The period leading up to your son or daughter’s return from deployment can feel overwhelming.

Excitement, relief, joy and pride can be intertwined with concern, fear and worry about how best to support your returning soldier; what to say, what not to say; what the future will hold.

It’s important to keep in mind that your son or daughter is capable, trained, and well equipped. The best thing you can do is to offer your support and encouragement. Take it step by step. While every family has its own dynamics, below are some thoughts you may wish to consider as you prepare for your son or daughter’s return.

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

- Traumatic events that can be difficult to talk about, or even think about.
- Formed stronger bonds with fellow service members and their military unit, who have shared similar experiences.
- Regimented highly structured environment and routines of 24/7 military life.
- Taken on a more aggressive attitude, which is often necessary when deployed in hostile settings. Often heightened sensory experiences.
- An altered sense of self and identity shaped by war.
- An altered view of the world.
- Stress and fatigue, or seeing and doing things that are difficult for them to integrate into their life at home.

The Walter Reed Army Institute of Research (cited in Snyder et al, 2012) provides practical pointers regarding this notion of purpose and perception. Below are some possible behaviour and consequences in relationships to be aware of:

**BEHAVIOUR**

**Cohesion vs. Withdrawal**
Bonds built in combat lead to sometimes showing a preference for time with military mates over family members.

**Accountability vs. Controlling**
Accountability for control of military gear and one’s behaviour leads to the need to control access to one’s “stuff” and irritability toward family members about this.

**Targeted Aggression vs. Inappropriate Aggression**
Use of anger and aggression in combat leads to a short temper at home.

**Tactical Awareness vs. Hyper-vigilance**
A high degree of situational awareness results in appearing jumpy at home.

**Emotional Control vs. Anger/Detachment**
Keeping a necessary lid on one’s emotions becomes second nature and leads to being seen as “uncaring” by spouse.
For the parents of returning soldiers
Defence Community Organisation

Each phase of deployment brings its own set of challenges. The end of a deployment, and the actual homecoming, can have extremely frustrating and upsetting elements as dates of return may change or other logistical issues may be out of your control. Typically, a "honeymoon" period follows in which families reunite in person, but not necessarily emotionally. Some family members express both a sense of awkwardness in addition to excitement. At times you may even feel as though you are strangers.

It is not realistic to return home and expect everything to be the same as before the deployment.

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.

You may have to face the challenge of differing public views about the deployment and involvement in the war. Sometimes media coverage can undermine the pride and purpose military families feel about their involvement.

Some thoughts and tips for building a shared sense of purpose:

**EXPECTATIONS** Remember that fatigue, confusion and worry, common during this transition, often lead to short tempers. 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 and fun. Create time in your weekly schedule to do something one-on-one.

**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 mates to protect their family from traumatic memories. Other ways to communicate involve physical activity. Take walks, engage in a sport or exercise program. Healthy communication involves processing feelings, new information and relieving stress.

**LET BE.** Know that ‘this too shall pass’. ‘The tincture of time’ - Time is often one of the most important factors in healing and solving problems.

**ATTITUDE.** A positive attitude is one of the greatest values. Appreciating what one has gives strength and energy to a family.

**KNOW WHEN 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 available to support and assist you.
For the parents of returning soldiers
Defence Community Organisation

Post-deployment is probably the most important stage for both Soldier and his or her family. Patient communication, taking it slowly, lowering expectations and taking time to get to know each other again is critical to the task of successful reintegration of the Soldier back into the Family.

Further reading:
The American Red Cross has published a booklet titled, “Coming Home from Deployment: The New Normal”


For more information on this factsheet and other Defence Community Organisation support services visit www.defence.gov.au/dco or call the all-hours Defence Family Helpline on 1800 624 608.

The Defence Community Organisation offers a wide range of support services for the families of ADF members.

The best way to access these services is to call 1800 624 608. The all-hours Defence Family Helpline is staffed by qualified human services professionals including social workers and psychologists.