



National
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Preparing

for

REUNION
Stress

Canada

Foreword

This publication is a resource for Canadian Forces personnel, Regular and Reserve, and members of their families.

While primarily intended for military families reuniting after United Nations Peacekeeping (UNPK) deployment, the information is valid for families experiencing reunion stress following separation for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to courses, exercises, and temporary duty (TD).

The information in this publication is based on research and experience with Canadian and American military communities.

Comments and suggestions for future editions are welcomed by:

Director Medical Policy (D Med Pol)

Canadian Forces Medical Group Headquarters

1745 Alta Vista Drive

Ottawa, ON K1A 0K6

D Med Pol would like to thank the many people who generously shared their experience and expertise in the initial preparation and current review of this pamphlet, as part of the Deployment Readiness Project. Valuable contributions were made by many peacekeepers and their families; Rear Party, Unit and Military Family Support Program personnel; as well as representatives from the helping professions and every level of command.

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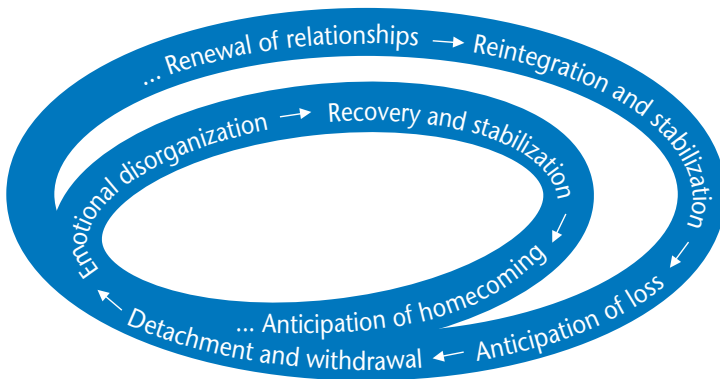
Reunion

- is part of the deployment cycle
- is the process of reuniting in which military families engage when service members return from unaccompanied tours of duty
- is identified by many military families as the most challenging time for them, whether the brief reunion of UN leave or the longer reunion at the completion of the tour of duty

Reunion Stress

- refers to the physical and emotional demands experienced by all family members around the time of homecoming (and UN leave). The return as well as the departure of the service member disrupts the balance/stability of the family. The majority of families require approximately three months to feel comfortable together again; however unique family characteristics and/or circumstances may shorten or lengthen the period of reunion stress.
- may be intensified and prolonged by major changes in family circumstances such as birth, death, serious illness, moving...

*The Emotional Cycle of Deployment**



**Adapted from the Emotional Cycle of Deployment by Kathleen Vestal Logan*

Anticipation of Homecoming

Common Reactions

- increased energy and activity
- sleep and appetite disturbances
- reduced concentration
- fantasizing
- feelings of joy, excitement, anxiety, apprehension, restlessness, impatience



General Suggestions

- share your feelings of apprehension as well as excitement
- share expectations and desires for the homecoming, especially concerning who should be included. Some families will include extended as well as immediate family members, while others may prefer to share this event exclusively with spouse and children
- try to think realistically about the homecoming, rather than building a fantasy reunion in your head
- include children in planning for the homecoming
- plan to have some family time with the children before the “honeymoon”
- reassure your partner of your love and commitment
- remember that everyone will likely be anxious about obvious changes (hair, weight) and will need reassurance of acceptance
- view the reunion as an opportunity to put your ideas about positive changes in family relationships into practice

For Returning Spouse

- relay only officially confirmed information about your return (location, date, time)
- participate in your unit Preparation for Reunion briefing(s)
- listen to yourself — now is the time to discard inappropriate language such as swearing
- express appreciation to your family for their love and support during the deployment
- plan to observe and comment favourably on signs of growth and development in your children
- anticipate discussion of potential changes in family/household responsibilities



For Spouse at Home

- ignore rumours and try to wait patiently for official information concerning your spouse's return (location, date, time)
- participate in Preparation for Reunion activities (briefings, workshops) organized by the Family Resource Centre and/or Rear Party
- remember that children also experience confusing ambivalent feelings (worry, fear, guilt, anger as well as excitement, happiness, relief) as they anticipate the reunion. Help your children express their feelings by drawing pictures, writing stories, making up songs, play-acting, etc.
- recognize your strengths, limitations and new skills as you prepare to discuss potential changes in family/household responsibilities
- avoid scheduling too many homecoming activities; the normal routine of a busy household may be challenging enough for returning peacekeepers

Renewal of Relationships

Common Reactions

- difficulty reestablishing intimacy (emotional, physical, and sexual)
- grieving loss of freedom and independence
- feelings of excitement, disorientation, resentment, frustration, disappointment, anxiety, numbness



General Suggestions

- communicate as openly, honestly and gently as possible — accept your feelings as normal and not as a threat to your relationship
- be open to discussing family roles and responsibilities — the workload can again be shared but perhaps in a new way
- recognize and affirm the personal growth each has achieved during the separation
- maintain friendships and continue to participate in a support group/network. An empathetic ear can be a wonderful resource during the stressful time of family reunion
- seek professional counselling (social worker, doctor, psychologist) if you are concerned or overwhelmed

For Returning Spouse/Parent

- participate in your unit post-deployment and/or reunion briefings
- reaffirm your bond with your children by being attentive, listening to them and playing with them
- curb any urge to take control — remember that your family had to adjust to your absence and will need time to adjust to your presence
- ask you spouse about family rituals (meals, bedtime) that have been maintained as well as new routines — sharing family rituals can ease reunion stress
- expect your spouse to be a little envious of your travels and relief from family responsibilities while you were away
- take time to become reacquainted with your partner. Some couples need time to reconnect emotionally before resuming sexual intimacy. Do not take it as a comment on your partner's love for you if he/she is not ready when you are
- remember that your family has not had the same exposure to a different culture

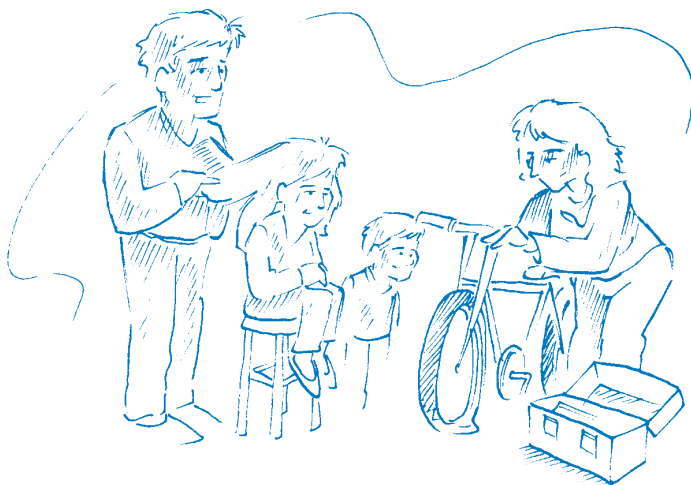
For Spouse/Parent at Home

- check with your local military Family Resource Centre for reunion activities for you and your family
- expect that your spouse may see certain things differently after a period of living in another culture, and may be less tolerant of previously accepted family practices
- expect some awkwardness or tension between you and your spouse. If you don't feel ready to immediately resume sexual intimacy you may ask for a courtship period in order to become reacquainted
- enjoy co-parenting again; take some time for yourself occasionally and let your spouse enjoy the joys and frustrations of parenting "solo"

Reintegration and Stabilization

Common Reactions

- acceptance of new family routines
- acceptance of growth and development experienced by each family member
- feelings of intimacy, closeness, confidence in relationship(s)



General Suggestions

- remember to follow through on promises made during deployment
- relax and enjoy yourself and your family
- begin preparation and planning for the next deployment
- share what you have learned with other families

Reintegration Checklist*

Marriage/Partnership

- Communication
- Intimacy
- Goals
- Work
- Leisure
- Other

Parenting

- Child care/supervision
- Transportation
- Rules/Discipline
- School
- Extracurricular activities
- Other

Home/House

- Interior
- Exterior
- Finances
- Shopping
- Meals
- Other

Car

- Registration
- Insurance
- Maintenance
- Other

Community

- Church
- Recreation
- Service clubs
- Other

**The Reintegration Checklist is presented as a reminder that successful reunion, like successful deployment, depends on many factors. The checklist may be personalized by additions and/or deletions.*

Family Reunion

Stage*

Common Reactions

Infant (birth–1 year)



- crying
- cling to at-home parent or caregiver
- not recognize, turn away from returning parent
- change eating/sleeping schedule

Toddler (1–3 years)



- shyness, resistance to being held
- clingy, fearful that parent will disappear again
- regression (language, toilet-training)

Preschool (3–5 years)

- feel angry and/or guilty that parent went away
- may need “proof” that parent is real; test limits
- may act out to get more attention

School Age (5–12 years)



- feel guilty about what they did, or didn't do, during parent's absence
- talk non-stop to returning parent
- want to show off returning parent to peers

Teenager (13–18 years)

- feel guilty about not living up to expectations
- feel ambivalent about parent's return which imposes another set of changes
- maintain focus on peer relationships

**A child's reaction to a parent's return is primarily determined by age and stage of development. Other important contributing factors are the quality/nature of the parent-child relationship prior to deployment, and the degree of “connectedness” during the separation.*

For Children

*Suggestions for Parents**

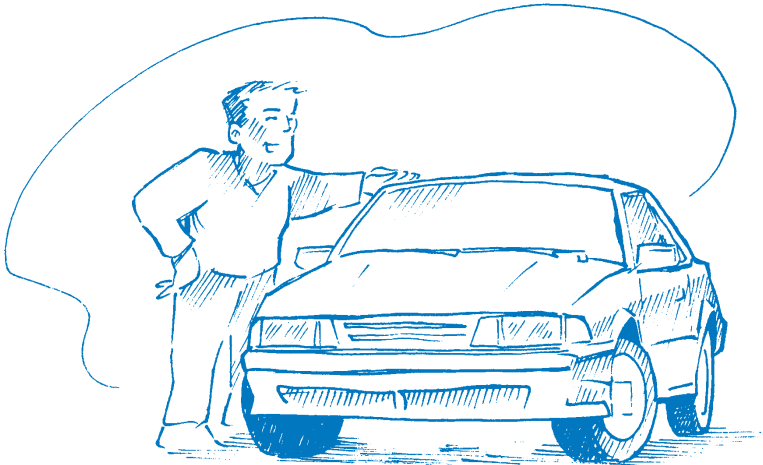
- talk with spouse about ways to participate in child care as a couple (feeding, bathing, changing)
 - try to be relaxed — infants are intuitive
 - play with your baby while your spouse holds her/him
-
- don't force your toddler to hug, kiss or play with you
 - sit on floor at toddler's level, and wait for your little one to approach you
 - be affectionate and playful with your spouse — your toddler will join in
-
- listen carefully to them and accept their feelings
 - reinforce that you love them unconditionally
 - express interest in their pursuits — games, books, songs
-
- praise children for their efforts to copy with the separation
 - listen to them; ask for their opinions, preferences
 - review pictures, school work, scrapbook, etc. with your children
-
- respect your teen's privacy and friends
 - listen attentively and non-judgementally to your teen's attempts to share their current interests/activities
 - share your deployment experiences and encourage your teens to talk about their lives during the separation
-

**Remember — reunion is very stressful for children; they have less experience and fewer conscious coping mechanisms than adults. Be patient and gentle; welcome rather than demand affection and attention.*

Homecoming for Single Members

Common Reactions

- feelings of frustration, anxiety, sadness, confusion, restlessness, irritability, impatience
- sleep and appetite disturbances
- fatigue, lethargy
- spending binges
- increased use of alcohol/drugs



General Suggestions

- remember that young people may experience significant changes (physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual) during a peacekeeping tour, particularly if this assignment represents their first prolonged absence from family and/or Canada
- patience and tolerance will be required to accept and integrate these changes

For Returning Single Member

- participate in your unit post-deployment/reunion activities
- maintain contact with other returning peacekeepers; share your reactions to homecoming with them and benefit from their support
- expect to miss your buddies
- concentrate initially on restoring family/peer relationships, share your experiences and feelings and show interest in theirs
- focus on friendships with neighbours and co-workers, before risking new intimate relationships
- set yourself some short/long term goals — stick to them
- maintain financial plans; resist spending sprees
- self-monitor your use of alcohol and/or drugs; engage in safer mood-altering practices such as exercise, meditation, music, etc.
- talk to trusted peers, supervisor, family and/or counsellor (padre, social work officer) for persistent anxiety, disinterest or depression

For Parents and Others

- be patient; let your returning peacekeeper know that you are interested in hearing about the deployment experience when he/she is ready to talk
- demonstrate acceptance and support of signs of increasing independence and maturity in your peacekeeper
- maintain contact with families of other peacekeepers; being able to share your concerns and frustrations with others who are having similar experiences will be helpful
- contact the local military Family Resource Centre, or your peacekeeper's unit for persistent serious concerns during the readjustment period

Resources

More Information and/or Support is Available from:

- Social Work Officer
- Medical Officer
- Chaplain
- Operational Trauma and Stress Support Centre
- Military Family Resource Centre
- Unit Rear Party
- Canadian Forces Member Assistance Plan 1-800-268-7708
(available to families also)
- Mission Information Line for Families of Canadian Peacekeepers
1-800-866-4546 (1-800-UNMILIN)

For Specific Concerns Related to Children:

- All the above
- Local Mental Health Unit
- Local Child and Family Services Agency
- Pediatric facilities (hospital, clinic)
- Schools
- Library

Pamphlets in This Series

A-MD-007-144/JD-001 Stress and You

A-MD-007-144/JD-002 Le stress et vous

A-MD-007-144/JD-004 Preparing for Critical Incident Stress/
Se préparer au stress provoqué par un incident critique

A-MD-007-144/JD-005 Preparing for Deployment Stress/
Un déploiement moins stressant

A-MD-007-144/JD-006 Preparing for Reunion Stress/
Retrouvailles moins stressantes