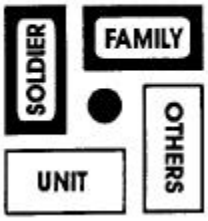
Homecoming Seminar



Deployments are difficult times for the whole family. Understanding some of the dynamics of family relationships can be helpful when reunion time comes. Homecoming is sometimes the most difficult part of deployment. Reality rarely matches our expectations.

Family members tend to fantasize how good homecoming will be in order to get through the deployment period. The soldier looks forward to returning to a loving family, super sex, peace and quiet, a good home-cooked meal. The spouse at home cleans in preparation for homecoming and plans a special meal. A wife may buy a new outfit in expectation of the return of a loving husband who will relieve her of responsibility for the kids. Reality, in contrast, may mean a fussy four-year-old who spills milk six times at the homecoming meal; a husband who doesn't notice the new outfit; a spouse who forgot to make the car payment while the soldier was gone.

A homecoming briefing or seminar to prepare soldiers and their families for what to expect can lessen the shock and stress of homecoming. This section gives a suggested outline of points a homecoming briefing might address.

A. All anticipation of homecoming isn't positive. Be prepared for this.

   1. Old problems don't go away. If they were not resolved before deployment, they will still be there.
   2. New hurts (real or imagined) often arise. New anger may crop up during separation. Letters may not have gotten through, or there may be disagreement with the decisions made by the spouse remaining at home.
   3. Fidelity may be an issue.

B. Mixed feelings about reunion are normal.

   1. You may be happy to see each other, but each resent the other. Avoid competition over "who had it worse."
   2. Each spouse wants the other to take care of him or her.
   3. Both want to be together but they both also need space to be alone.
   4. The spouse at home had gotten used to his or her own routine and way of doing things, while the soldier has had to abide by the Army routine - where there is a right and wrong way of doing everything.

C. It is normal to "pigeonhole" your feelings during deployment; this is an emotional survival tactic.

   1. The soldier buries (or suppresses) his or her feelings so as not to miss the family too much.
   2. The spouse suppresses his or her feelings in order to get through the lonely nights.

3. It takes time to open up to our feelings and to feel the love again.

   a. For husbands, developing loving closeness with the children may take time.
   b. Wives may not be as responsive sexually at first; this may take some time, too.
   c. Kids may be angry at Dad or Mom for going away. They may not let you pick them up or get close at first.

D. When homecoming expectations fall short of reality, there are steps you can take.

1. Recognize the problems. Awareness is half the battle. Now that you are aware of the situation, you can change it.
2. Talk about it without blaming the other person. Try to see some humor in the situation. Realize there will be some awkwardness and that it's okay to discuss your feelings.
3. Give each other physical and emotional space. Don't pressure your wife into sex or your children into talking. Give your family time to get used to your presence and be ready to talk.
4. Have good communication.

   a. Remember that the message sent isn't always the message received.
   b. Our emotions distort the message; one partner or the other may be angry or upset.
   c. Feedback is necessary; otherwise, we may wrongly assume our messages are understood.

   For example, a man might say to his wife, "When's dinner ready?" She hears, "You're late cooking; get busy!" What he meant was, "I'm really looking forward to dinner with you."

   Or the wife might say, "I don't have enough money to buy groceries." He might hear, "You don't make enough." What she meant was, "I forgot to cash a check!"

5. Nonverbal communication is as powerful as verbal and usually says more than one might be willing to state verbally.

   a. Walking in the door, sitting down and watching TV without saying anything is still communicating.
   b. A powerful message is being sent, but it may be an ambiguous one.
   c. Negative feelings should be put into words to allow the other person to deal with your feelings. Otherwise we can avoid responsibility for these.
   d. Your tone of voice must match your words to convey the right message. No matter how hard you try, your voice will betray your emotions.

   For example, depending on our tone of voice, we can say "You look great!" and either be sincere or mean just the opposite.

6. Remember that men and women sometimes communicate differently. For example, a wife is describing her feelings when she says, "I don't want you to go." A husband may respond with a factual statement: "You know I have no choice."

   The husband might have shown that he understands the wife's feelings by saying instead, "I know it's hard on you, but it's part of my job." This type of "feeling response" can often avoid an argument.

E. Many strategies used in relationships have negative effects.

1. We sometimes talk or think our way into being angrier about a situation than we need to be.
2. We may resort to labeling or name-calling - categorizing someone in a totally negative manner ("You jerk!") while forgetting all about their many positive traits.
3. We may think we can mind-read and assume we know why a person acted in a certain way, even believing they were just trying to hurt or get back at us. ("She is trying to drive me crazy.")
4. We may also think we can tell the future, believing that because something happened in the past that it will continue. ("He'll never change.")
5. We may exaggerate the importance of a negative event rather than being mildly annoyed over an inconvenience. ("I can't stand it.")
6. We make "should" statements, translating preferences into demands. ("Because I said so.") This causes feelings of injustice, self-righteous anger and vengeance.

F. To combating "self-angering" thoughts and overcome reliance on negative strategies, try positive ones instead.

1. Avoid labeling by focusing on the behavior, not the personality. ("I don't like her complaining about the Army.")
2. Avoid trying to guess about motives and intentions. ("I don't know why she's doing this.")
3. Remember that nobody knows the future. Negative predictions can become self-fulfilling prophecies; if you don't think things will get better, they probably won't. Avoid the words "always" and "never."
4. Think carefully about how bad or inconvenient something really is. Is it really the end of the world or just an inconvenience?
5. Don't make your preferences into demands on others; don't assume everyone has to do things your way.

6. Expect a certain amount of "craziness." It's better for your mental health and the health of your relationship. Try to accept your spouse's behavior and work out ways to handle the differences.

G. The incidents of spouse and child abuse increase immediately before and after deployments. The emotional factors associated with separation are a major cause. Expectations also play a role. Be aware of this.

1. Your child may not respond to you as you expect.
   a. The child may have learned to live by different rules while the soldier was away.
   b. Discipline by example is perhaps the best control you can have on your kids.
   c. You will have to readjust to being around kids again; giving orders as though still in the field does not make for an open and happy family.
2. Recognize the signs of child abuse.
   a. Disciplining that leaves marks or bruises or hitting a child on the face or head are definitely abuse.
   b. Emotional abuse (involving name-calling, threatening and so on) can be more damaging than physical abuse.
3. Recognize the forms spouse abuse can take.
   a. Physical battering may be involved.
   b. Sexual abuse (including marital rape) also constitutes abuse.
   c. Psychological abuse (threats or harassment; more than an argument) is another form of abuse.
   d. Destruction of property or pets is also abuse.
4. Recognize the causes of spouse abuse.
   a. Concerns about fidelity may be involved.
   b. The returning soldier may resent changes made while the soldier was gone.
   c. Your spouse may be doing some things differently now, and you want to have more control.
   d. Husbands may resent their wives becoming more independent.
   e. Each spouse may want his or her needs met immediately.

The material above will work best if it is combined with interactive exercises that allow those attending to participate and explore their feelings rather than just listening passively. See the section in Chapter 4 on family separation workshops for examples, and the "Homecoming" section of that chapter for additional ideas. Some material suggested earlier in this chapter for predeployment briefings may also be useful at homecoming.