

Coping with a Deployment Extension

Overview

Ways to cope with a deployment extension.

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A deployment extension is difficult for service members and their families. You've been anxiously looking forward to your loved one's return home only to find that your reunion plans must suddenly be put on hold. While there is no denying that this is a difficult period, there are things you can do to cope as a family and get through this time together with a positive attitude. That, after all, is what your service member would want you to do.

How you may feel

An extended deployment creates hardship for families. From the moment you receive the news of the extended deployment, you may experience a flood of emotions, including feelings of sadness and disappointment, worry and anxiety; some feelings of anger; and a sense of betrayal or of promises being broken. Your hopes were up and your spirits were soaring as you thought about your forthcoming reunion. Now you must regroup and gear up for more months of coping as a family while your loved one is away on active duty. Experts agree that a deployment extension is often harder on families than it is on service members.

During this difficult time, you may find it helpful to remember the following:

- *The emotions you are feeling are normal.* There is no getting around the fact that a deployment extension brings strong emotions and feelings of stress. You may feel flooded with feelings and overwhelmed for days or even a few weeks until you have had time to adjust to the news.
- *You are not alone.* Military family life is a life of constant change. There are schedule changes, family separations, and extended deployments. Active duty service members understand this reality when they enlist for military life. For Guard and Reserve families, however, a deployment extension can feel more unexpected. The more you talk with others in your situation, the easier this time will be and the less alone you will feel. Participation in family readiness groups is a good way to stay connected.

Coping as a family

A deployment extension affects your family's plans, schedule, and routines. Here are some suggestions on coping during this time:

- *Give yourself time to regroup emotionally.* Admit to yourself that you are upset. Your feelings are genuine. They reflect your disappointment and pain. Even though you didn't cause the situation and may feel a bit out of control, try to

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avoid taking your legitimate frustrations out on your friends, relatives, or children, who, like yourself, didn't cause the situation. You might want to take an evening off from your regular activities to do something special for yourself. It doesn't have to cost a lot of money. It might be visiting a friend you don't get to see much. Getting away for a day or half a day will do you some good.

- *Help your children handle the news by talking about it with them and offering extra love and support.* Discuss the extension news in an open, honest manner with your children. Keep your children informed about the change of events and explain what information you have in words your children can understand. Tell your child that unexpected changes sometimes happen and that you will keep them up to date on those changes. Reassure your child that you will all be together soon.
- *Tell your child's teacher about the deployment extension and any updates.* It's good to keep teachers and other adults in your child's life in the loop.
- *Share your feelings as a family.* Allow children to discuss their feelings, questions, and concerns. Encourage any questions they may have regarding the extended deployment. Listen and do your best to understand.
- *Get back into a routine as soon as possible.*
- *Focus on the future by beginning to make new plans.* The deployment extension changed plans you may have had for a reunion. You may have had a vacation planned, a special reunion with extended family members, or a celebration involving close friends and relatives. Some things you will be able to put off; others you may not. You may need to make new plans altogether. When you are ready, organize and plan for a new reunion with your loved one. It will give you and family members something positive to focus on.
- *Keep things in perspective.* As difficult as a deployment extension is, it helps to keep things in perspective and to remember that many military families face even greater hardships. Some have had a service member return home only to have him or her be shipped back out to a combat zone for another year's service. As hard as this time is, try to see the light at the end of the tunnel and remind yourself that your wait will soon be over.
- *Limit exposure to television or other sources of information about the war and its victims.* Especially for children, it can increase feelings of fear and anxiety.
- *Army personnel (Active, Guard, and Reserve) and their families and Marine Corps personnel and their families in the United States and Puerto Rico are encouraged to take advantage of free, private, face-to-face counseling services in their local communities.* Counselors help adults and children with issues such as marital and family stress, reunions after deployment, grief, and other common problems associated with military life. You may receive up to six counseling sessions per problem per person, and there are no claims to file. Army

personnel and their families contact Army One Source at 800-464-8107. Marine Corps personnel and their families contact MCCS One Source at 800-869-0278.

Handling practical matters

There may be financial and other practical matters to attend to during a deployment extension, including mounting bills and a reduced income, especially for Reserve families. You will reduce feelings of stress if you take care of these matters as soon as you are able. Here is a list of reminders:

- *Be sure the service member contacts his or her employer.* Guard and Reserve members expected back at work will need to notify their employers about the deployment extension. Employers are mandated by law to hold a mobilized Guard or Reserve member's job for up to five years. (There are some exceptions.) For more detailed information, contact the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve by calling their toll-free number at 800-336-4590, or by visiting their Web site at www.esgr.org. Some employers will need a hard copy of the extension orders as proof to secure reemployment rights.
- *Notify creditors.* Often credit card companies, banks, and other financial institutions will reduce interest rates during a deployment and a deployment extension under provisions of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Civil Relief Act. To take advantage of this benefit, you will need to contact your creditors to let them know that your spouse has been extended on active duty and submit the required paperwork and documentation. Contact your unit or installation legal assistance office for more information. To learn more about the Soldiers' and Sailors' Civil Relief Act go to www.esgr.org.
- *Seek advice or assistance if you have financial concerns resulting from the extended deployment.* You may have financial issues to take care of as a result of the extended deployment. If you made vacation plans, for example, to celebrate the service member's homecoming, you may be able to get a refund on tickets or deposits by explaining the circumstances. There may also be bigger issues to take care of, such as what to do about a lease that is expiring or how to get through the next several months of expenses on a reduced income. For help reviewing your financial situation and coming up with a plan, you might contact the service that brought you this article. A consultant can give you information on such matters as health insurance coverage, housing options, and how to apply for mortgage assistance from your lender. Contact the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve by calling their toll-free number at 800-336-4590. Installations also have financial counseling services. In the Army, for example, there are Army Community Service centers that have a financial counselor.
- *Remember that emergency help and relief are available through the military.* Every branch of the military has a relief organization for members needing

emergency help or relief. There are low-interest loans, grants, and donations available to service members and their families, as well as help with transportation, child care, food, rent, utilities, and unforeseen family emergencies. For information on assistance options, contact your service branch:

- Army Emergency Relief (www.aerhq.org/)
- Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society (www.nmcrrs.org/intfreeloan.html)
- Air Force Aid Society (www.afas.org/)
- Coast Guard Mutual Assistance (www.cgmahq.org/)

If you live far from an installation, remember that assistance is available through the Red Cross. To find your local chapter, go to www.redcross.org.

Taking care of yourself

Once you have had some time to get used to the news of the deployment extension, and to helping others cope, take some time to focus on yourself.

- *Give yourself a break to compensate in some way for all you are doing and will need to keep doing in the months ahead.* Have a meal out with a friend. Take a day off of work if you can. Schedule a break for yourself, even if it's just a small treat like having your hair done, or going out for ice cream with a friend.
- *If you have young children at home, seek support from others so you get a break from parenting.* You were expecting your spouse home any day and were mentally prepared for a break and an extra set of hands around the house. Now you will have to postpone that break several more weeks. To tide yourself over, share babysitting or child care with a friend so you get some relief. Ask a relative to come stay with you for a few days or weeks if possible. Or go visit a relative or close friend with your children.
- *Keep busy and stay connected to others.* Get together with relatives and friends for potluck dinners, card games, or having a picnic with children.
- *Talk with people who have been through deployments.* They may have valuable suggestions and helpful ideas on how to get through this time. Talking to someone who has been through it or who is just a good listener always helps you feel better.
- *Take advantage of the support services and programs available to you through the military.* The military has many support services for families of active duty members. This includes information, counselors, the installation chaplain, family support groups, online support groups, and organizations and clubs for spouses, such as the Key Volunteer Network. Reserve families should contact their unit family readiness group or chaplain; they can also utilize all of the

services of their nearest installation. Resources and information are available as well through the service that brought you this article.

Supporting your service member

The best way to support your service member is to stay strong as a family and to gear up to get through the coming months until you are together again.

- *Send a letter or email as soon as possible.* Because you were expecting your service member home, you may have stopped writing in recent days or weeks. With the extension, your service member may be without mail or word from home. You don't want him or her to go without mail for weeks. So that there isn't a gap of support, send a letter or an email, if possible, as soon as you can.
- *Write often to your service member.*
- *Make plans for a new reunion.* You might create a new family calendar counting down the days until your loved one returns home. Share plans about the reunion with your service member. It will give you all something positive to focus on.

Written with the help of Dr. Walter R. Schumm, Retired Army Reserve Colonel and professor of family studies and human services at Kansas State University. He is the author of numerous publications on military family life.