MODULE 1

Returning to Family Life after a Deployment

Materials Needed:

- Handout 1: What the Returning Service Member/Veteran Can Do
- Handout 2: What Family Members at Home Can Do
- Handout 3: Caring Behaviors Exercise
- Handout 4: Understanding and Supporting the Children in Your Life
- Handout 5: Parenting Tips

- Copies of the Veterans Parenting Toolkit, available for free at www.ouhsc.edu/vetparenting

Provider Note: Today’s session covers several topics regarding the changes families make during and after a deployment and tips for how families can succeed during this transition. The class begins with a group discussion on the changes each member of the family made to cope with the deployment.

The following discussions are aimed at helping both the returning service member/veteran and the family member(s) who were at home understand some of the unique challenges that the other faced, both during and after the deployment. The goal here is to have a discussion that increases each family member’s understanding of the other’s experience.

I. Understanding the Returning Service Member/Veteran's Experience of Deployment and Reintegration

Discussion Question (for the service members/veterans):

- What were some of the challenges you faced during the deployment?

Provider Note: Write the answers the group gives on the board. The following is a list of some of the things you might want to include:

A. The deployment involved living in a hot, dry desert without the comforts of home. Service members go without the privacy, food, housing, and other comforts that many of us take for granted.

B. The deployment involved difficult work and enormous responsibility, with very few breaks or time to relax.

C. On dangerous deployments, service members form extremely strong bonds with their units. This is often what sustains them in the midst of difficult circumstances.
Leaving behind these relationships can be a major loss when a service member returns from combat.

D. During deployment service members participated in stressful events and may have taken part in operations that exposed them to life-threatening situations. They may have been shot at, and/or seen the death or injury of other soldiers, the enemy, or civilians.

**Discussion Question (for the service members/veterans):**

- What were some of the challenges you faced upon your return home?

**Provider Note:** Write the answers the group gives on the board. The following is a list of some of the things you might want to include:

A. The returning service member/veteran may seem preoccupied with the experiences deployment. He or she may be unable to talk about it or may excessively talk about it.

B. The returning service member/veteran may have suffered physical or emotional injury or disability.

C. The service member/veteran may expect extra attention and support for some time after returning from combat.

D. The returning service member/veteran may have serious concerns about their financial or employment future. Many Guard and Reserve members left behind their jobs and careers and may continue to worry about their employment prospects after returning.

**II. Understanding the Adult Family Members Who Stayed Home**

**Discussion Question (for the family members who stayed home):**

- What were some of the challenges you faced during your service member/veteran's deployment?

**Provider Note:** Write the answers the group gives on the board. The following is a list of some of the things you might want to include:

A. The family member that remained at home had to assume many responsibilities, such as assuming additional work, making household decisions alone, dealing with parenting issues without support, etc.
B. The adult at home has to navigate many of the changes that families undergo without being able to discuss them with the partner. These changes may come as a surprise to the returning service member/veteran.

C. The family member at home had to live with significant anxiety and uncertainty while their service member/veteran was deployed.

Discussion Question (for the family members who stayed home):

- What were some of the challenges you faced upon your service member/veteran's return home?

Provider Note: Write the answers the group gives on the board. The following is a list of some of the things you might want to include:

A. The adult at home may feel ambivalent about giving up some of the responsibilities assumed while the service member was deployed. He or she may not want to return to their previous role, and may want to maintain their increased independence.

B. For someone whose service member/veteran was injured (physically or psychologically) as a result of his or her combat experience, there can be a considerable adjustment to the "new normal."

C. Family members often report being unsure of how to talk about the war with their veteran/service member or of how be most supportive.

Provider Note: After you have completed these lists, have group members share what it was like to hear about other group member's experiences. Ask if any participants now have a better understanding of their service members/veterans or family members. Explain that understanding is often the first step in building more supportive relationships and that continuing a dialogue about each other's experiences may be a helpful way to rebuild a sense of connection. Explain that the next portion of the module will focus on increasing support and positive interactions in the relationship.

Provider Note: Break the group into two, a group of service members/veterans and a group of family members. Have each group choose someone to take notes. Have the service members/veterans write down a list of ideas they have for how to be supportive of the family members who were home while they deal with reintegration adjustments. Have the group of family members who stayed home make a list of ideas they have for how to be supportive of the service members/veterans during the reintegration process. See Handouts 1 & 2 for examples of things they might include. Once the groups are finished with their lists, bring the group together to share their lists. Allow time for the group to discuss. Distribute Handouts 1 & 2 to the appropriate group members and allow some additional times to discuss the suggestions and any other ideas the group generated.
III. **Caring Behaviors Exercise**

- In addition to the ideas just discussed for increasing support and strengthening relationships, research has found that simple, regular caring behaviors can go a long way toward improving relationships and relationship satisfaction.

- Caring behaviors are simple, meaningful behaviors that express our love for our family members. These behaviors do not have to be complicated or expensive, but they should be thoughtful and done regularly. They are a great way to strengthen a relationship after being separated by a deployment.

**Provider Note:** Distribute **Handout 3:** “Caring Behaviors Exercise” worksheet. Ask each person to write down a few simple behaviors that the family member could do every day. Remind the group to phrase their requests in terms of things they want rather than things they do not want. Examples include: kissing me goodbye before I leave for work, putting lotion on my back, picking up your things at the end of the day, sitting next to me on the couch, asking how my day went, helping give the kids their baths, watching a TV show I enjoy with me, exercising together, etc.

Ask the group members to read their lists to their family members. Encourage group members attending alone, to share this activity with their family members when they get home.

Group members should post their lists in a prominent place in their homes and do 2-3 things from their family member’s lists each day. Remind the group that consistency is key, and that saying “thank you” is essential.

IV. **Supporting Children**

**Provider Note:** Ask the group members who have regular contact with children to raise their hands. Spend a moment finding out about the children in the veterans’/service members’ and family members’ lives. Explain that while everyone does not have children, most of us currently have or will have relationships with children, and that the group is going to spend a few minutes during this session discussing the needs of children. If you have more than one group leader, you may want to divide the group into those members with children to focus on this module and spend the time with those who do not have children reviewing the caring behaviors exercise.

A free toolkit called the "Veteran's Parenting Toolkit" by Sherman, Bowling, Wyche & Anderson is available at [www.ouhsc.edu/vetparenting](http://www.ouhsc.edu/vetparenting). Print and have available copies of these toolkits to distribute to the class.

V. **Understanding Children's Experience of Parental Homecoming**

**Provider Note:** Ask those who have some regular time with children to state the names, ages, and interests of the children. As you discuss each of the developmental stages of children and
common reactions in this next section, first ask the group members what behavioral changes they would expect. Praise group members for their awareness of children’s behavior under stress.

Discussion Questions:

- What changes did you notice in your children during the deployment?
- How did your children adjust to your spouse’s return?
- How can you support your children in meeting their needs?

A. Children generally are excited about a reunion with their returning parents. However, the excitement of the reunion can also be stressful for children. Children may be anxious and uncertain about the reunion for some time.

B. Children may need a period of time to warm up and readjust to the returning parent. This is common and should not be taken personally by the service member/veteran.

C. Children’s responses may differ depending on their developmental level. The following are some of the responses you may expect in various ages of children upon the service member/veterans return:

1. Infants (Birth-12 months) may respond to disruptions in their schedule, environment, or availability of their caregivers with changes in appetite, sleep, increased crying and irritability. They may not initially recognize the parent who was deployed and may need extra time to be reacquainted.

2. Toddlers (1-3 yrs) may become sullen and tearful, throw tantrums, develop sleep problems, or act younger than their age. They may need time to become reacquainted with their returning parent and may be clingy and needy.

3. Preschoolers (3-6 yrs) may act younger than their age and develop problems with toilet training, sleep, separation fears, etc. They may believe that the absence of their parents was somehow their fault and may need reassurance that they did not cause it. Children at this age are also likely to “test the limits.” These children thrive on consistency and structure.

4. School-age children (6-12 yrs) are far more aware of the realities surrounding their parents’ absence and the potential dangers of deployment. During deployment, they may have been more irritable, whiny, or sullen. They may have difficulty adjusting to the parents return and may be slow to warm up to that parent, or they may cling to the new parent and become critical of the parent who cared for them during the deployment. They may also try to monopolize the returning parent. Scheduling special times and activities with children will help them to “share” their parent during the rest of the week.

5. Teenagers (13-18 yrs) may be rebellious, irritable, or challenging of their parents’ authority. They may act “cool” towards the returning parents, or may be very interested in learning about their parent’s experience. Expect
teenagers to vary widely in their emotional responses and maturity level on a moment-to-moment basis. If a teenager seems distressed, parents need to be alert to high-risk behaviors such as problems with the law, sexual acting out, and drug use.

VI. **Parenting Tips**

**Discussion Questions:**

- What changes did you notice in your children during the deployment?
- How did your children adjust to your spouse’s return?
- How can you support your children in meeting their needs?

**Provider Note:** Ask the group members to write on the board a list of tips that they think would be helpful in parenting children who are experiencing a parent’s deployment or adjusting to their return. Some tips you might want to consider include:

A. Share information with your children about your family member’s experience in a way they can understand based on their age and level of maturity. Show your children a map of where the veteran/service member was, read them children’s books about deployment and return, or watch videos (such as the Sesame Street series) that talk about the reintegration experience. Answer questions directly and simply, using language your child can understand.

B. Continue or resume family traditions, discipline, and structure.

C. Monitor children’s exposure to media about the war, especially if redeployment is a possibility.

D. Encourage your child’s open and honest expression of worries, feelings, and questions.

E. Have each parent continue to make an effort to spend a few minutes of one-on-one time with each child on a daily basis. Try to make this something that you both enjoy, like riding bikes, playing a board game, or reading a book.

F. Remember that change is just as stressful for children as it is for adults.

G. Work with your spouse to agree on rules and discipline. Present a united front on matters of discipline.

H. Re-engage with your children at their level, through their activities.

VII. **Wrap-Up**
- Distribute Handouts 4 & 5 to group members.
- Ask that the group members complete the Caring Behaviors Worksheet in the next day or two, then practice for the next week.
- Answer any questions the group may have.
- Have group members complete the evaluation and knowledge forms (Handouts D & E).
- Remind the group of the next group date and time, and pass out reminder cards.
What the Returning Service Member/Veteran Can Do

1) Make time for your family.

2) Work with your family to reestablish a consistent routine at home.

3) Take time to talk to your spouse or partner. To the extent that you are comfortable doing so, share your experiences while away and make time to listen to your spouse. You have both had new experiences and likely would benefit from talking about the changes that took place while you were apart.

4) Intimacy and sexual relations may be awkward at first. Take your time. Make an effort to be patient with your partner and to “romance” them, much as you did when you were first dating.

5) Take time to learn how your family dealt with your absence. Find out how they dealt with household matters, parenting, etc. Try hard to understand and compliment your partner’s approach to this adjustment rather than criticizing them. Remember that your partner did his/her best to run the household single-handedly. Give them credit for their efforts.

6) Spend time alone with each member of your family. Make “date nights” with your spouse, and arrange to have “special time” with your children.

7) Remember that time with your spouse and children is more important than money or fancy gifts. Be careful not to end up in the stress of excessive debt following your return.

8) Be gentle with yourself and your family. Give yourself time to ease back into family relationships.

9) Acknowledge the many responsibilities your spouse had to shoulder while you were gone. Express your gratitude.

10) It is normal to feel some apprehension about discussing your experience with your family members. Take your time with this, while recognizing that your family members may be able to listen more supportively than you realize.

Other ideas from my group:

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What the Family Member who Stayed at Home Can Do

1) Make sure to continue to make time to care for yourself. If you have developed habits or hobbies (such as exercise, time alone to read, etc.), try to continue to make this time for yourself.

2) Spend time talking to each other. You’ve each taken on extra responsibilities and endured extra stress during the time apart. Take time to share about each of your experiences.

3) Understand that your spouse has had a very intense emotional experience. He or she may have difficulty describing feelings or experiences or may want to talk about the experience quite a bit. Either way, do your best to allow your partner time to settle back into life at home. Your spouse may not want to share about everything that happened; this is very normal. Do your best not to take it personally.

4) You may find the deployment has strained your relationship. Time and negotiation will help you work toward a new loving relationship.

5) Family problems that existed before the deployment frequently reappear after the deployment. Be patient with the issues that arise, and don’t be afraid to seek professional help if needed.

6) Extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles may have helped you during the deployment. They may have difficulty redefining their roles with the family after the service member/veteran's return. Talk openly about these changes with all concerned.

7) All family members will need time to adjust to the changes that accompany the return of the deployed family member.

8) Open discussions of expectations prior to the return home are helpful if they are possible.

9) Families should utilize the help offered by the military and other organizations to readjust to the reunion.

10) Most families will change. Children have been born or have grown. You may have become more independent. Be aware that this can be difficult for a returning service member/veteran to adjust to.

11) Your service member/veteran may be a little hurt by how well you did during the deployment. Make sure your spouse that you missed him or her and that you are happy they are home.

12) Despite the difficulty your spouse has gone through, violence towards you is never an acceptable response. If you are a victim of domestic violence, get help. There are
many free or low cost counseling programs available. A list is available in the Anger Management Module of this program, you can speak to your group leader and ask for phone numbers, or you can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-SAFE.

Other ideas from my group:

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Caring Behaviors Exercise

Instructions:

Please list specific behaviors that you would like your family member to do for you. It’s better to phrase the requests in terms of what you’d like your partner to increase or do more of (rather than what he or she should not do).

After completing your lists, post both lists together in a place where you both can see them often. Every single day for the next 3 weeks, initiate 2-3 of these caring behaviors for your partner.

TIPS: *** Take the first risk! ***

*** Do at least one caring behavior daily NO MATTER HOW YOU FEEL! ***

This exercise is designed to strengthen the emotional bond in your relationship. Like any exercise, the effectiveness of the outcome will depend on your discipline and commitment to the procedure.

CARING BEHAVIORS to be done for __________________ by _______________

1. _____________________________________________________________________

2. _____________________________________________________________________

3. _____________________________________________________________________

4. _____________________________________________________________________

5. _____________________________________________________________________

6. _____________________________________________________________________

7. _____________________________________________________________________

8. _____________________________________________________________________

9. _____________________________________________________________________

10. ____________________________________________________________________
Understanding and Supporting the Children in Your Life

1) Children generally are excited about a reunion with their returning parent. However, the excitement of the reunion can also be stressful for children. Children may be anxious and uncertain about the reunion for some time.

2) Children may need a period of time to warm up and readjust to the returning parent. This is common and should not be taken personally by the service member/veteran.

3) Children’s responses may differ depending on their developmental level. The following are some of the responses you may expect in various ages of children upon the service member/veterans return:

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Parenting Tips

1) Share information with your children about your family member’s experience in a way they can understand based on their ages and levels of maturity. Show your children a map of where their family member is/was; read them children’s books about deployment, etc.

2) Continue family traditions, discipline, and structure during and after deployment.

3) Monitor children’s exposure to media coverage of the war.

4) Encourage your child’s open and honest expression of worries, feelings, and questions.

5) Have each parent continue to make an effort to spend a few minutes of one-on-one time with each child on a daily basis. Try to make this something you both enjoy, like reading a book, riding bikes, or playing a board game together.

6) Remember that change is just as stressful for children as for adults.

7) Work with your spouse to agree on rules and discipline. Present a united front on matters of discipline.

8) Take time to play with your children at their level, doing the activities they most enjoy.

For more information on connecting with the children in your life and dealing with common parenting challenges, please see the Veterans Parenting Toolkit at www.ouhsc.edu/vetparenting.

Other ideas from my group:

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