

Homecoming Tips for the Deployed Member

By CAPT John Swanson, PACAREA Chaplain

Note: The following reunion tips can help ease you back into the family routine. With the holidays upon us and the normal stress that accompanies this time of year, it's important to minimize and not create more stress for the family.

1. Discuss homecoming plans ahead of time with your family. It's important that your expectations are in sync with your family members. Be realistic about the challenges of reunion. You have changed. Your loved ones have changed. Society has changed. Experts agree that it takes most couples several (up to 4-6) weeks to adapt and readjust to each other following a major deployment. That's not to say you will be strangers for that long, but it does mean it may take that long before you really feel like you are back in sync again as a couple. Don't worry, this is a normal part of the reunion process and almost every couple experiences it to some degree. It **DOES NOT** mean your marriage or relationship is in trouble! You will both need time to re-connect emotionally and adjust to each other's presence and routines. If you still feel like things aren't right after 4-6 weeks, don't worry. You may want to think about setting up an appointment through your chaplain, CG SUPRT or TRICARE. These confidential counseling services are free to you and your family.

2. One of the major challenges of reunion is renegotiating the 3 R's: **Roles** (who does what), **Rules** (those may have been modified during the last underway; like how long the kids can watch TV or what time they go to bed, for example.) and **Routines**.

It is not uncommon following a long separation for spouses and children to have some ambivalent feelings about your return. That is, part of them is very excited about your return but a part of them may be apprehensive or anxious. Have you changed? How will the kids react? Will they lose the independence and freedom they have come to enjoy? Remember, during the course of the last several weeks your family has established a routine that works for them. Try not to interrupt that routine. Sit back, take a chill pill and relax.

WARNING: Do not come home and immediately change the family routine. Enjoy your status as an honored guest for the first week and simply observe how things are working at home. Before you know it you will be back in sync with the family's routine and, if necessary, you and your spouse can make needed course corrections.

3. Take advantage of the marriage enrichment weekends available through the Navy's CREDO program. These free couple weekends include hotel and meals. These weekends are educational in nature and focus on making good marriages even better. (They are not designed for couples who are having major conflict. Marriage counseling through Chaplains, CG SUPRT or TRICARE is appropriate for those situations.) Unfortunately, child care is not provided at CREDO Marriage Weekend Retreats. Child care is sometimes available at Marriage Enrichment workshops (no overnight lodging) . For more information on these marriage weekends, go to:

<https://www.cnic.navy.mil/search.html?q=CREDO>

I also recommend some great reading resources like Gary Chapman's book, "The Five Love Languages". He also has books on the Five Love Languages of Children and Teens. These books are very helpful when it comes to reconnecting with a spouse or child. I also recommend a magazine titled "Marriage Partnership". Lots of good articles and information on strengthening your relationship. In our high OPTEMPO culture it is no surprise that the divorce rate is very high. You can "divorce proof" your marriage, however, by investing in your marriage. Workshops, knowing how to speak your partner's love language, applying ground rules that limit escalation, setting aside time during the week to discuss issues, never using the "D" word in conflict and

never threatening the future of your relationship when you are angry...these are all ways you can invest in and strengthen your marriage.

4. If you have children or grandchildren, they may be a little shy depending on their age. Several weeks are a long time to be gone, even in this age of email and cell phones. If you have small children, you will be amazed at how much they have grown and the developmental changes that have occurred. Also, be aware that you're not used to having the kids around 24/7 and you may find yourself easily frustrated or annoyed. Remember, you too have a routine on the ship and need time to adjust to home life.

5. You may find it difficult to sleep at first. If you are married, neither of you are used to sleeping together. All that tossing and turning may take some getting used to. Also, whether single or married, you may find it too quiet. After several weeks onboard you get used to all the background noise (catapults, jet blast, engines, fans, slamming doors, 1MC announcements, etc.). Again, it may take time to adjust to life at home, even something as simple as going to bed.

6. Finances: The #1 issue couples argue about. One of the common complaints returning members have is that they think there should be more money in the savings account. For those of you who relied on others to pay the bills, remember that the bills didn't stop when you deployed. There undoubtedly were unexpected expenses and repairs that had to be dealt with. There probably were a few occasions when you spent more than you should have. Bottom line: Be prepared to sit down and discuss your current finances and how the money was spent. If necessary, you can consult with a financial specialist.

If you have the "I deserve something big" mindset, don't make any major purchases until you have evaluated your finances. If you are married, keep in mind your spouse has been working hard too while you have been gone. Any major purchases should be done jointly, not unilaterally.

7. There is a honeymoon period following your return. Sometimes the honeymoon is over before you get to the car, but generally the honeymoon period lasts anywhere from a few days to a week or two. Then reality sets in...and be assured, it will. In the mean time, you will need to get reacquainted with each other and get used to having each other around. One spouse once told me that when her husband returns from a deployment it seems like all he wants to do is make love...several times a day. While this may be "normal" for some couples, it's not for most. She expressed frustration because his need and desire for sex was wearing her out. Communicate clearly your needs and desires for physical intimacy and sex. While you may be in the mood, your spouse may not be. After a long separation it's very important to reconnect on an emotional level, not just a physical level. When it comes to sex and physical intimacy, men and women are very different and have differing expectations. A good one liner I heard that helps explain the difference between men and women is that when it comes to physical intimacy, "men are like microwaves; women are like crock pots."

8. Be careful behind the wheel. It's been several weeks since you have driven a vehicle and dealt with traffic. And don't drive long distances if you are overly tired, dehydrated or have been drinking alcohol. Use common sense.