

COPING WITH SEPARATION

Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare



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Studies in America have helped to shed light on the emotional hurdles facing Naval families as a result of deployment - these worthwhile findings are equally relevant to the families of Royal Navy servicemen and women, as well as the serving person themselves.

The real value of the research is in examining natural patterns of emotion - which nearly everyone goes through whilst experiencing separation. Realising that these emotions are natural - and that you are not the only family experiencing them - can go a long way towards helping you cope with the difficulty of being apart.

THE SYMPTOMS OF SEPARATION

Did you know that many naval families experience some or all of these perfectly normal emotions/reactions towards deployment?

Before deployment:

- anger, resentment and frustration
- arguing with each other
- crying at TV shows or songs
- finding it difficult to make decisions

During deployment:

- initial relief that the pain of saying goodbye is over
- guilt because of that relief (“does it mean I don’t really love him/her?”)
- difficulty in sleeping (or sometimes over-sleeping)
- restlessness and irritability

After deployment:

- an initial uneasiness with each other
- arguments or silences
- fear of sexual intimacy

THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT

Kathleen Vestel Logan, author of the American study and ex-Naval Officer, describes the ways in which the research can be used to help all naval families.

“The Emotional Cycle of Deployment (ECOD) model describes changes in naval wives’ behaviour and emotions during deployments of three months or more. Although it was initially developed for wives, the model has been useful in working with husbands and children as well.”

“The Navy has its own culture and traditions, and it is not helpful to compare military families to the civilian community. Most navy wives, for example, have heard from a civilian friend or relative the comment, “you’re so strong, I could never do it!” It makes them sound weird, like superwomen, when they are just doing the best they can under the circumstances. The ECOD presents a general picture. The cycle appears to be true for most women most of the time, but each person is unique - so obviously there will be exceptions.”

“Some people have expressed concern that there seems to be too much emphasis on “negative” feelings. First, feelings are neither good nor bad, they simply exist. Only actions can be negative. For example, there is nothing inherently wrong with feeling angry; ways of coping with that feeling, however, can vary from abusing a child (negative) to discussing solutions to the problem (positive). Some feelings - like loneliness, resentment, depression, anger and anxiety - are harder to identify and share. But they are a part of naval life too, and will not go away simply because people try to ignore them.”

“Acknowledging the whole range of feelings is the first step towards dealing with them in a healthy manner. Just because Naval couples live under abnormal circumstances does not mean they have to have sick marriages. In fact, experience supports the case that there is no stronger marriage than a good Naval marriage.”

“Getting ready for a deployment starts long before the husbands actually walk out the door. For a period of time, the women tend to ignore the deployment, fantasising that somehow it will not happen: “surely the ship will sink or he’ll get drafted ashore”. Eventually, something happens to trigger recognition of the reality of departure, perhaps a flip of the calendar so that “The Date” is visible. At this point, the Emotional Cycle of Deployment begins.”

Stage One

Anticipation of Loss - Anticipating departure

This stage occurs four to six weeks before deployment. During this time, it is hard for a person to accept the fact that their partner is going to leave them. They may find themselves crying unexpectedly at “silly things” (a song, TV shows etc.) which would normally not affect them. These incidents allow them to release some of their pent-up emotions. There is a lot of tension in this period, as both partners try to cram in a multitude of projects and activities (visiting families, various DIY duties etc.).

The partner staying at home may find they have some unexpressed anger, and the couple may bicker even though they usually don't. This can be upsetting if taken out of context. Although unenjoyable, these arguments can be functional: they provide one way in which the couple can put some distance between themselves in their preparation for living apart; one wife said feeling “mad” at her husband made it “easier to let him go”.

Other frequent symptoms of this stage include restlessness, depression and irritability. While the partners staying at home may feel angry or resentful (“are they really going to leave me alone with all this”), the partner going away tends to feel guilty (“there's no way I can get everything done that I should before I leave”).

Stage Two

Detachment and Withdrawal

During this time, partners may experience some ambivalence about sexual relations. The brain says “we've got to have sex: this is it for six months” while the heart may rebel “but I don't want to be that close”. Intercourse represents the ultimate intimacy - it is hard to be intimate when you are separating from each other emotionally. This can be especially difficult if it is seen as a rejection rather than a perfectly natural reaction to trying circumstances. The couple may find, too, that they stop sharing their thoughts and feelings with each other. This stage is most evident when departure is delayed for some reason. When asked whether they enjoyed the extra time together, partners invariably respond “it was awful!” The detachment and withdrawal stage is an uncomfortable time: though both are physically in the same house, emotionally they are separated. Partners staying at home may think “if you have to go, go” and the partner going away think “let's get on with it!”

Stage Three

Emotional Disorganisation

No matter how prepared individuals think they are, the actual deployment can still come as a shock. An initial sense of relief that the pain of saying goodbye is over, may be followed by guilt. They worry "if I do love them, why am I relieved that they have gone?" They may feel numb, aimless and without purpose. Old routines have been disrupted and new ones not yet established. Individuals can become depressed and sometimes will withdraw from friends and neighbours, especially if the neighbours' partners are home. They often feel overwhelmed as they face total responsibility for family affairs.

Some individuals may have difficulty sleeping, suddenly aware that they are the "security officer"; whilst others may sleep excessively. The partner left at home often reports feeling restless, concerned, disorganised, indecisive and irritable. The unspoken question is "what am I going to do with this "hole" in my life?" Many experience a sense of being service personnel report feeling "lonely and frustrated".

Stage Four

Recovery and Stabilisation

At some point, partners at home realise "I'm doing well!" They have established new family concerns and settled into a routine. They have begun to feel more comfortable with the reorganisation of roles and responsibilities, and each successful experience adds to their self-confidence. New sources of support are created through friends, work, community groups etc. Being separated brings freedom as well as responsibilities. This stage can be beneficial in creating opportunities to initiate new activities and accept more responsibilities - all while still "secure" in a relationship.

Nevertheless, all the responsibility can be stressful, and some may find that they are sick more frequently. Some will continue to feel mildly depressed and anxious as isolation from their partner can leave them feeling vulnerable. On the whole, though, most have a new sense of independence and freedom and take pride in their ability to cope alone.

Stage Five

Anticipation of Homecoming

Approximately four to six weeks before the deployed individual is due back, the partner at home often finds themselves saying “they are coming home and I’m not ready!” That long list of “things to do while they are gone” is still unfinished. The pace picks up. There is a feeling of joy and excitement in anticipation of being together again. Feelings of apprehension surface as well, although they are usually left unexpressed.

This is a time to re-evaluate the relationship. That “hole” left by their partner’s departure was filled - with work, friends and new interests - and now they instinctively know that they must “clean house” in their lives in order to make room for the serving persons return. Most experience an unconscious process of evaluating “I want them back but what am I going to have to give up?” They may feel nervous, tense and apprehensive.

Partners at home are concerned about the effect their serving person’s return will have on their lives and their children’s: will they understand and accept the changes that have occurred? Will they approve of the decisions made? Returning partners maybe anxious too, wondering “how have we changed? How will I be accepted? Will the kids know me?”

Some will bury these concerns in “busywork”. Once more, there maybe a sense of restlessness and confusion. Decisions become harder to make and may be postponed until the homecoming. Partners at home become irritable again and may experience changes in appetite. At some point a psychological decision is made. For most it is ‘do I want them back? You bet! I can’t wait to see them.

Stage Six

Renegotiating of the Relationship

This stage, too, is one in which the partners are together physically but not necessarily emotionally. They will have to have some time together and share experiences and feelings before they feel like a couple again. They both need to be aware of the necessity to refocus on the relationship. During this stage the task is to stop being “single” and start being in relationship again.

Most sense a loss of freedom and independence, while a minority are content to become dependent again. Routines established during the deployment are disrupted. "I have to cook a real dinner every night?!" This causes individuals to feel disorganised and out of control.

Although most couples never write it down, there is a "contract" in every relationship - a set of assumptions and expectations upon which they base their actions. During this stage, couples have to make major adjustments in roles and responsibilities; before that can happen, they must undertake an extensive re-negotiation of that unwritten contract.

The relationship cannot and will not be exactly the same as before the deployment: both partners have had various experiences and have grown in different ways, and these changes must be accommodated.

Too much togetherness initially can cause friction after so many months of living apart. More than one partner has had to cope with the fleeting shock of wonder "who's that person in my bedroom?!" Some resent their service person "making decisions that should be mine". Still others question "my partner wants me to give up all my activities while they are home. Should I?" The returning partner may wonder "why do I feel like a stranger in my own home?"

All of these concerns and pressures require partners to communicate with each other. Assumptions will not work. Some find that "talking as we go along" works best, while others keep silent until "we've had our first good fight, cleared the air, and everything's OK now". Sexual relations ardently desired before the return, may initially seem frightening. Couples need sufficient time together to become reacquainted before they can expect true intimacy.

This stage can be difficult as well as joyful. But it does provide an opportunity offered to few civilian couples: the chance to evaluate what changes have occurred within themselves to determine what direction they want their growth to take, and to integrate all of this into a renewed and refreshed relationship.

As you return from deployment.....

You've been places, seen things and had a lot of new experiences; it might be easy to think that your partner at home has enjoyed a stable, steady lifestyle and of course you'll be full of "news" to tell on your return. Remember, life has been very different for your family at home too, - don't expect everything

to be the same as before - and let them tell their story too. Ways in which your partner has changed or adapted to your deployment might take some getting used to, but be positive about it - it should make separation on your next deployment easier to deal with, because you'll know they can cope on their own even if they are missing you as much as you're missing them. It's easy to want them to be dependent on you and to feel lost without you, but it is better for all of you to nurture some feeling of independence. You'll always have your mates around you; your partner doesn't have this "team" support, so allow them their right to the independence they need in order to feel able to cope on their own.

Stage Seven

Reintegration and Stabilisation

New routines have been established for the family, and partners feel relaxed and comfortable with each other. There is a sense of being a couple and a family. They are back on the same track emotionally and can enjoy the warmth and closeness of being in a strong relationship.

Variations on the cycle

Once the basic ECOD model or cycle is understood, we can examine the effects of other kinds of deployments. It takes time to work through each stage; people's emotions cannot be forced to fit deployment schedules. Short deployments, in particular, can be disruptive as there is not enough time to get used to the serving person being away or at home. Longer deployments or those of uncertain length, with unreliable communications (such as submarine deployments) will take more effort to cope with, and can result in longer periods of stabilisation, or require greater "Renegotiation of the Relationships".

HOW TO USE ECOD MODEL

The model's primary usefulness seems to be in the area of prevention; many problems in Navy families could be avoided or minimised simply by understanding the process of adjustment. For example, lack of sexual intimacy just before deployment could be accepted as a natural reaction to difficult circumstances rather than being viewed as personal rejection. Arguing during that time may be tolerated instead of perceived as evidence of a deteriorating relationship. It also helps to know that it is perfectly normal to feel somewhat strange with each other at the homecoming. Almost everyone feels reassured just knowing that their range and fluctuations of emotions are normal.

Key personnel (e.g. Commanding Officers, Divisional Officers, Naval Personal and Family Service (NPFs), Royal Marines Welfare (RMW) and Chaplains) could use the model to be alerted to potential problems at stages, or to distinguish between temporary situation problems and those requiring more in-depth attention.

Individuals may find the model useful in normalising the emotions and difficulties that they may experience during periods of separation.

DEPLOYMENT ADJUSTMENT STAGES

Stage	Pre-deployment	Duration
1	Anticipation of Loss	1-6 weeks before deployment
2	Detachment and Withdrawal	Last week before deployment
	During Deployment	
3	Emotional Disorganisation	First six weeks of deployment
4	Recovery and Stabilisation	Occurs between stages 3 & 5; of variable duration
5	Anticipation of Homecoming	Six weeks before end of deployment
	Post-deployment	
6	Renegotiation of Relationship contract	Six weeks after end of deployment
7	Reintegration and Stabilisation	6 - 12 weeks after end of deployment

Note: Only the outline of the model is included opposite. The symptoms and behaviours are described in the article: *The Emotional Cycle of Deployment by Kathleen Vestel Logan was first published in US Naval Proceedings in February 1987.*

The Emotional Cycle Of Deployment

Anticipating Departure
(-6 weeks)

Detachment Withdrawal
(-1 Week)

Emotional Disorganisation
(+1-6 Weeks)

Recovering and Establishing Stability
(16-18 Weeks)

Anticipation and Homecoming
(18-24 Weeks)

Adjustment and Renegotiating of Relationships
(24-32 Weeks)

Restabilising Stability
(32-44 Weeks)



Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare (RNRMW)

'Resilient and Resourceful Naval Personnel, Families and Communities'

RNRMW offers a range of services to the Naval Service and their families, across the UK and overseas. RNRMW provides an accessible and confidential service in these key areas:

- Specialist Welfare
- Advice and Support to the Executive and Divisional/Regimental system
- Network of Community, Information and Communication Support

To access our services contact the RNRMW Portal Team:

Tel: **023 9272 8777**

Email: **navynps-peoplesptrnrmwportal@mod.gov.uk** who will assess your needs and discuss what steps will be taken to provide the support required.

For **Information and Community Support**

Email: **rnrm-wio@royalnavymail.mod.uk**

Or log onto **www.royalnavy.mod.uk** Where you will also find the

Royal Navy Forums which provide a safe and protected online environment for Naval Service personnel, their family and friends whilst serving as a conduit for bespoke information and updates directly from deployed ships and units, written specifically for and aimed at those left behind.

Website: **www.royalnavy.mod.uk/profile/register**

Children's Resources - RNRMW have a selection of resources for children, including When a Special Person Goes Away, My Memory Box. Contact Information Support for more details on **rnrm-wio@royalnavymail.mod.uk**

NAVAL FAMILIES FEDERATION

Offering an independent voice to Royal Naval and Royal Marines families. NFF also have some valuable resources for those with children experiencing separation.

Tel: **023 9265 4374**

Email: **admin@nff.org.uk**

Website: **www.nff.org.uk**

JOINT CASUALTY AND COMPASSIONATE CENTRE

For compassionate leave and travel from outside UK Waters.

Tel: **020 1452 519951**

Website: **www.gov.uk/joint-casualty-and-compassionate-centre-jccc**

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