COURAGE TO CARE

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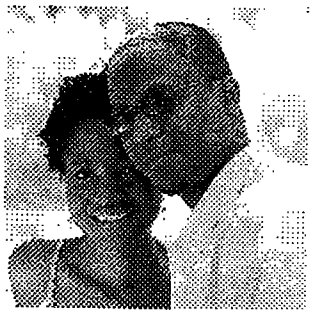
BECOMING A COUPLE AGAIN

How to Create a Shared Sense of Purpose After Deployment



Coming together as a couple after war deployment isn't always easy or something that happens naturally. It requires effort, and an understanding that each person has grown and changed during the separation. A positive way to think about this is that both of you, service person and spouse, have developed your own sense of purpose coping with new experiences while apart. What's important now is to come together and create a "shared sense of purpose", that is essential for your well being as a couple, that of your children and your life in the community. This won't happen overnight; it will take time, mutual compassion and a desire to do so. Here are four steps to help you create a "shared sense of purpose".

STEP#1: Understand Each Other's Sense of Purpose During Separation

The returning service member's sense of purpose has been shaped by:

- ❑ Traumatic events that can be difficult to process and talk about.
- ❑ Identification and closeness with their military unit and comrades who have shared similar experiences.
- ❑ Regimentation in the form of highly structured and efficient routines.
- ❑ Heightened sensory experiences including sights, sounds and smells.
- ❑ Expanded self-importance and identity shaped by war.

The spouse's sense of purpose has been shaped by:

- ❑ *New roles and responsibilities.* Many spouses have assumed new or more taxing employment, oversight of finances and child rearing.
- ❑ *Community support trade-offs.* Some spouses and children left the military base to stay with parents and in-laws for various reasons, but will have experienced loss of connection with their military community, its familiarity and support.
- ❑ *Emotional changes.* Some spouses may have experienced growing independence and thrived on it; others may have found this a difficult time leading to depression, anxiety, increased alcohol or substance use and abuse, and other symptoms of stress.

STEP #2: Recognize that the following concerns upon return are common, often shared or felt indirectly, and will require mutual adjustments and time:

- ❑ *Home.* Life at home does not have the edge and adrenaline associated with wartime duty, which often leads to let down, disappointment and difficulty shifting gears.
- ❑ *Children.* Reconnecting with one's children is an anticipated event by service member and spouse. Children react differently depending upon their age, and can be shy, angry, or jealous as new bonds are reestablished. Discipline will now be shared, often resulting in conflicting opinions and styles.
- ❑ *Relationship.* Concern about having grown apart, growing close again without giving up individual growth and viewpoints, issues of fidelity, and being able to discuss these issues without raising more anxiety or anger challenge many couples.
- ❑ *Public.* While there has been widespread support of the service member, the public has mixed views of the war. Protracted deployment and an upcoming election may polarize the public, promoting media coverage that can undermine the pride and purpose military families feel about their involvement.

STEP #3: Relationship Breakers: Most couples argue about three things: sex, money and children.

Understanding the potential of these issues to divide rather than unite is key to reestablishing a shared sense of purpose. These issues involve:

- ❑ *Intimacy.* Intimacy is a combination of emotional *and* physical togetherness. It is not easily reestablished after stressful separations creating an emotional disconnect.

Partners may also experience high or low sexual interest causing disappointment, friction or a sense of rejection. In due time, this may pass, but present concerns may include hoping one is still loved, dealing with rumors or concern about faithfulness, concern about medications that can affect desire and performance, and expected fatigue and alterations in sleep cycles.

- *Finances.* During the deployment, most service members and families received additional income from tax breaks and combat duty pay, as much as $1,000 extra/month. Some families may have been able to set aside appreciable savings; other families may have spent some or all of the money on justifiable expenses and adjusted family budgets. This may create disagreement that can hamper the important work of building *shared trust* and financial planning as a couple essential to moving forward.
- *Children.* Children have grown and changed during deployment. Some returning soldiers will see children for the first time. It is important to build upon the positive changes in your children, and work as a couple to address issues of concern that need improvement or attention. Discipline of children will now be shared and should be viewed as something that can be built together rather than criticized or ignored.

Step#4: Relationship Makers. Here are some thoughts and tips for building a shared sense of purpose and stronger family.

- *Expectations.* Remember that fatigue, confusion and worry, common during this transition, often lead to short tempers. In that frame of mind, it is easy to revert to the relationship breaker issues listed above. If this happens, suggest taking time out and return to discussions when both parties feel more relaxed.
- *Enjoy life.* Find and do activities that are pleasurable such as a movie, a family picnic, bowling or shopping. Create time in your weekly schedule to do something as a couple, as a family, and one-on-one activity that is shared between returning service member and his/her child or children.
- *Give thanks.* Together, thank those people, family, friends, co-workers and new service member buddies, who have helped you and your family during this deployment. Showing appreciation through writing notes together, calling people or visiting them will bring a sense of fulfillment that reunites each other's experiences.
- *Communicate.* Talking together builds a shared sense of purpose. Desire to communicate is more important than details. Service members often prefer to discuss war stories with military buddies to protect their spouse and family from traumatic memories. Spouses should not be offended. Other ways to communicate involve physical activity. Take walks, work out together or engage in a sport. Healthy communication involves processing feelings, new information and relieving stress. Read, draw, paint, dance, sing, play an instrument, volunteer at church or in the community to keep a sense of perspective and individuality as you grow together as a couple.
- *Let time be your friend.* Time may not mend everything, but it is often one of the most important factors in healing and solving problems.
- *Be positive.* A positive attitude is one of the most important gifts you can bring to each other and your family during this time. Appreciating what one has gives strength and energy to a family and a couple. Special circumstances such as physical injury and psychological problems are not addressed in this fact sheet, and require additional support, information and resources.
- *Know when to seek help.* Both service member and spouse have endured a level of stress, uncertainty, worry and lonesomeness that can affect one's health and mental health. If either spouse or service member suspects they may be suffering from a health or mental health problem, it is essential to seek help. Many service members do not want to seek help for mental health problems from the military for fear of damaging their career. However, the consequences of letting a problem linger untreated can be much more damaging. There are excellent treatments including medications that can help people reclaim their lives and enjoy their families, as they should. You owe it to yourself and your family to be in good health.

We hope this fact sheet is helpful and something you will hold onto and refer to in the months ahead. Service members and spouses should feel proud of the important contributions both have made to our nation. Now it is time to reunite with loved ones and enjoy a shared sense of purpose and togetherness.

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