



TIPS FOR DADS on Deployment

Part ONE¹

UNDERSTANDING the Cycle of Deployment



Deployments have been more frequent, longer, and less predictable than they were a few decades ago due to the number of countries and conflicts the U.S. military is engaged in. As unpredictable as the deployments themselves are, the way service members and their family react to deployment follows a very predictable, consistent pattern—regardless of when or how it comes about. These reactions, which can be physical, behavioral, emotional, and psychological, form what many researchers and the military call the “cycle of deployment.”

¹ This is the first in a series of six National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse Spotlights, which provide tips for dads on deployment. The series is authored by Armin Brott, a former Marine, fatherhood author (Ask Mr. Dad), and host of the radio show Positive Parenting for Military Families. Part One of the series draws on material presented by Karen Pavlicin in *Surviving deployment: A guide for military families* and on information from interviews with service members and their families. The series was developed with assistance from Nigel Vann (Fathers Incorporated).

On the most basic level, the CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT has three major phases:

Pre-Deployment



Deployment



Post-Deployment



Understanding the cycle and the psychological, emotional, and behavioral upheaval that can arise with each phase and stage will help everyone in your family better cope with and adapt to your deployment and can help you keep your relationships with each other—especially with your kids—strong while you're away.

Generally speaking, here's what the deployment cycle looks like.

PHASE I: PRE-DEPLOYMENT This phase can last from a day to a year or more. It officially starts when you receive your deployment orders, and it ends just after the last good-bye. The pre-deployment phase is all about preparing you and your family for what's ahead.

STAGE 1: Shock, denial, anger, and other emotions.

Whether you're on active duty or in the Guard or Reserve, you're bound to feel a certain level of shock at receiving orders to leave your family and your routines. After the shock, it's natural for anger to kick in—at anything and everything—as well as a complete refusal to believe the deployment is actually going to happen. From there on, the emotions that you and your coparent experience will be all over the place.

STAGE 2: Acceptance.

Once the emotional upheaval has settled, reality sets in, and you and your family will start coming to terms with the idea that you're actually going to be away. For some families, this is a period of extreme closeness, when everyone wants to spend as much time with each other as possible, building up a reserve to last them through all the months when you'll be separated. But for many families, it's a pretty tense time, as each person finds a different way to begin adjusting to the upcoming new reality.

STAGE 3: Emotional detachment and withdrawal.

You're going to be spending more and more time with the members of your unit, forming closer bonds, learning to work together as a team, and preparing yourselves for your mission. But the more time you spend with your buddies, the less you'll have for your family. At the same time, your coparent has been preparing for your departure, so she may withdraw from you emotionally and physically. Your kids may also be withdrawn and angry, "punishing" you in advance for leaving them.

PHASE II: DEPLOYMENT This is the actual separation, which, like the pre-deployment phase, can last anywhere from a few days to a year or more.

STAGE 4: Emotional disorganization.

You're off—and now those mixed emotions from Stage 1 come roaring back. On the one hand, you and your coparent might actually feel some relief that the goodbyes and pre-deployment tension are behind you and that you can both now focus on the task at hand: you on your mission, she on helping the family resume some semblance of normality. Yet, you're all starting to miss each other, and everyone is worried about how everyone else will adjust to the uncertainty of your deployment.

STAGE 5: Recovery and stabilization.

You've settled into your new environment, and you're focusing on the job you were trained to do. You may push thoughts of your family off into a neat little corner of your mind so that you can focus on your job. At the same time, you're trying to keep in touch with family, and you're increasingly confident that you'll all make it through the deployment okay. Back at home, your coparent is feeling confident, too, and proud that she's managing the extra responsibilities she's needed to take on.

STAGE 6: Anticipation of homecoming.

Starting a month or so before your scheduled return home, another period of mixed emotions will kick in. You're really looking forward to returning home, but you're worried about what it will be like. Will your family be happy to see you? Will your kids even remember who you are? Your coparent will be experiencing similar questions. She may be practically unable to contain her excitement that you're coming home, but worried about what you'll be like.

STAGE 6.5 (sometimes): Deployment extension.

Delays happen, missions change, and there's nothing you or your family can do about it. After all, if the military behaved in nice, predictable ways, they'd be called the Girl Scouts, and you'd be out selling tasty mint cookies. If this happens, you and your family may experience some of the same emotional disorganization as you did in Stage 4.

PHASE III: POST-DEPLOYMENT You return home and begin the process of rejoining and reintegrating into the family—which is not nearly as easy as it sounds.

STAGE 7: Honeymoon.

The first few days will be glorious, filled with hugs, kisses, and catching each other up on life. Most likely, you will enjoy welcome-home parties and maybe even a romantic weekend getaway for you and your coparent, where you and she can tentatively rediscover sex.

STAGE 8: Reintegration.

Once the initial excitement of your homecoming is over, you may want to jump right back in where you left off, taking control of the things you were in charge of before. However, your coparent, who has been managing the household tasks while you were gone, is now perfectly capable of doing everything herself. Not only that, just as you feared, your kids, instead of jumping into your arms and asking you to read them bedtime stories, may push you away and demand that Mommy do everything.

Active duty personnel have to get used to life in the United States, while Reservists and civilian contractors have to put their nonmilitary life back together. Eventually things may return to where they were. Or your family will have to deal with a new "normal."

Working through the various stages of the deployment cycle isn't going to be easy for you, your coparent, or your children. But, if you keep working together, the family will be stronger in the end.

In future spotlights, we will focus on the other phases of deployment. We'll talk about the feelings and emotions that may surface at various times, and the behaviors that may accompany them. We'll also discuss some strategies you can implement to help everyone in the family cope and explore many concrete steps you can take to stay in contact with your family and remain an important part of their lives.

But for now, let's move out!

RESOURCES/FURTHER READING

- **Brott, Armin A.** (2009). The military father: A hands-on guide for deployed dads
<https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/military-father-hands-guide-deployed-dads>
- **Military One Source.** <https://www.militaryonesource.mil>
- **National Military Family Association.** <https://www.militaryfamily.org/>

