

Maintaining a Strong Relationship with Your Guard or Reserve Spouse

Overview

Tips for maintaining a strong relationship when one spouse is in the Guard or Reserve.

- Making a lifestyle commitment
- Preparing for possible deployment
- Anticipating being apart
- Managing while your spouse is away
- Finding ways to stay close
- Getting support

A happy and healthy relationship takes work. When one spouse is in the Guard or Reserve, you may face challenges that you don't expect. Your spouse may be called to active duty, creating significant changes in your usual family routine. Even if your spouse isn't activated, the possibility of deployment can create feelings of stress and insecurity. But by preparing for the Guard and Reserve lifestyle and for challenging times, you can strengthen your relationship and grow closer as a couple.

Making a lifestyle commitment

From weekend training exercises to overseas duty, separation can strain even the strongest relationship. Families fare best when they make a commitment to the Guard and Reserve way of life. Here are ways to do that:

- *Learn about military culture and lifestyle.* You can learn about military structure, language, customs, benefits, and your role in accomplishing the mission by participating in classes and online educational opportunities offered by active and Reserve Components. Programs you might look into include:
 - Army Family Team Building at www.myarmylifetoo.com (Click on "Family Members," then on "Army Family Team Building")
 - Guard Family Team Building at www.guardfamily.org
 - Marine Corps Family Team Building at www.usmc-mccs.org (Click on "Family Life," then on "Marine Corps Family Team Building")
 - Air Force Spouse Forum at www.afcrossroads.com (Click on "Spouse Forum")
 - Navy Lifelines at www.lifelines.navy.mil (Click on "Reserve Families")
- *Use the Internet to learn about military resources for families.* Because Guard and Reserve families are scattered across thousands of communities throughout the U.S. and its territories, the military has introduced new ways to support them during deployments. These include Web portals provided by National Guard and Reserve family programs that give families critical information, points of contact for services, links to other sources of support, and opportunities to interact with other military families. Internet sites with extensive information specifically for Reserve Component families include:
 - National Guard Bureau Family Program Online Community at www.guardfamily.org
 - Army Reserve Family Programs (Online) at www.arfp.org
 - Marine Forces Reserve MCCS at www.mfr.usmc.mil/bq/mccs

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- Lifelines Services Network at www.lifelines.navy.mil (Click on “Reserve Families”)
- *Become familiar with the nearest installation.* You may live many miles from the nearest military installation, but try to visit as a couple or family and learn what services are available there.
- *Reach out to other Guard and Reserve members and their families.* Your friends and families may not understand what it’s like to have a spouse in the Guard or Reserve. You’ll feel less alone if you know others who are going through similar experiences.
- *Factor in your spouse’s schedule.* Write down on your calendar all training exercises and other upcoming duties so you can schedule your plans around them.

Preparing for possible deployment

Deployment is a challenge for even the most experienced military couples. For Guard and Reserve families who aren’t familiar with separations and military life, deployment requires rethinking and readjustment. You may not want to think about deployment, but planning ahead for the possibility can make the separation easier.

- *Discuss how each of you will handle a call to active duty.* Discussing the possibility openly will help you to work out your concerns about being apart. Discuss how you will manage without your spouse. Discuss as a couple how the spouse at home will take care of household responsibilities. Set aside some time for the reservist to teach the at-home spouse how to handle unfamiliar chores, such as changing the oil in the car, preparing dinner, or handling family finances. It’s also important to make sure the spouse at home knows where important documents are kept.
- *Put your legal affairs in order.* Prepare a will if you don’t already have one. Not only is a will an essential document, but writing one can bring you closer as a couple because it focuses you on the life you have made together. Don’t forget to arrange for the spouse at home to have power of attorney, which will allow him or her to sign documents and make decisions for the deployed spouse.
- *Prepare a budget.* Household finances are a common cause of stress for many couples. As a Guard or Reserve couple, you may have special concerns about money because your income will probably change when the reservist is called to active duty and no longer receives a paycheck from his or her civilian job. Make a commitment as a couple to avoid financial difficulties by limiting your spending. Even if the military paycheck is higher than the civilian pay, try to keep spending at its usual level. If possible, put money aside while the spouse is still home to use in the event of an emergency or an unexpected expense.
- *Determine what benefits you will lose.* Does the Guard or Reserve member have a company car that will have to be returned when he or she is mobilized? If so, you

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may need a new vehicle, especially if the mobilization is within the United States where the reservist will want a car. Are there other benefits that you won't have access to during activation? The transition to deployment will be less disruptive for both of you if you understand ahead of time what benefits need to be replaced.

- *Set up a support system to tap into in the event of deployment.* You will both feel better about the separation knowing there are people at home to lend a hand. You may live many miles away from the nearest installation, making it difficult for the spouse at home to take advantage of support groups located there. Think of who nearby will provide emotional and practical support during the spouse's absence. Your support network may include neighbors, family, friends, co-workers, and clergy.
- *Plan a special project.* As a couple, think of a project that the partner remaining at home will enjoy working on during the deployment, such as painting a room, planting a garden, or coaching a child's sports team. The spouse at home will feel closer to the reservist while working on this project, and the activated spouse will enjoy hearing about the activity in e-mails and letters.

Anticipating being apart

You and your spouse are likely to experience a range of emotions when the activation or mobilization orders arrive. You both may feel denial, resentment, guilt, and sadness, as well as excitement. Here are some ways to handle these emotions:

- *Allow yourselves to feel and express your emotions.* If you deny or mask your feelings they may come out in other, unhealthy ways. If you have children, try to keep a positive attitude when they are around so as not to alarm or upset them.
- *Acknowledge that you may change when you are apart.* The spouse at home may become more self-reliant. The reservist may discover inner resources that had been hidden to him or her. These are positive changes that will probably add to your relationship in the long run. Reassure one another that regardless of any changes to you individually, your marriage will stay as strong as ever.
- *Plan time alone together.* Before the deployment, schedule an afternoon or evening doing something you both enjoy, eating at your favorite restaurant or going for a hike. Take pictures and acknowledge this as an important and special time together.
- *Keep things in perspective.* If the reservist seems excited about the upcoming deployment, try not to take it personally. Remember, the reservist has trained for this moment; it's natural to look forward to it finally happening.
- *Participate in family readiness briefings and activities.* When military units are preparing to deploy, spouses, children, parents, and other family members

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usually have an opportunity to attend at least one event designed to inform them about the deployment and mission of the service member's unit. These events include:

- family readiness briefings
- town hall meetings
- commander's calls
- unit family days

At these events, you'll be able to:

- Find out how the unit supports families during the deployment
- Learn about benefits that the service member's spouse or dependent child may be entitled to receive
- Obtain information directly from the commanding officer
- Meet family readiness staff and volunteers
- Get to know the families of other service members in the unit

Managing while your spouse is away

As a Guard or Reserve couple, you probably have a settled routine and life outside the military, with a network of friends and possibly family nearby who will be willing to lend a hand. However, you may live miles from the nearest military installation, which can leave you feeling very much alone in your situation. These tips can help:

- *Look for families in your situation.* It is always helpful to be with others who understand exactly what you are going through. The unit's family readiness staff may run support groups. Try to attend these if you can.
- *Stick to your usual routine.* Your life probably feels very different with your spouse away. You will feel more in control if you keep your routine intact.
- *Keep active.* If you find yourself with extra time while your spouse is away, take up a hobby or return to doing something you love, but haven't had time for, such as taking a class. Finding a cause to volunteer for is also a great way to get out and be with people.
- *Take time for yourself.* You may be tempted to fill every minute of the day so you won't have time to worry about your spouse. While it's good to be active, don't overdo it. Handling the household and the children, if you are a parent, without the help of your partner can be overwhelming. Schedule time for yourself each week to relax or do something you enjoy. If you have children, hire a babysitter or ask a trusted friend or family member to watch them. Or share child care with friends.

- *Postpone making major decisions until you are reunited, if possible.* Try to hold off on making major decisions during your separation, or address them before the deployment begins.
- *Expect that things may feel different when your spouse returns.* There is a natural adjustment period for everybody when a service member comes home. Take time to get reacquainted with each other and discuss how things have changed during your separation.

Finding ways to stay close

A successful relationship requires open communication, trust, mutual respect, and a commitment to each other. That's hard enough to do when couples are together, and harder still when they're apart. But by paying attention to your relationship and to your own needs, you can grow stronger and more secure in your marriage.

- *Communicate as often as possible.* Letters, e-mails, phone calls, audio or video recordings, and personal Web pages are all ways for you to feel part of each another's lives. Remember that several days or more may pass before a newly deployed reservist is able to get in touch with family back home.
- *Share daily happenings from home.* When writing, e-mailing, or talking on the phone, describe the events of your day even if they seem boring to you. Hearing about your life can help your spouse feel closer to you.
- *Focus on the positive.* Try not to dwell on what's wrong, but on what's right. Remember that you still have each other, even though you are apart. Reassure your spouse that you're managing well even though you miss him or her.
- *Trust each other.* There may be times when you or your spouse feel insecure in each other's love when you are apart. This is normal. Be honest about your feelings and discuss your concerns openly with each other. If mistrust is causing anxiety for either of you, talk honestly with each other about your feelings. When you think about trust, examine your own behavior. Are you spending lots of time with members of the opposite sex? Do you go to nightclubs and bars? Even if your actions are innocent, your spouse may suspect that you're being unfaithful.
- *Remind your spouse of your love.* Tell your spouse about those qualities you admire in him or her. This will help your spouse feel more secure -- and trusting -- in your relationship. When you write or talk on the phone, remind each other of special times you have shared. Let each other know about times when you were thinking of each other. It's reassuring to hear that you are in each other's thoughts.
- *Learn about the area of the world where your partner is stationed.* Even if he or she is in the United States, reading up on the region will help you feel closer to your partner. If you have children, turn the learning into a family project.

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- *Communicate your respect for each other.* Express gratitude for how your spouse has managed during the separation. Provide specific examples to each other of how the other person has made you feel reassured and supported. Remember, you are both doing your part for the country, whether you are on active duty or taking care of the household.
- *Express yourself clearly.* If your letter or e-mail is vague, your spouse may be confused and wonder what it is you're not saying.
- *Send care packages.* Your spouse will be happy to receive care packages in the mail. Include items that have special meaning to the two of you. If you have children, ask them to draw pictures or write notes to tuck into the package.
- *Be realistic about communication.* There may be times when a deployed spouse is unreachable. Other times, a service member may call home and be disappointed to get the answering machine. Remember that communication will not always go as smoothly as you hope.

Getting support

The number of resources available to Guard and Reserve families continues to grow. Be sure to:

- *Visit an installation Family Support Center or National Guard Family Assistance Center.* As the immediate family of a Reserve Component service member on active duty, you're entitled to all the services available at military installations. Fleet and Family Support Centers, Marine Corps Community Services, Airman and Family Readiness Centers, or Army Community Service Centers offer a wide range of professional support services as well as information and referral to community resources. If you live near a military installation, a visit to the Family Support Center will give you an idea of the services available. And if the nearest installation isn't your service member's branch, don't let that keep you away. Installation family program professionals are accustomed to serving all activated personnel and their families without regard to service branch.
- *If you don't live near a military installation, find support at a National Guard Family Assistance Center.* States and territories have Joint Force (Army and Air National Guard) Headquarters that have established over 300 Family Assistance Centers (FACs) nationwide. FACs are strategically located to be available to geographically dispersed families, and they are staffed by people trained to provide critical information, outreach, and referrals to services in your community. You don't have to be a Guard family to be assisted at an FAC. They serve families and service members in all active and Reserve Components. To find the nearest FAC, visit the Guard Family Program Web site, www.guardfamily.org, and follow links to the locator for your state.
- *Remember that Military OneSource is there for support 24/7.* This free service, provided by the Department of Defense, is available to all active duty, Guard,

and Reserve members and their families. Consultants provide information and make referrals on a wide range of issues. In addition, Military OneSource is your source for professional, face-to-face counseling provided at no cost to you. You can reach the program by telephone at 1-800-342-9647 or through the Web site at www.militaryonesource.com.

- *Take advantage of support for military children and youth.* If you're a busy parent, you may be discovering that the most stressful part of your service member's absence is meeting the needs of your children by yourself. Many new initiatives are in place to give Guard and Reserve families access to quality child care and to provide support for school-age children. For example, you can get help finding child care and possibly assistance with the cost of care through Operation Military Child Care, a partnership program between the Department of Defense and the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. Go to www.naccrra.org/militaryprograms for details.
- For resources designed to help children cope with the emotional aspects of having a deployed parent, be sure to see:
 - your active and Reserve Component family support programs
 - the National Military Family Association (NMFA) at www.nmfa.org
 - the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) at www.militarychild.org