



Supporting Defence families



Being a military couple: navigating interesting times together

You are invited to spend time together with these exercises both before and following deployment. The exercises are driven by your input and the level of detail you choose to engage in. You may wish to commence this journey with a few thoughts and engage in more detail at a later stage. Treat this work as your friend and a work in progress. I would encourage you to take some time for yourself to complete it and in this way support yourselves on the journey of deployment.

Introduction

There are no 'right' or 'wrong' responses in this workbook. This is a private and personal work, entirely yours.

Enjoy your time together. Any level of increased self awareness is valuable. Perhaps not always easy, but always valuable both individually and for those in your life. Bear in mind that you have access to individual and well as couple counselling as needed.

There are support structures in place for you leading up to, during and post deployment. Should you require support please call your local DCO Area Office or the Defence Family Helpline on 1800 624 608.

Finding a shared sense of purpose

We study, sit exams, short courses, complete apprenticeships, diplomas, degrees, enlist personal trainers...the list goes on – all in the quest of securing sustainable life success. However, we often stumble into our intimate relationships shaped only by past role models (positive or negative) and strong doses of emotion and hormones. Arriving with different backgrounds, different models of family interaction, values and norms; different hopes and expectations of how life together will be. Is it surprising that relationship breakdown and distress is so common?

It is not often, if ever, that we have the opportunity for a couple's retreat. Or simply, the time to connect and explore how we are going as a

couple. The goal of this booklet is to provide you and your partner with the opportunity to create your own 'in house retreat'. How wonderful if you can take a special weekend or day for yourselves. However, you know what will work best in your lives and the time available to you.

This booklet is intended to support you as a couple in the following ways:

- Finding a shared sense of purpose.
- Aligning your visions.
- Learning and practicing habits to strengthen you as a couple.
- Practicing healthy communication.
- Long distance communication.
- Supporting each other – what works.
- Practicing appreciation.
- Practicing sharing emotions.
- Intimacy – defining, sharing, exploring.

What is a healthy relationship?

It could be suggested that shared purpose and interaction between people is really the 'glue' which connects us as human beings. Interaction between people largely determines the success of immediate activity, as in a short term project.

However, the quality of interaction between partners has been found to be a strong predictor of relationship distress and future breakdown.

Research by psychologists Gottman, Markman and others, over decades, indicates that couples





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who interacted more negatively than other couples had relationships that were in trouble or predicted future marital distress.

The good news is that negative interaction is a behaviour that couples CAN change to improve their odds of staying together.

This thinking contrasts with relatively static factors that are hard to change once married, including having divorced parents, marrying at a very young age and having a personality tendency to react strongly or defensively to problems and disappointments—all risk factors for marital distress. A recent study found that nearly four out of five couples on the brink of divorce can transform their relationships by participating in brief, evidence-based marriage education classes (Seth Eisenberg, PAIRS). This means that we can LEARN new ways of interaction; creating a shared sense of purpose.

The separation of deployment provides soldier and partner a chance to evaluate changes within themselves and what direction they want their partnership to take. Although a difficult as well as joyful stage, many military couples have reported that their relationship is much stronger as a result. Both parties have developed your own sense of purpose coping with new experiences while apart. What is important now is to come together and create a 'shared sense of purpose', that is essential for your well-being as a couple.

This won't happen overnight

It requires time, mutual compassion and a desire to do so.

Here are four steps to help you create a 'shared sense of purpose'.

1. Understand each other's sense of purpose during separation.

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 partner's sense of purpose has been shaped by a range of factors too:

- Of all the family members, partners at home may have to make the most changes during a deployment with new roles and responsibilities.
- Many partners have assumed new employment, or alternately had to reduce working hours. Managing finances, child care and discipline. Increased independence in managing day-to-day events and challenges. They have to take on many, if not all, of the tasks their partners did while at home. Partners may have become more autonomous and individual personal priorities in life may be different.
- Emotional changes. Some may have experienced growing independence and thrived on it; others may have found this a difficult time leading to depression, anxiety, and other symptoms of stress.

While these added responsibilities can increase the spouse's stress level, they can also lead to:

- a sense of great accomplishment and pride.
- Newly identified skills and strengths.
- Increased leadership role in the 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:





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BEHAVIOUR	IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS AT HOME
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.

2. Recognize the concerns are common, and will require mutual adjustments and time:

Bear in mind that often these common concerns are shared or felt indirectly.

Relationship. Each phase of deployment brings comes with its own set of challenges. The end of a deployment, homecoming, can be an extremely frustrating and upsetting experience. The date of return may change or other logistical issues out of your control.

Typically, a 'honeymoon' period follows in which couples reunite physically, but not necessarily emotionally. Some spouses express both a sense of awkwardness in addition to excitement. At times you may even feel as though you are strangers. For others, however, the desire for

sexual intimacy may require time in order to reconnect emotionally first.

Getting back together as a couple after a deployment isn't always something that happens naturally, or easily. Effort and an understanding that each person has grown and changed during the separation are required. This may not always happen overnight. 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.

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 rumours or concern about faithfulness, concern about medications that can affect desire and performance, and expected fatigue and alterations in sleep cycles.

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

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.

Public. 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.





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- **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 spouse and 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. Share in activities and in the community to keep a sense of perspective and individuality as you grow together as a couple.
- **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 and a couple.
- **Know when to seek help.** Both partners have endured stress, uncertainty and loneliness that can affect one's health and mental health. 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. You owe it to yourself and your family to be in good health.

As reintegration occurs partners may report a lost sense of independence. There may be resentment at feeling like they have been 'abandoned' for six months or more. Spouses may consider themselves to be the true heroes (maintaining the house, children, handling finances, etc.) while Soldiers may have been more focused on their job. At least one study (Zeff et. al., 1997) suggests that the stay-at-home parent is more likely to report distress than the deployed soldier. Partners

will also have to adapt to changes. Partners may even find they are more irritable with their mates involved again in daily activities and decisions. The desire their 'own' space may be a real concern. Basic household chores and routines need to be renegotiated and roles re-established.

Post-deployment is probably the most important stage for both Soldier and spouse. Patient communication, going slow, 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.

EXERCISES

The following exercises are built on the family work of Lorie DeCarvalho and Julia Whealin (Healing stress in military families – eight steps to wellness). A valuable resource for military families.

These exercises are tailored specifically to couples.

Building quality interactions – healthy communication

The goal of this exercise is to help you as a couple to listen attentively and communicate better with each other. There are no 'wrong' or 'right' responses, just your own unique answers. This is about your own experience. It may not always make sense to another party. Claim the experience as your own and take responsibility for how you have honestly experienced events. It is not a judgement on yourself or your partner – it is simply as it is.

My experience of this deployment has been...

The most challenging part of deployment for me was...





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I feel concerned about...

Providing support

Part of practicing healthy communication is about practicing the art of support for each other. Again, there are no 'wrong' or 'right' responses, just your own unique answers. This is about your own experience. It may not always make sense to another party. Claim the experience as your own and take responsibility for how you have honestly experienced events. It is not a judgement on yourself or your partner – it is simply as it is.

Describe in detail a time when you felt most supported by your partner (what did they do or say?):





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Practicing Appreciation

Please answer the following questions, based on the same approach as above.

I appreciate how you...

I appreciate that you...

I appreciate your...

Sharing emotions

Emotions serve important functions:

- When people share emotions with others, doing so makes emotions less intense.
- Sharing emotions helps connect people with others, and so can help people feel less isolated from others.
- Avoiding talking about emotions and problems usually just makes the problems worse.
- Sharing emotions is associated with better physical and emotional health.

Here are some guidelines for listening to others when they are expressing how they feel:

1. First, take time to provide the person with your full attention.
2. When your partner shares, just listen. Focus on what the other person is communicating.





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Imagine that you talked to your partner about something that made you feel sad or scared. What would that be like for you?

If you told your partner about a secret, how would you like your partner to respond and show that they are listening to you?

How do I know when I am in a healthy relationship?

Some people may not have had much experience in safe, healthy relationships. They may not believe that healthy safe relationships actually exist. They do. While no relationship is perfect, here are some behaviours that are commonly found in healthy relationships:

- Your partner supports your relationships with friends and family members.
- Your partner asks your opinion and respectfully listens to your answers.
- You and your partner can agree to disagree and resolve conflicts without fear of name calling, insults, manipulation, threats, or violence.
- Your partner accepts responsibility for his or her own mistakes, behaviour, thoughts, or feelings and will offer sincere apologies and demonstrate change accordingly.
- Your partner trusts you and is also trustworthy and is someone you and your children feel safe with.
- You share in the decision making, the responsibility of family budgeting, and sharing the family resources to benefit all family members equally.

If you find that you would like to build or increase these behaviours in your current and future relationships, you may consider consulting with a health care professional about how to find support in doing so.

References

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Australian Government
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For more information on this handout 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.



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1800 624 608 www.defence.gov.au/dco