When ADF members leave home on deployment, the period of separation can be particularly stressful for their loved ones. It is helpful to realise that the thoughts and feelings each person in the family may experience are often normal responses to the stress associated with separation.

**Thoughts and feelings during separation**
For the people staying at home, common thoughts and feelings can be associated with different stages of separating. The stages of separation are pre-separation, separation, and homecoming.

**Pre-Separation**
Thoughts such as: Is he really going to leave me with all this? He won't talk properly to me about the separation. How am I going to cope? His job must be more important than mine! Where is he going exactly? Will he be safe?
Feelings such as: restlessness, irritability, anger, resentment, hurt, fear and depression.

**Separation**
Thoughts such as: If I love him why am I relieved he has gone? I just don’t feel like mixing socially just yet. What am I going to do with this hole in my life?
Feelings such as: numbness, aimlessness, indecisiveness, anger, being overwhelmed or withdrawn.

**Homecoming**
Thoughts such as: Why should I give that up just because he has returned? He doesn’t understand the difficulties I’ve had. He thinks life here was exactly the same while he was away. He has changed a lot.
Feelings such as: excitement, relief, happy but distant, resentful and wary at the same time.

**Suggestions for coping with separation**
People can do more than they realise to help themselves. The following suggestions may be useful:

**Pre-Separation**
Talk matters through; disputes are sometimes a means of preparing for separation, allowing emotional distancing. Try to resolve any problems or family conflicts before departure. Cry; this can be a way of releasing pent-up emotions such as worry, upset and uncertainty. Discuss possible short and long term effects of separation on the family; understanding and reassurance can affirm trust and help resolve worries. Develop a support network.

**Separation**
Share your concerns with others and don’t bottle things up. Try to solve those problems you can deal with as this may boost your confidence. If you’re the one staying at home, enjoy yourself when possible (you have every right to do so), and help and support others when you can. Helping others can help you by making you aware that you are not alone. Allow yourself to be upset at times, but don’t allow the separation to dominate your life. Ask for help; it may surprise you that people more often than not like to lend support.

**Homecoming**
Be aware of your expectations, they might not be realistic. Both the person who has deployed and the people staying behind may have changed, so be careful and avoid making insensitive statements. Renegotiate relationships and roles, be patient with each other and be prepared to accept change. Accept that family reintegration is a process of adjustment and will take time and effort. Be alert for delayed stress reactions.
Children

Children may experience a sense of insecurity during a parent’s long absence. Their world ‘usually’ comprises a mother, a father and a home, which creates a strong basis for security. Remove one, and the children have lost a part of their security. The effect of this can show up in many ways, often in varying degrees of unacceptable behaviour.

During the separation, children need added support and attention. Perhaps the most important step to minimise adverse effects on children is to keep the absent parent a part of the family’s emotional life.

Photographs of the absent parent can be kept beside the children’s beds and used as part of the going-to-bed routine, for example ‘say goodnight to Daddy’.

Try to have letters arrive for young children as soon as possible after separation perhaps by posting such letters a day or two before departure.

The absent parent should write separate letters to each child.

Give each child some undivided attention, though admittedly this can be difficult for only one parent.

Keep roughly the same rules for the children during Mum/Dad’s absence.

Where to seek help

Defence Family Helpline (1800 624 608)

www.defence.gov.au/dco

The Defence Family Helpline is your first point of call for support, information and connection with your community. The Helpline is available 24/7 for ADF Members and their families, and is staffed by qualified human services professionals including social workers and psychologists.

You can also email the Helpline on DefenceFamilyHelpline@defence.gov.au and receive a response within 24 hours.

Other Mental Health Resources

The ADF Mental Health All-hours Support Line (ASL) is a confidential telephone service for ADF members and their families available 24/7 on 1800 628 036 or if calling from overseas +61 2 9425 3878.

Chaplains are connected to all units in Australia and can provide support and appropriate referrals.

Lifeline (131 114). If you, or a friend, need to talk to someone about a problem immediately, you can call Lifeline for the cost of a local call.

Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS). This 24-hour emergency service is available to veterans of all deployments and their families on 1800 011 046.