapting, Clara (age 7) seems to be struggling. Mr. Lopez reports that Clara appears anxious and withdrawn more times than not. He indicates that Clara asks when her mother is going to return multiple times a day and wants to call her mother on the phone daily. He expresses frustration over Clara’s “clinging” and describes her following him around like a “puppy” no matter where he is in the house. Mr. Lopez also reports that he plans to “skip” celebrating his birthday, which is coming up, because he is afraid that Clara will miss her mother even more since they always bake him a special cake together. In general, Mr. Lopez states that he feels “out of control” with managing the household and indicates that he has “released” the children from their chores since he feels bad about their mom being gone.

Below are specific problem areas and solutions based on the tips and strategies you just reviewed for children in this stage in the deployment cycle.

- Clara asks when mom will return: Create a way to track time until mom returns (chocolate kisses, paper chain).

- Clara asks to talk to mom on the phone daily: Identify a way for Clara to share information with her mom daily. Schedule “mom” time each day when Clara does something to share with mom (e.g., write a note, draw a picture, write in a journal to give mom at end of deployment, etc.). Ask MSgt Lopez to try to correspond with Clara as much as possible.

- Clara is clinging: Review with Mr. Lopez how to reassure Clara that he will continue to be home to care for her. Develop separation plan (consistent exit ritual, how to express confidence that Clara can manage the separation, and a commitment to follow through on promised return times). Reinforce Clara’s independent behaviors.

- Skipping birthday: Educate Mr. Lopez on the importance of maintaining special family traditions. Help brainstorm ways to maintain this “holiday” (e.g., he can bake a cake with Clara or find neighbor/friend to help her) and involve MSgt Lopez long-distance if possible.

- Releasing children from chores: Educate Mr. Lopez that children feel more secure when they are expected to honor rules and maintain their contributions to the family, like doing chores. Discuss how the children helping out may reduce his feeling of being “out of control.” Identify other ways to help Mr. Lopez establish routines and schedules.

Post-Deployment

Now that you have covered the first two stages of the deployment cycle, you will take a look at the post-deployment stage.

As indicated in Part 1 of this course, although filled with excitement and anticipation, this stage has been reported to be the most challenging by many family members. As family members reunite, roles and responsibilities must be renegotiated. Family members,
especially the deployed Service member, may appear to have “changed.”

Feelings of resentment by all parties can negatively impact reunion, while fears of future deployments may cause distancing.

The mental health provider can serve a critical role in helping the family find its new normal and optimize positive growth that occurred as a result of deployment challenges.

**Tips for Coping Post-deployment: Couples**

While reuniting after deployment is considered an exciting and joyous time, it also can be a stressful time. As the Service member reintegrates into their family, the family may have developed new routines, interests, and support systems.

Often, the Service member and their spouse/partner face the task of restoring family roles, relationships, and general aspects of daily living.

As a therapist treating a couple who is in this phase of the deployment cycle, what are some things you can share with them to help them negotiate this transition?

Normalize: Remind the couple that readjustment stress is common and that it may take time to reconnect. The reintegration process may take several weeks or months. Roles and routines may have changed for both individuals and they may feel unneeded or unwanted (check for cognitive distortions).

Acknowledge change: Couples have been through separate experiences during deployment and as a result may have changed. For example, the spouse/partner may have learned how to manage the household on their own while the Service member also has had unique experiences.

Establish healthy communication: Both the Service member and spouse/partner have had different life experiences during their separation. Encourage them to get to know one another. This may include discussions regarding what life was like during the separation, how it is now, and how they would like it to be. Monitor the pace of their discussion, especially when the Service member opens up about deployment experiences. Encourage the couple not to play power games (e.g., who had it worse during the separation). Remind the couple to continue to evaluate how their thinking and interpretations of each other’s actions impact their relationship. Continue to hone balanced thinking skills, while reducing the occurrence of cognitive distortions and negative interactions.

Negotiate roles and routines: Encourage the couple to discuss the new roles and routines they’ve developed. This may include when, why, and how these roles and routines developed. Again, this is another way for the couple to get to know each other and reconnect. Assist them in identifying potential problems and encourage the use of their problem solving skills.

Personal space: As the couple negotiates the re-integration process, having some
personal space can be healthy. During the deployment phase, both individuals lived separate lives and became accustomed to doing things alone.

Parenting: It’s normal for children to test limits, especially whenever there is a change in the family dynamics. It will be helpful for couples to discuss the new rules, procedures, and activities that are in place. Do both partners agree on these changes? If not, what things do they disagree on? Problem solving skills are helpful here as well.

Re-establishing common interests: During the deployment, both partners have gotten used to doing things separately. Encourage them to identify things they liked doing together prior to deployment (e.g., playing a board game, running) and schedule these pleasant activities. They also can come up with new ideas that are fun.

Maintaining personal goals/activities: If the spouse/partner has developed new personal goals or activities, encourage them not to give these up because the Service member has returned. The Service member also may have developed new interests (e.g., new exercise routine, hobby, card game, etc.). Encourage the couple to examine their current family schedule and to find ways to include some of these activities.

Patience: Encourage the couple to be patient with one another. Stress, fatigue, and worry can lead to short tempers. Help them examine and possibly modify their expectations.

Intimacy: Re-establishing physical and emotional closeness after a stressful situation may take time. Encourage the couple to be patient with one another and take things slow. Couples may be embarrassed to discuss this topic so offering to discuss it with them can provide a welcomed forum to problem solve intimacy issues.

Infidelity: If there is suspicion of infidelity, encourage the couple to openly and honestly discuss their concerns.

(Pavlicin, 2003; Pavlicin, 2007)

Tips for Coping Post-deployment: Children

Now that you’ve reviewed some tips and strategies for working with couples during reintegration, you will learn about some of the ways you can help children and parents navigate this stage.

Providing education regarding typical reactions that children and adolescents might have (reviewed in Part 1 of this course) can reduce stress if parents observe common negative behaviors.

Set the expectation that while there may be some challenges, most families reunite and adapt well during reintegration.

Spend one-on-one time with each child: Encourage the recently returned parent to arrange a special time with each child to reconnect. Help them to identify a time and/or
activity to schedule despite all the post-deployment demands. It doesn’t have to be something costly or complicated, but the act of taking alone time with a child underscores the value of that relationship and further strengthens CONNECTION.

Observe, notice, and remark: Emphasize the importance of attending to the children’s positive behaviors and activities, especially ones that were missed during deployment. Encourage the returned Service member to invite the child/adolescent to share pictures, stories, school work, or other accomplishments, and to model appropriate reactions that will instill feelings of COMPETENCE and CONFIDENCE.

Contribution: Along the same lines, identify ways for the family to honor the sacrifices and CONTRIBUTIONS the child/adolescent has made during deployment. Service members often receive awards, medals, and official recognition for their accomplishments and contributions during deployments. Encourage this same practice with the rest of the family. Many installations and states have official coins and medals that can be presented to children during award ceremonies or family functions (see Resources section for more information). Honoring the youth’s service and sacrifice promotes the continued development of their CHARACTER.

Allow the child/adolescent to have space and a range of emotions: Remind parents that their children, especially adolescents, may require time to readjust. Allowing the child some CONTROL over when they would like time apart or some space may reduce friction and negative interactions. Some children may avoid hugs or the expression of affection. Remind parents to be patient and not force positive interactions. Children should be allowed to express neutral or negative feelings, while criticism over lack of enthusiasm or affection toward a parent should be avoided.

Deployment guilt: It is common for the deployed parent to experience guilt over missed milestones and accomplishments in the lives of their children while they were deployed. This often leads to giving into children’s demands, and the softening of rules/boundaries. Remind parents that routines, structure, and clear rules make life feel predictable and safe for children and adolescents. Help parents to manage guilt and avoid going overboard with allowing their child to have privileges that they would never even have considered in the past.

Set realistic family goals: The whole family has grown and changed during the deployment cycle. Everyone has gained new skills and competencies, especially the children. What goals do the family share now that they are reunited? Is there a project, activity, routine, or ritual they want to develop or maintain? What COPING strategies should stay in place? How can family members encourage each other to continue to grow now that deployment is over?

Case Example Post-deployment

MSgt Lopez returned from deployment one month ago. Mr. Lopez reports that although his wife initially seemed excited to be home, in the past couple of weeks she appears withdrawn and irritable.

He indicates that she snaps at him and the children and often wants to be left alone. The
children have distanced themselves from her and often go to Mr. Lopez when they need help or have a question.

Although MSgt Lopez reports no difficulties at work, especially relating to Service members she deployed with, she agrees that she’s been distant from her family and that little things get to her. MSgt Lopez reports that she wants to re-establish a connection with her husband but doesn’t know how.

As a provider working with MSgt Lopez and her husband, what strategies would you use to help the couple reconnect?

Here are some examples:

NORMALIZE: Remind the couple that it takes time to reconnect. MSgt Lopez has only been back from deployment for a month. Both partners are adjusting and renegotiating their roles.

ACKNOWLEDGE CHANGE: The couple has had different life experiences and as a result may have changed. Remind them that change does not have to be a bad thing. Identify any positive outcomes to the change (e.g., Mr. Lopez may have taken cooking classes and now loves to cook).

NEGOTIATE ROLES: Encourage them to use problem solving skills to negotiate their new roles. What does MSgt Lopez think, feel, and do when the children go to their father instead of her? Help the couple work through this.

DISCUSS PERSONAL SPACE: Discuss how they can negotiate personal space. Does MSgt Lopez need alone time (something she’s probably used to during her deployment)? Does Mr. Lopez need alone time? He’s possibly tired from being the primary caregiver and having the household responsibilities.

RE-ESTABLISH COMMON INTERESTS: Review with them the things they enjoyed doing together. Can they set aside some time to engage in these activities?

Summary

This concludes the course Impact of Deployment and Combat Stress on Families and Children, Part 2.

The review of risk and resiliency factors, along with general applicable strategies discussed in this course will help you to further develop your competence in working with military families throughout the deployment cycle.

Thank you for taking this training and best of luck to you in your work with Service members and their families.

To obtain more information on how you can assist military families successfully adapt to the challenges presented throughout the deployment cycle, please review the References and Resources section.
You have finished reviewing the course content.