

MINDLINES

NAVAL CENTER FOR COMBAT & OPERATIONAL STRESS CONTROL

THE FIRST RIPPLE IN THE RING

BY CAPT. PAUL S. HAMMER, MC, USN

Today's military operational tempo is very different from the past. Two extended wars, multiple deployments, decreased time between tours, the numbers of the Individual Augmentee and more.

What isn't different is the incredible adaptability required of our military families to stay strong and resilient in the face of war, sacrifice and separation. Mission ready are their watchwords, too.

Everyone changes to some degree during a service member's deployment, and adjustments upon returning home are always required. With empathy and good communication skills, most families, including the service member, return to what they consider "normal" in fairly quick order. For others, though, it doesn't work that way.

It invariably is family members who first notice a stress injury or illness in a Sailor or Marine returning from deployment. They are the first ripple in the ring of relationships that are affected by such maladies as major depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. Like the proverbial stone tossed into the pond, the ripples multiply and lives can become seriously derailed if these conditions are not treated.

Not only are families usually the first to notice a service member's psychological problem, they often provide the impetus to get the Sailor or Marine into treatment. Here is where education and an awareness of the vast number of available support resources become critical. The resilient family knows when and where to find help. The resilient family is proactive and gets help.

Our mission at NCCOSC is to promote force readiness through a commitment to psychological health — for Sailors, Marines and their families. It is our aim to provide important tools to our constituents to understand and deal effectively with the stresses of modern military demands.

Clearly, today's military life can take its toll in many sad ways.

It is with that spirit that we dedicate this issue of *Mindlines* to the families of our service members. We have selected several important topics to help with the demands during and after deployment. One constant is emphasized throughout: Take care of yourself.

Just as the current conflicts have impacted the psychological health of some of our service members so have they affected their families.

Surveys and research studies report:

- higher rates of divorce among today's military families
- a rising incidence of behavioral and psychological problems among military kids
- escalating numbers of domestic violence cases
- higher percentages of service members with alcohol problems.

Clearly, today's military life can take its toll in many sad ways.



ALL GOOD ON THE HOME FRONT

LIFE SKILLS

MINDLINES . Issue 4

2

AUTUMN 2009

Like their deployed Sailor or Marine, the military family at home also has a mission. It's stated in lots of different ways, but the basic assignment boils down to "stay strong and carry on." Simple advice for what often is a difficult task.

The deployment alone brings new demands to even the most resilient of families, and many adapt remarkably well to the required role changes and added responsibilities while their service member is away. But toss in some additional stressors—such as unexpected financial factors, a special-needs child or a relocation away from the family's traditional support system — and the hardest military family can find itself in trouble.

It's what psychologist Dr. John A. Clapp calls "an integrated stress package."

"Deployment requires a heightened awareness of looking at the existing family and identifying the sources of stress for all family members in tandem with the military stresses that are going on," says Clapp, who has worked with military families for more than 30 years. He currently is program coordinator for NCCOSC.

"All behavior is a statement that either reflects our love for one another or doesn't. No one should forget that."

Clapp offers some straightforward suggestions to help build and maintain family strength, especially during a deployment.

It begins, he says, with family members recognizing they each want the same things — love, respect, security, good communication, fun — and recognizing everyone's responsibility to promote those qualities in the family.

"Everyday, each person needs to ask, 'How is my behavior, attitude, communication style promoting the family goals that we all share,'" says Clapp. Parents and older siblings who practice this set a great example for the younger kids.

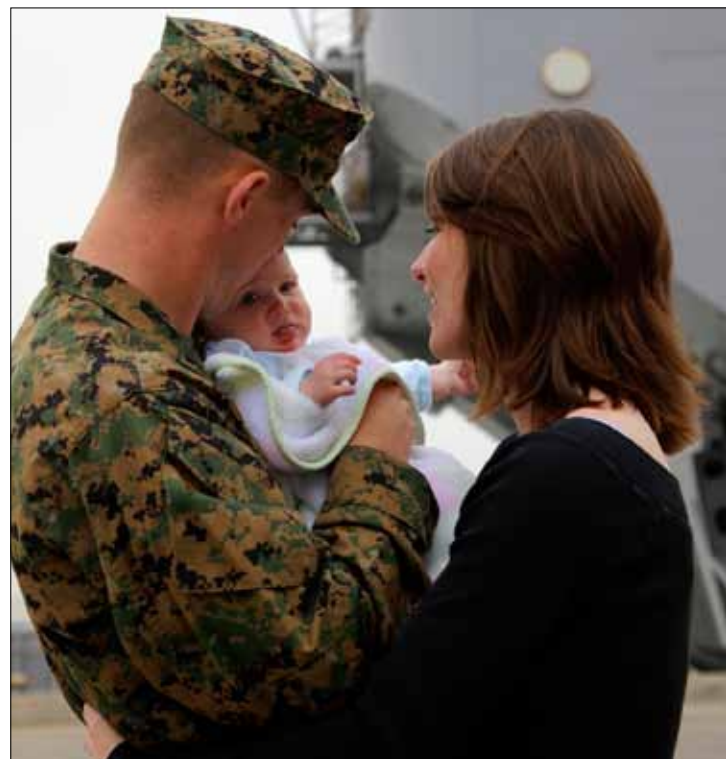
Structure and routines provide family support, Clapp says, adding: "Everybody needs to be flexible, but do some simple things like having dinner as a family at least once or twice a week."

Also schedule time every week for a family meeting, even if it's only 15 or 30 minutes. "This is where each member gets to say how he or she is doing and to express what's important to them. So often, families only do this when something bad has happened, but to practice this regularly builds resilience."

Be a good friend and a good listener to your family members, and respect their time. "If someone is not ready to talk about a problem," says Clapp, "respect that but realize the individual does, at some point, have the responsibility to talk about what's bothering him or her."

Express affection and care for each other everyday. "All behavior is a statement that either reflects our love for one another or doesn't," Clapp says. "No one should forget that."

These simple things add up, says Clapp. "The hard part is to build these steps into your daily repertoire but once you do, they really become invaluable life skills."



FAMILY ADJUSTMENTS

All You Have to do is Ask

Problems faced during and after deployment usually involve family readjustments, relationship issues or financial matters. Individually, the problems can seem overwhelming; talking them over with a professional counselor helps bring perspective and a plan for positive action.

There are a vast number of support resources available to Navy and Marine families. Here's a short list of the most comprehensive to get you started.

Resources

Navy Fleet and Family Support Centers (FFSC) provide free counseling for individuals, couples and children. In addition to one-on-one sessions, there are workshops, classes and support groups for everything from debt management to effective parenting to IA support. www.nffsp.org

Every Navy command should have an **Ombudsman**, a volunteer spouse of a Sailor in the command who serves as an important communications link with family members. Ombudsmen, who are appointed by the commanding officer, provide referral sources and are advocates for family members. They are a tremendous Navy resource. For more information, click on "Ombudsman Program" at www.nffsp.org.

Families of Marines, get to know your **FRO!** The **Family Readiness Officer** is a full-time paid position, assisted by volunteers, assigned to each unit. FROs can help line up counseling and, overall, provide a wealth of resources for challenges associated with deployment. The program operates under the auspices of Marine Corps Community Services, located at all Marine installations. www.usmc-mccs.org.

Military OneSource is one of the best bargains available to active duty and their families. Its many services include 12 free counseling sessions per service member or family member, per issue; sessions are conducted 24/7 in person, on the phone or online. Complete information is available at www.MilitaryOneSource.com or by calling **800-342-9647**. The service is provided by the Department of Defense.

TRICARE, the civilian-care component of the Military Health System, recently launched the **TRICARE Assistance Program (TRIAP)**, a free Web-based service for psychological health services. Available to active-duty service members and their families, TRIAP uses audiovisual telecommunications systems, such as video chat and instant messaging. Assistance counselors are on hand around-the-clock for nearly any behavioral health issue, and a referral or prior authorization is not required. For complete information, see www.tricare.mil/TRIAP.

A note about confidentiality

Counseling sessions for the services described above are private and confidential except when the issues involve family maltreatment, threats of harm to self or others, substance abuse or illegal activities.



CONNECTING WITH KIDS



Children have lots of questions about deployment and what it means for the parent who is away. It's especially important for their questions to be answered openly, honestly and calmly.

Some Practical Pointers

- Encourage children to ask questions and use language suitable to the age and development level of each child in answering.
- Let kids know that their thoughts and feelings are important to you.
- If a child has trouble verbalizing thoughts, suggest another way of expression, such as drawing, telling stories or playing with puppets.
- Keep routines as consistent and predictable as possible; children are reassured by structure and familiarity.
- Let kids be kids. Even in times of war, kids need to play, laugh and continue to grow and learn.



“Military teens may be assuming some adult responsibilities during a deployment, but they still are teens with teen brains. It’s important they have parental guidance to develop healthy problem-solving and coping skills.”

Tips for all Ages

Early Childhood

- Be calm around babies and toddlers.
- Keep to your normal routine as much as possible.

Pre-school

- Setting and sticking to bedtimes is very important. Looking at books, reading stories and tuck-ins are vital.
- Give kids lots of hugs and physical reassurance.
- Safety is a real concern for this age group. Reassure youngsters that adults are in charge and will keep them safe. Let them know you will protect them and keep them safe.

Elementary School

- Be open. Ask the kids if they have any questions and answer them without overreacting.
- Spend extra time together to provide additional reassurance.
- Limit television use and continue normal routines, especially at bedtime.

Middle School

- Children this age are extremely aware of their surroundings, so encourage them to talk about their feelings.
- Remember not to burden them with any fears you might be experiencing.
- Use historical examples — the Civil War or World War II, for example — to provide kids with a sense of hope and to explain how the United States has survived very difficult times in the past.

High School

- Some teens make jokes, so remember that humor can be a way to cope with difficult emotions they might be experiencing.
- Be open and allow them to express their feelings in different ways.
- Teens are focused on the events in their own lives. They might not want to talk about the deployment at all. Encourage conversation but don't force it.

A Special Note for the Parents of Teens

Military teenagers with a deployed mom or dad face a good news/bad news situation.

On the plus side, they often develop increased self-confidence and independence, a strengthened relationship with the parent at home and a closer connection with the deployed parent through letters, emails and calls. On the down side, they may end up filling the support role of the deployed parent at the same time they are still trying to figure out their own identity.

“Military teens may be assuming some adult responsibilities during a deployment, but they still are teens with teen brains,” says Shannon Lelakes, a marriage and family therapist with NCCOSC. “It’s important they have parental guidance to develop healthy problem-solving and coping skills.”

The at-home parent needs to develop his or her own adult support network, rather than relying on the teen child to provide it. This is especially important in problems dealing with finances and marital relationships.

“Parents who have their own issues resolved are better able to focus on their families and be good role models for solving problems in a positive way,” Lelakes says.

A DEPLOYMENT PRO

I keep resilient by staying focused on the bigger picture and what it means for us all. I surround myself with people who support that same cause, and it is not about political party lines. The bottom line is, they are fighting and we are left behind — what can we do about it now? Move forward, don't look back.

The advice comes from one who knows whereof she speaks. Aime Fountain, 32, is the wife of Marine Corps 1st Sgt. Kevin Fountain, who recently deployed to Afghanistan on his third combat tour. It's his fifth deployment in total, and Aime has been through them all.

During the first three, the couple did not have children. Now they have two, a boy, 4, and a 2-year-old daughter, and a third child is due before Kevin returns home.

The deployments never get easier, Aime says, but her job as a nurse and a solid network of friends "have helped me keep my sanity."

Working made time go by quickly and helped me keep my mind off the deployment. I was able to meet new people and feel like I was making a positive contribution. When I wasn't working, I had a wonderful group of girlfriends that I surrounded myself with.

Deployment is such a personal experience but with so many commonalities, it's easy to relate to another military spouse if you just start talking. I think you also have to develop and surround yourself with a safety net. You need a place where you are comfortable and can be yourself, but where you are also supported emotionally.

Her advice to young military wives is to learn the system, stay informed about the battalion or unit, and don't be a hermit in your house.

Take the base programs, classes and trainings. They teach you much about the military and support resources, and you meet people. You need to be dialed into your unit, your base, your neighborhood. Know where to go, what to do and be proud in doing so. For me, information is power and it helps me feel more in control in a situation where I have very little control.

Even with the benefit of her experience, Aime says she is nervous about Kevin's current deployment. Their 4-year-old son gets teary-eyed and misses his father terribly. Aime is taking the advice she would give to other spouses and seeking out support.

This deployment is more of a challenge than I've ever had before, and it wears on me. I don't always know how to answer our little boy so I called my Family Readiness Officer and we've got a meeting scheduled with someone who can help.

Aime is confident that this latest deployment, in the end, will be a positive experience for her family.

Everyone has a breaking point. Some days you get there but if you are lucky, most days you won't. You get up, tackle another day, and know that no matter the cost, or where the journey takes you, it is worth the ride. I would not trade anything thus far. I know I've grown and changed so much with each deployment, and learned a lot about myself in the process.

For me, information is power and it helps me feel more in control in a situation where I have very little control.



You get up, tackle another day, and know that no matter the cost, or where the journey takes you, it is worth the ride.

Parents of Sailors and Marines can find themselves in an awkward position when their sons or daughters deploy for war or other dangerous operations.

They may be unfamiliar with the military and confused by the structure and prescribed roles. If a son or daughter is married, parents can be frustrated that they are not the first to receive information. Conversely, a daughter-in-law or son-in-law may now be living with them — perhaps with their grandchildren, too, and maybe even a pet. Parents' exposure to the current conflicts may have been shaped solely by the mass media, and they can be frightened by what they hear.

These types of situations bring stress to an already stressful time.

If you're the proud parent of a Sailor or Marine, here are some good things to remember:

- It is normal to feel protective of your adult child.
- It's also normal to feel a tremendous loss, an experience called anticipatory grief. Grief is common with any loss — not just with death — and having your child deployed during wartime is a loss.

'MY BABY IS GOING TO WAR'

- Expect a wide range of emotions. One minute you're happy, the next you're crying. Again, it's a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.
- Follow the advice you gave — and probably still give — your son or daughter: Eat healthy foods, get plenty of rest and don't worry too much.

Developing a communications plan to stay connected with your Sailor or Marine can help relieve stress.

Helpful tips include:

- Know your service member's Social Security number, which you would need to provide in case of an emergency.
- Find out if your service member will have email and any telephone access. If available, these communications may not be as instantaneous as stateside.
- Be sure you have your son's or daughter's unit name, including the battalion, ship, squadron or platoon, plus an FPO or APO address.



- Understand that remote locations, travel, power outages, security considerations or other situations can affect the frequency with which you communicate.
- Understand that your son or daughter may not be able to reveal certain information to you, including location and activities.
- Keep a running list of topics you want to discuss with your service member so you're prepared when you do have a chance to communicate.
- Check out www.TroopTube.tv, an authorized Department of Defense website for service members and families to post and share videos. It's a free service.
- Ask how you can get information from your son's or daughter's unit. For the Navy, the contact usually will be the command's ombudsman and for the Marine Corps, it will be the unit's Family Readiness Officer, or FRO. Find out if there are command or unit newsletters. Many commands and units also have their own websites.
- Ask if phone trees are available. Volunteers at home pass on information to other families.

Many military-related organizations offer local support groups for parents of service members. Look into the Marine Corps Family Team Building website, www.usmc-mccs.org/mcftb, or the Navy's Fleet and Family Support Program, www.ffsp.navy.mil.

Also consider starting your own support group with extended family and friends. So many people want to help, and they may only need someone to show them how.

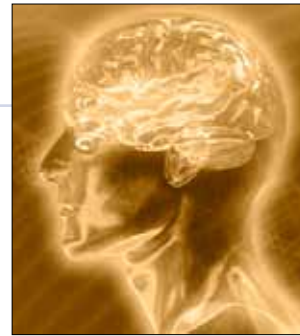


Stay Tuned...

The 2010 Navy-Marine Corps COSC Conference will be held in San Diego May 18-20.

Further details will be available in the next issue of *Mindlines*.

WHEN THE DIAGNOSIS IS TBI



Living with a service member who has suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) is one of the greatest challenges a military family, or any family, can face. Physical wounds associated with the condition most likely will heal, but the “well” person may be very different.

Patients with a mild TBI— also called a concussion— usually improve with time, education about the condition, reassurance and the expectancy that they will get better. Moderate or severe TBI, however, becomes more problematic because changes in personality often occur. The “new” person is not the same as the “old.”

This is an emotionally exhausting experience for a family. Improvements and rehabilitation do occur but caregivers’ high expectations often are coupled with long changes of no improvement or even more negative changes arising.

“Family members are going to experience a real roller coaster of emotions,” says Navy Capt. Paul S. Hammer, M.D., the director of NCCOSC. “There will be times of great joy but also periods of grief, anger, denial and resentment.”

Hammer stresses that TBI caregivers must practice self-care for their own psychological health. “The family members’ well-being is not only critical for themselves, but also for the wounded service member, who needs as much normality around him as possible,” he says.

Hammer adds that research also has found there is a direct relationship between a family’s ability to adapt and cope with the trauma of the injury and the patient’s success with rehabilitation.

While surveys have shown that caregiver families often say they don’t need social support, research shows that a strong support network is critical for the service member’s family to function at a healthy level.

Research has found there is a direct relationship between a family’s ability to adapt and cope with the trauma of the injury and the patient’s success with rehabilitation.

“There can be a strong tendency to isolate but it’s one of the worst things you can do,” says Hammer.

“Brain injuries are complicated matters. Make time to educate yourself and get the resources you need — that helps immensely in building resilience.”

Another important tack for caregivers is positive communication with the injured service member. “When we’re under stress,” says Hammer, “we tend to only see what’s wrong. Instead, look for what’s right and tell your patient. Attitude is key, both for the caregiver and the TBI sufferer.”

An excellent starting point to learn more about traumatic brain injury is the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center, **800-870-9244**, www.dvbic.org.

Families needing to ramp up their resiliency to best handle the demands of deployment and combat and operational stress should check out FOCUS, Families OverComing Under Stress, a new program operating at several Navy and Marine Corps bases across the country and in Okinawa.

Through parent, child and family sessions, FOCUS helps Navy and Marine families develop strong skills in problem solving, goal setting, communication and

SNAPSHOT: FOCUS PROJECT

emotional regulation. The free program is offered through the Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery in collaboration with UCLA.

For details and a list of FOCUS locations, see www.focusproject.org or call **310-794-2482**.

A SPIRITUAL TOUR

MINDLINES . Issue 4

8

AUTUMN 2009

Deployments and the stressful pace of operations can test even the strongest military marriages and committed relationships. A program once called the Navy's best-kept secret aims to arm couples with insights and communication skills to overcome troublesome, tense situations.

"Interest in CREDO definitely is growing," says Navy Capt. Jerry Seely, supervising chaplain of Navy Region Southwest. "There are waiting lists at many of the locations."

CREDO, which stands for Chaplains Religious Enrichment Development Operation, provides free weekend getaways to help service members and their families develop support resources for personal and spiritual growth.

Led by chaplains and trained volunteers, CREDO participants are encouraged to define their own goals and work at their own pace.

The most popular getaway offered by CREDO is the marriage enrichment retreat, says Seely. It's at these retreats where couples learn how to keep their friendship and marriage growing, how to handle inevitable conflicts, and how to strengthen spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical aspects of their commitment.

"We do not offer counseling per se in the retreats," says Seely. "The emphasis is on developing communication skills to prevent the pitfalls that relationships so often suffer. It's an opportunity for a couple to conduct a marriage checkup, and it can be especially helpful in these stressful times."

CREDO also provides onsite workshops to Navy commands in support of the Operational Stress Control program. The programs usually are tailored for the young sailor, says Seely, and include stress assessments and discussions related to commonly shared work stressors.

CREDO is open to all active-duty military. It operates through seven Navy regions (Pearl Harbor, Hawaii; Bremerton, Wash.; San Diego, Calif.; Jacksonville, Fla.; Norfolk, Va.; Groton, Conn. and Naples, Italy) and Marine Corps bases Camp Pendleton, Calif.; Camp Lejeune, N.C.; and Okinawa, Japan.



VISIT US ONLINE AT WWW.NCCOSC.NAVY.MIL

A WEEKEND AWAY

Making a successful transition from the war zone to the home front is the focus of Returning Warrior Workshops, (RWW), a well-received program for Navy reservists.

The program launched in 2007 and is funded through July 2010.

The workshops are expense-paid weekend events, set at four-star hotels, for up to 200 service members and their spouses or significant others. In addition to presentations from senior military leaders who have been in combat,

there are breakout sessions where participants discuss — and help learn to resolve — stressful situations arising in deployment and reintegration.

A number of support services are available at the workshops, and counselors, psychological-health outreach coordinators and chaplains also attend to assist service members in re-acclimating with their families and to civilian life.

A bonus for reservists: Attending a Returning Warrior Workshop satisfies the member's drill obligation. A Sailor's reserve unit has complete information.

Upcoming RWW Events

- November 2009**
Indianapolis, Ind.,
and Spokane, Wash.
- January 2010**
Norfolk, Va.; San Antonio, Texas;
San Francisco, Calif.
- February 2010**
Sarasota, Fla.
- March 2010**
Kansas, Mo., and Denver, Colo.
- April 2010**
Boise, Idaho, and Norfolk, Va.
- May 2010**
Houston, Texas,
and Sedona, Ariz.
- June 2010**
Milwaukee, Wis., and
Manchester, N.H.
- July 2010**
Savannah, Ga.



**MINDLINES . AUTUMN
2009**

A publication of NCCOSC
Communications Department



Comments?

nmcsd.nccosc@med.navy.mil

*Views expressed in this publication
are not necessarily those of the
Department of Defense*



**Naval Center for
Combat & Operational Stress Control**
Naval Medical Center San Diego
34960 Bob Wilson Drive, Suite 400
San Diego, CA 92134-6400