

Making Sense of the Science: Serving the Military Population

Service members and their families face unique challenges and opportunities associated with Military life, such as frequent relocations, deployments, and an eventual transition from the Military to the civilian sector. A supportive family environment serves as a buffer to the adversity faced by children in Military families¹. Professionals can best serve this population by increasing their awareness and understanding of these common issues and the potential impact.

RELOCATION

Active Duty Service members move, on average, every two to three years². Due to the Service member's rank or specialty, the moves may occur more or less frequently. In most circumstances, families relocate with their Service member, and each member of the Military Family experiences the added stress of adapting to a new community³.

	CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES
SERVICE MEMBERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A spouse job loss, moving costs, and home equity loss may have a negative financial impact³. • Related to decreased Military satisfaction, commitment, and retention intentions⁴. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development. • Career advancement. • Experience a new community and work environment. • Potential for a fresh start
MILITARY SPOUSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adverse impact on financial condition, educational enrollment, and employment⁵. • Loss of support network in former community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet new people, thus expanding their social network. • Experience a new community or culture. • May increase family coping and closeness⁶. • May provide employment or schooling opportunity.
CHILDREN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in child care or schools³. • Loss of friendships³. • Loss of participation in activities and sports³. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows children to build new friendships and learning opportunities⁷. • Offers a fresh start in exploring identity as an adolescent⁷. • Potential exposure to new places or diverse cultures⁷.

DEPLOYMENT

A deployment is defined as *the rotation of forces into and out of an operational area*⁸. Deployment locations may be stateside or overseas training sites or peacekeeping or combat operations abroad. Family members do not accompany the Service member on deployments. The duration of a deployment varies by mission and Service Branch, but most range from three months up to a year or more⁹. Families already struggling with emotional, relationship, or financial problems are more affected by deployments than those families that function well before deployment³. Multiple and prolonged deployments generally have worse effects on families than fewer and shorter deployments³. Communication can benefit every member of the family during a deployment particularly if expectations about communication frequency are realistic¹⁰.

	CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES
SERVICE MEMBERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encounter life threatening situations¹¹. • Boredom¹¹. • Separation from family¹¹. • Missing family events and milestones, such as births, birthdays, holidays, and graduations. • National Guard and Reserve Service members may experience a decline in income during deployment¹². • May experience readjustment challenges and an increased likelihood of marital instability¹³. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active Duty Service members may experience an increase in pay due to special deployment-related allowances¹⁴. • May strengthen job skills due to extensive training prior to deployment¹³. • Potential to use learned and enhanced skills in real situations¹³. • Regular communication with family may boost Service member morale, especially for married Service members¹⁰.
MILITARY SPOUSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased stress⁵. • Heightened depressive and anxiety symptoms⁵. • Added household responsibilities and solo-parenting¹⁵. • May experience readjustment challenges¹⁶. • Foreign-born and younger spouses may have an increased risk for poor coping¹⁷. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen support networks¹⁸. • Positive coping may include having a positive attitude, using the deployment as a time for personal development, channeling anxiety into other activities, and developing a routine¹⁹.
CHILDREN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased stress⁵. • Can prompt depression, anxiety, and behavior problems⁶. • Primary care-giver's mental health and coping can directly influence the child's ability to cope²⁰. • May experience readjustment challenges¹⁶. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support with regulating emotions and talking with a caring adult or parent about concerns may help to alleviate stress⁶. • Taking on additional responsibilities during the deployment can build a sense of self-efficacy and personal development³.

POST DEPLOYMENT

The time after deployment can have its own set of unique challenges and opportunities. While reunion with families is a happy time, it can also be very stressful. Family members may have become comfortable with their new roles and responsibilities and may hesitate to give them up. Similarly, the returning parent may be unclear about what their role in the family should be³².

	CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES
SERVICE MEMBERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active Duty Service members may experience a decrease in pay due to special deployment-related allowances going away²¹. • Communications with the family about the deployment may be difficult³¹. • May experience a feeling of not being needed at home³⁰. • Unfamiliar with changes, things aren't done the way they were when the service member left^{30,31}. • Difficulty readjusting to non-deployment environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconnect with the family, have a fresh start. • Pleasant surprise with the growth of family members³¹. • Value relationships more³⁰. • Relationship may become stronger^{30,31}. • Opportunity for better communications with the family³¹.
MILITARY SPOUSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping Service member deal with wounds from deployment (physical and/or mental). • Readjustment to include the Service member into daily activities³¹. • Feeling a loss of independence³³. • Disagreements on how things were handled during the Service member's absence (e.g., finances, childcare)³⁰. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconnecting with the Service member. • Value relationships more³⁰. • Relationship may become stronger^{30,31}. • Opportunity for better communications³¹. • Opportunity for more time for self-interests and goals.
CHILDREN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New changes in routine³¹. • May have to give up new responsibilities to include the Service member³¹. • Feeling the effects from parental re-adjustments (e.g., arguments)³¹. • Recognizing the Service member³². • The Service member not recognizing the growth in the children (expecting them to be the same as when the service member left)³². 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconnecting with the Service member. • Value relationships more³⁰. • Relationship may become stronger^{30,31}. • Opportunity for better communications³¹. • Pride in showing the Service member how much they have grown³¹.

TRANSITION (i.e., SEPARATION OR RETIREMENT)

Active Duty service for Military members averages about six years for enlisted members and eleven years for officers²²; most Service members transition from the Military before retirement eligibility²³. In the next few years, about one million Service members will transition into the civilian sector²⁴. Early transition planning can help alleviate potential difficulties and allow Service members and their families to create realistic expectations for life in the civilian community²⁵. Each Service Branch offers free transition counseling for Service members.

	CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES
SERVICE MEMBERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May experience readjustment difficulties related to finances, employment, relationships, substance abuse, and homelessness²³. • Little to no previous civilian work experience due to enlisting or commissioning soon after high school or college graduation²⁶. • May experience a lengthy period of unemployment (averaging 17 weeks), with rates highest for 18- to 24-year-old Veterans²⁷. • Service-related mental and physical health issues may impact reintegration to civilian life²⁸. • Transition may be unexpected and may not be voluntary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timely access to programs and services may improve chances of positive health, economic, and social outcomes²³. • Combat Veterans are generally eligible to receive 5 years of free health care through the Veterans Administration²³. • May be eligible for Veteran benefits, such as reduced home and education loans¹⁴. • Retirees receive monthly pension income, continued health insurance benefits, and access to commissaries and installation amenities¹⁴. • Likelihood of fewer family separations.
MILITARY SPOUSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May experience another relocation²⁹, leading to loss of support network and job loss if employed at time of transition. • May now become the “bread winner.” • May experience stress assisting the Service member transition. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retiree spouses may receive continued health insurance benefits and access to commissaries and installation amenities. • Likelihood of fewer relocations and family separations. • May allow time to focus on spouse’s career.
CHILDREN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May experience another relocation²⁸ that results in a change of child care or schools and loss of friendships and participation in sports and activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likelihood of fewer child care or school changes due to relocation. • Continuity of activities and sports.

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