



**American  
Red Cross**

# Coming Home From Deployment: The New “Normal”



The months of separation are over. The need to perform your combat duties has ended, and the need for your loved ones to maintain your family's welfare has passed. The much-anticipated time of being together again is finally here.

This long-awaited homecoming is an emotional time for everyone in the family, and everyone wants the transition to go smoothly. Successful transition strategies for returning service members are discussed in the first section of this booklet; transition strategies for family members are discussed in the second section.



## Service Members: Coming Home From Deployment

### Managing the Transition

Families separated by deployment often believe that when the tour is finished and they are together again, the stress each experienced will disappear. Some of the stressors do go away immediately, such as the uncertainty about the physical safety of the service member and the sadness of living apart from one another. However, some of the stressors fade more slowly and some new sources of stress can unexpectedly appear; such as finding that you, your spouse and your family's daily routine have all changed. Guard and Reserve members can also find that their civilian jobs may have changed; they have new supervisors, new co-workers and different work assignments.

Coming home can be just as challenging as it was to deploy to a combat zone. Returning from deployment requires a period of transition. You have been part of a group that has shared a unique experience that only those who have been through it can fully understand. Your mission has been demanding and the dedication and sense of purpose so strong that it can seem as if time has stood still.

Like all transitions, coming home will have its ups and downs. What each member of your family experienced as your normal life before deployment is now different. Adjusting to the changes you encounter in each other and in your life after deployment requires patience, understanding and accepting that change occurs and is necessary when confronted with new experiences. Knowing what to expect when you return can help you manage the transition. This section offers some ideas to help you.

### Coping Strategies

Coping refers to the ways we think and the things we do to manage the demands of our lives. Most people use coping skills without realizing it. Coping can be positive or negative.

Proactive coping builds strength and prepares individuals to deal with difficult times in their lives.

Reactive coping is a negative response. Reactive coping is like putting out a fire after your home is severely damaged; proactive coping is like ensuring your home has smoke alarms, fire extinguishers and sufficient insurance.

Managing your transition home will be easier if you use proactive coping skills.

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*“Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.”*

—Anaïs Nin

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# Moving Forward With Awareness, Actions and Attitudes

**Awareness, Actions** and **Attitudes** are the building blocks of proactive strategies for post-deployment transition.

## Prepare yourself for change.

You may feel different when you return, and, in fact, many things are different, especially for your loved ones and others who are closest to you. Your view of yourself, others and the world has most likely changed. When you come home, nothing may seem important for awhile and it can be challenging to reconnect with family and friends. You may miss your “buddies” and fellow service members with whom you shared so much, or even find yourself wishing to go back. You may feel that people in your daily life are unable to appreciate or understand what you’ve been through, but they’re trying to cope, just as you are.

## Find your “off” switch.

In a combat zone, you probably were on high alert all of the time. Your mind and body learned to focus on potential danger. This results in responding with adrenaline even after you come home and, at times, when it isn’t necessary. When you return home, you may feel irritable and impatient, jumpy, unable to relax, and even anxious in your daily life. You may also experience difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep. This reflects your adaptation to a normal life as opposed to the demands of life in a war zone.

## Energize yourself.

When you return, your mind and body may have to be retrained to accept that many situations may feel uncomfortable. Engaging in positive activities will help you feel more comfortable. If you have trouble enjoying activities at first, even ones you used to love to do, you may find that participating in these activities anyway will help you move toward a better mood and higher energy level. Take action first and the feelings will follow. Do what you know may help you even if you don’t feel like it.

## Awareness

**Tip 1:** Remember that you are transitioning home and this takes time and effort on your part. It is common to have mixed emotions at this time. Be patient with the people in your life. Give others a chance to adjust to having you around and back in their lives. Be particularly patient with yourself. Give yourself the time you need to get used to a very different intensity and pace of life.

## Actions

**Tip 2:** Identify at least one technique that helps lower your overall tension level, slow down your breathing to calm your heart rate and remind yourself that you are no longer in the same level of danger you were in while deployed. Popular methods include deep breathing, meditation, progressive muscle relaxation and yoga.

## Actions

**Tip 3:** Consider involving yourself in positive activities like playing with children, your spouse, partner or pet; writing, painting, dancing or other creative activities; praying; exercising or getting outdoors to enjoy nature; laughing or crying; playing golf with friends; watching a movie; going bowling or fishing; eating out; listening to positive music; discussing situations with someone you trust; and practicing your favorite relaxation techniques.



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*“To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.”*

–Robert Louis Stevenson

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### Communicate.

Take stock of what you are comfortable with when sharing your experiences, and with whom. You may not want to talk about what you've experienced. However, people around you may want to know all about it, what it was like, and what happened. Conversely, you may want to talk, but others are not ready to listen.

### Normalize your experience.

It is not uncommon that something may trigger automatic reactions, memories, or images of events that happened while you were deployed. You may even find yourself remembering and reacting to something you thought you had dealt with and that no longer bothered you. This can feel strange and uncontrollable because it seems to happen without warning.

### Take time to reflect.

You have been involved in an extraordinary mission. Now, after such an achievement, you are coming home with a different purpose, a different focus, different emotions, a different pace, and to different people. It takes time to figure out how to move ahead without losing the importance of what you have just experienced.

## Actions

**Tip 4:** If you want to talk, but your family or friends aren't ready to listen, find another way. You can contact some of your buddies that deployed with you and talk to them. You could write a journal. You could find another person outside of your personal life who will listen. If you don't feel like talking, you can let people know that it doesn't mean you don't care about them—but that you just are not ready to share the experience yet. Perhaps someday you will. Or, depending who asks, develop a response ahead of time that reflects your desires. Always bear in mind, your experience was and is very different from that of civilians.

## Actions

**Tip 5:** This is your body and mind's way of processing powerful events. Having such reactions is a normal part of getting back to life as usual and the intensity or frequency of such moments can lessen over time. Keep this in mind to reassure yourself.

## Attitudes

**Tip 6:** Constructive attitudes will help ease your transition.

- Be patient, don't give up.
- Be open to asking for help.
- Expect change to feel uncomfortable.
- Look at both sides of things.
- Keep your thoughts positive.





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Photo: Senior Master Sgt. David H. Lipp

## **Family Members: Managing the Changes When Your Loved One Returns**

When a loved one returns from a deployment, he or she will go through a period of readjustment and transition. You who have been maintaining life at home will also experience a transition of your own. This is a time of adjustment that began when you and your family first received notice about the deployment. Everyone's story is different: you may have children or not; you may have endured several deployments or this may be your first; you may be surrounded by many supportive family members and friends or you may have had to manage the separation on your own.

While your loved one was away, you took on new roles and responsibilities because decisions could no longer be made jointly; you have had to develop new routines, rituals and ways of being on your own. You may feel more capable and independent.

You have had to deal with both missing your loved one and the possibility that he or she may be injured or might not return at all.

You and your loved one have been changed by what each of you has faced separately. After your initial reunion, the process of reuniting as a couple and as a team begins together. Knowing what to expect can help you take care of yourself and manage during this time.

### **Coping Strategies**

Coping refers to the ways we think and feel and the things we do to manage the demands of our lives. Coping can be positive or negative. In times of transition it is best to draw on proactive coping strategies rather than reactive ones. Proactive coping is like saving for a rainy day; reactive coping is like spending every cent you earn. Proactive coping builds strength and hardiness and prepares us for when the going gets tough. It will be easier if you use proactive coping skills to manage the transition.

# Moving Forward With Awareness, Actions and Attitudes

**Awareness, Actions and Attitudes** are the building blocks of proactive strategies for post-deployment transition.

## Be mentally prepared to take a step back and take stock.

Despite eagerness to resume your life together, you may be wondering or even worrying about how a combat zone experience has changed your loved one and how the time apart has changed your relationship. Service members often return from deployment with a battlefield mindset that takes a while to lessen. This mindset may include emotional toughness, mission focus, hyper-vigilance and distrust. Your loved one may be feeling as if he or she is still overseas rather than really back home—closer to those he or she served with and to the military mission than to you and the children. For a while, nothing else may seem as important to them. It may be a challenge for each of you to simply appreciate what you have been through. Furthermore, you and your family have new habits and ways of being close to each other—this among other things will need to be reworked as you reinvent your family life together. You must start not where you left off, but from where you are now.

## Awareness

**Tip 1:** Remain mindful that you and your family are undergoing a transition that will take individual and collective time and effort. The mixed emotions—joy, resentment, relief and anxiety—during this transition can make you feel unsteady. Remember to be kind to yourself so that you can remain patient with your spouse, your children, and yourself.

## Encourage communication.

Communication is perhaps the most important tool in a post-deployment reunion. Being face-to-face is different from the contact you have had with each other through phone calls, e-mails, and text messages. Words can make or break a relationship, so take time to consider what and how you communicate. Become an expert in the art of communicating by—

- Remembering that listening and observing are essential;
- Voicing praise and encouragement as well as concerns;
- Using “I” statements; not “You” statements;
- Setting an open tone; and
- Remembering to include your children in this process.

Keep in mind that modeling good communication skills provides your children with knowledge and practice for their future relationships.

## Actions

**Tip 2:** You may be prepared to resume your family life and relationship with your loved one, but there is a chance your returning spouse may not be ready. You’ve had to take care of everything and now you may be eager for your loved one to do the same. Your loved one’s ability to process all the changes at this time in his or her life may be at a different pace than yours. Your loved one may still be coming to terms with deployment events. Communicating with your partner and children can help clear the air: hold family meetings, ask questions, listen first, and don’t allow disputes to escalate to avoid fighting.

## Seek support: normalize the experience.

A service member’s family is his or her most valuable asset. There are many resources available to support you during your family reunion, because it is understood that coming home from a war zone has unique challenges for the entire family. You can go online and read about what other military families and spouses have experienced; reach out to friends or families you know who also have had a loved one return from combat; or utilize unit and installation resources that are available. If you need help outside of your friends and family, you can contact a local VA facility, seek out a chaplain or call Military OneSource for a referral in your area. Seeking support will help you feel less alone and empowers you by providing helpful information and ideas about what to expect and what actions to take for a positive outcome.

## Actions

**Tip 3:** Identify activities that you and your loved ones can do together that are simple and available. This could be as basic as going for a walk, exercising, having a picnic, getting outdoors to enjoy nature, or even practicing relaxation techniques together.





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*“I knew who I was when I woke up this morning,  
but I must have changed several times since then.”*

–Lewis Carroll

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### Plan down time.

While in a combat zone, your partner has been on constant high alert. Similarly, you have been on your own high alert while taking care of all matters at home. Creating safe, neutral opportunities to get to know and enjoy each other again offers you the chance to become reacquainted and to renew and strengthen your connection through enjoyment and fun.

## Actions

**Tip 4:** Being connected to sources of support and information helps you maintain your perspective and positive frame of mind; this fuels your healthy thinking and explains your actions.

### Allow time to readjust.

Your loved one has been involved in an extraordinary mission. Now, he or she is coming home with a different purpose, a different focus, different emotions and a different pace. He or she will need some time to figure out how to move ahead and to process the many emotions experienced during deployment.

## Attitudes

**Tip 5:** Constructive attitudes will help ease your transition.

- Be patient, don't give up.
- Be open to asking for help.
- Expect that change may feel uncomfortable.
- Look at both sides of things.
- Keep your thoughts positive.

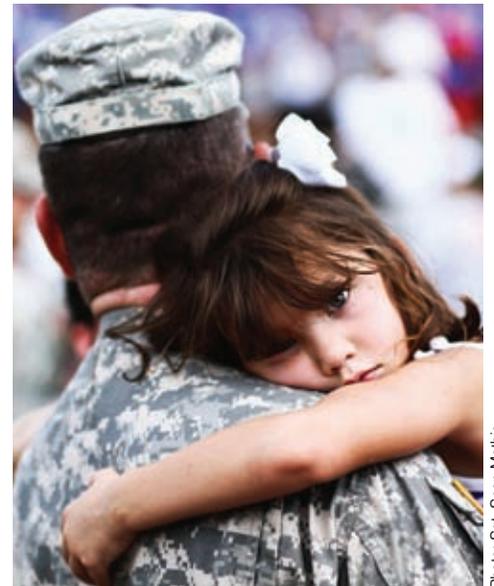


Photo: Sgt. Sean Mathis

# Post-Deployment Assistance for Service Members and Family Members

There are many resources available to help you deal with challenges that you might encounter during your post-deployment adjustment phase. The Department of Defense has created specialized programs that support service members and their families during this transition. The National Guard and Reserve components have a series of support programs that can assist in the absence of installation support, such as the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program and the Joint Family Service Assistance Program.

There are also service-specific support programs such as Air Force Family Support Centers, Army Service Centers, Marine Corps Community Services and Fleet and Family Service Centers for the Navy located on military installations. In addition, there are numerous online resources to provide you with support from wherever you are, any time of day. Whether or not you feel you have encountered problems, it is well worth the time to explore Military OneSource, After Deployment, Real Warriors, and the Defense Centers of Excellence.

## **Military OneSource**

(800) 342-9647 is available to assist you throughout the deployment cycle, on any topic, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.  
[www.Militaryonesource.com](http://www.Militaryonesource.com)

## **Afterdeployment.org**

Here you will find information and self-guided solutions for dealing with health and wellness, stress, relationship problems, children and deployment, conflict at work, anger, living with physical injuries, sleep problems, depression, post-traumatic stress and war memories, alcohol and drug abuse and spiritual guidance and fitness.  
[www.Afterdeployment.org](http://www.Afterdeployment.org)

## **Real Warriors Campaign**

Real stories of strength and hope along with other useful news and information to build warrior and family resilience to support your return and transition.  
[www.RealWarriors.net](http://www.RealWarriors.net)

## **Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health & Traumatic Brain Injury Outreach Center**

Provides information and resources 24/7 about resilience, recovery and reintegration.  
(866) 966-1020  
[www.DCOE.Health.mil](http://www.DCOE.Health.mil)

## **Our Military**

For information on both government and community support.  
[www.ourmilitary.mil](http://www.ourmilitary.mil)

## **Veterans Health Administration**

Healthcare information, VA Medical Center facility locator and benefits assistance.  
(877) 222-VETS (8387)  
<http://www1.va.gov/health/index.asp>

## **Vet Centers**

Provide free readjustment counseling and outreach services to all veterans who served in a combat zone. Also available for family members dealing with military-related issues.  
[www.VetCenter.va.gov](http://www.VetCenter.va.gov)

## **American Red Cross**

Under its 1905 Congressional Charter, the American Red Cross is charged with the responsibility to provide service to members of the Armed Forces. Thousands of Red Cross employees and volunteers are supporting service members, veterans and their families on military installations throughout the world, in military and VA healthcare facilities and through a network of hundreds of Red Cross chapters across the United States. The American Red Cross continues to build upon our long-standing services by enhancing our existing programs and by establishing new services to meet the needs of today's service members and their families.

- Emergency Communications
- Emergency Financial Assistance
- Service in Military and VA Medical Facilities
- Community Support

[redcross.org](http://redcross.org).

*“It is good to have an end to journey toward:  
But it is the journey that matters in the end.”*

–Ursula Le Guin





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