

Understanding the Effects of Trauma and Traumatic Events to Help Prevent, Mitigate and Foster Recovery for Individuals, Organizations and Communities
A Program of Uniformed Services University, Our Nation's Federal Medical School, Bethesda, Maryland • www.usuhs.mil/psy/traumaticstress/newcenter.html

Reuniting with Your Loved One: Helpful Advice for Families

In response to numerous inquiries from family and friends of loved ones returning from war in Iraq, the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) would like to share the following ideas and suggestions to enhance your homecoming and communication during the holidays.



buddy or special friend. Let your returning soldier take the lead here. Listening rather than asking questions is the guiding rule.

- ❑ Keeping your social calendar fairly free and flexible for the first weeks after homecoming is wise. Respect the need for time alone, especially time with important people, such as spouses.

TRY TO REMEMBER

- ❑ Homecoming is more than an event; it is a process of reconnection for your family and your loved one.
- ❑ While coming home represents a return to safety, the routines of home are markedly different from regimented life in a war zone.
- ❑ In your loved one's absence, you and other family members have probably assumed many roles and functions that may have to be re-negotiated. Be patient during this period of readjustment and recognize that many things often do not return to what they previously were like.
- ❑ GO SLOWLY. Your returning loved one, you and your family need time — time together before exposure to the demands of the larger community—friends, extended family and coworkers.

TRY TO OBSERVE

- ❑ Celebrating is important, and should reflect your family's own style and preferences. Do what feels comfortable and right for you. Tributes might be cakes, yellow ribbons, special dinners, and events that your loved one has enjoyed in the past.
- ❑ Talking about war experiences is a personal and delicate subject, and frequently not a part of a family reunion. Many soldiers prefer to share such experiences with a

Explain to those who may be slighted at not being included that this is a normal requirement of returning personnel.

- ❑ Your loved one may need time to become adjusted to the local time zone as well as other environmental changes such as the lack of continual noise. Also, your own family may be keyed up, sleeping poorly in anticipation and in the excitement of the homecoming, and may be exhausted as well.
- ❑ Your children's reactions may not be what you, the parent at home or your returning spouse may have expected or desired. Very often young children will act shy, not remembering the returning soldier at first. Older children may feel and act angry because of their parent's absence. Be patient and understanding concerning your children's reactions and give them time to become reacquainted.
- ❑ Try to be flexible with reasonable expectations. It is normal to experience some disappointment or let down in the face of this momentous event. The reality of homecoming and reunion seldom match one's fantasies and preconceived scenarios.

EXERCISE CAUTION

- ❑ *Driving.* When people have not operated a conventional motor vehicle in a long time, driving can be hazardous. Driving with someone in the car is the best way to return to driving.

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- ❑ *Drinking alcoholic beverages.* Since exposure to alcoholic beverages has been limited in wartime, it is important not to over indulge. Persons drinking with the returning service member should be especially careful to help limit the intake. Excessive use of alcohol can be a warning sign of distress, increase the risk of accidents and decrease the opportunity to communicate and reestablish connection with one's spouse and family.

THE DEPARTURE

- ❑ Leaving home and returning to one's unit is stressful for you, your loved one and your family. You've drawn close, and now you must let go. It's a sad time, and it is natural to feel sad, even to cry. Your loved one may distance himself/herself in preparation for leaving. Try to understand if this happens.
- ❑ At the time of departure, it is important to let your loved one know how proud you are of their sacrifice, their commitment to our country and their job. Expressing this pride while saying goodbye is positive, and will provide strength to you, your children and most of all, the departing soldier.

THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES HAVE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

- ❑ <<http://www.usmc-mccs.org/MCFTB/return.asp>>
Return and Reunion Information, Return and Reunion Guide, Return and Reunion Brief, Operation Iraqi Freedom Warrior Transition
- ❑ <<http://www.nmha.org/reassurance/mentalHealthWarMilitaryFamilies.cfm>>
The National Mental Health Association: *Coping with War-Related Stress: Information for Military Families and Communities*
- ❑ <<http://www.deploymentguide.com>>
Deployment Guide 2003 includes *Readjusting after a Deployment*
- ❑ <<http://www.ncptsd.org/>>
The National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: *Iraq War Clinician's Guide*



Please continue to view the *Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress* as an ongoing source of information and support. Visit our website at <www.usuhs.mil>