

Homecoming Tips

By CAPT John Swanson, PACAREA Chaplain

Some General Information

Whether a veteran of many deployments or experiencing your first one as a Navy spouse, there are some common themes you should be aware of. You may have some ambivalent (mixed) feelings about your spouse's return. This is normal. Many spouses experience some anxiety and apprehension during the last few weeks and days prior to their loved one's return. Will our relationship be different? Has he/she changed? During the past four months you may have also gained a lot of confidence and independence as you took on roles that were previously taken care of by your spouse. Many spouses have mixed feelings about relinquishing the roles and routine they have come to enjoy. One of the things I have advised your spouse not to do is to immediately change the family routine. Short of catastrophic events like the bank account being overdrawn and the car being in the impound lot, there is no reason for your spouse to immediately take over the check book or confiscate the car keys. I have told them that you will gradually turn over some of the household jobs and roles (some more quickly than others), and that they should enjoy their status as an honored guest until both of you can sit down and renegotiate the family roles. Here are some general things to keep in mind:

1. Remember, after any deployment there will be a transition period for both of you. Generally speaking, the longer the deployment, the longer the transition period. Of course there is no set time, and the length of the transition period can be determined by a number of factors: How long you have been together, the number of previous deployments made, how well you communicate as a couple, etc. I would say that following a major deployment it is not unusual to experience a transition period of at least 2-4 weeks. Sometimes it can take even longer. The bottom line: Don't have unrealistic expectations about homecoming. Unrealistic expectations only lead to disappointment. Yes, you will be happy to see each other, but don't expect your relationship to look exactly like it did before the deployment. It will take some time and good communication before you both feel like you're in step again.
2. Be prepared for some post-deployment symptoms. Your spouse may have trouble sleeping the first few nights home. Be prepared for some tossing and turning. One reason for this is that it's too quiet. There is a lot of background noise on a ship. Over a period of months you get used to that. Another reason is that the watch schedules onboard disrupt sleep patterns. Your spouse may have watch from Midnight to 0400 one day and Noon to 1600 the next. So, be prepared. You may find your spouse pacing the halls into the wee hours or sitting in front of the TV with a sandwich well past Midnight.
3. Understand that following a lengthy deployment the only thing your spouse may want to do after returning home is to stay home. Of course this can vary with individuals, but for the first few days don't be surprised if your spouse just wants to sit in "his" chair, hold "his" remote, and watch "his" favorite TV shows. Also, remember that your spouse hasn't seen the new shows or commercials. TV may fascinate him for the first few days. Don't worry. This too shall pass. After a few days your spouse will start venturing out of his cave and talking to friends and family, but don't be surprised if he just wants to stay close to home the first few days.
4. If you have children, be aware that it may take them awhile to "warm up" to mom or dad. This is especially true of younger children. Also, your spouse may get impatient around the kids, especially when they are being overly rambunctious. Remember, it's been four plus months. Your spouse is not used to being around the children. Again, this is part of the transition process and this too shall pass.

5. There will be a “honeymoon” period following your loved one’s return. It may not last long. Sometimes it’s over before you get off the pier. Remember, every relationship has some conflict. How you resolve your issues as a couple is the key to happiness. Listen. Don’t interrupt. Hear each other out. Avoid the temptation to say things like, “You always...” or “You never....” Don’t bring up past issues or arguments. Keep your discussion focused on the issue at hand. No “Kitchen Sinking”! To prevent a defensive posture and blaming, preface your statements with something like, “So, what I hear you saying is....” Let your loved know that you hear and understand what they are saying, even if you don’t agree with what they are saying. Give your loved one the same consideration and respect that you give your friends and co-workers.

Some Specific Tips

1. **No big surprises.** Again, this depends on your spouse, but generally speaking, most people don’t like big surprises when they get home (unless it’s a new hot tub). Most men like to find the house, garage and yard the way they left it. If you have redecorated or rearranged furniture, you may want to give your spouse a “heads up”. If you are planning a homecoming “surprise”, you might want to test the waters before he/she gets home. Again, if you and your spouse have different expectations about homecoming, you are setting yourself up for disappointment. Communicate!
2. **Hold off on the “honey do” list.** Don’t bombard your spouse with a list of projects and things that need to be fixed as soon as he/she gets home. Allow some time to decompress and unwind. Understand that your spouse will be very happy to see you and to be home, but he/she will probably need some private time as well. While you may not want to let him/her out of your sight, and want to spend every waking moment with him/her, respect his need for some occasional privacy. Again, this is part of the transition process back to home life.
3. **Take time to invest in your relationship.** This is something I included in my brief to your loved ones. Every relationship needs an occasional tune up. In that sense, relationships are like cars. If you never perform preventative maintenance (like changing the oil, rotating the tires, changing the air filter, etc.) it will eventually run poorly and possibly leave you stranded along the side of the road. Take advantage of the FREE weekend Marriage Enrichment Retreats available through CREDO Southwest (San Diego, CREDO Northwest (Bremerton, WA), and CREDO Hawaii. For information about CREDO: <https://www.cnic.navy.mil/search.html?q=CREDO> These “marriage tune ups” are interactive, educational and include free hotel lodging and meals. Child care is not provided.

If you are interested in marriage enrichment, contact your Coast Guard Chaplain. They can offer individual and couple counseling as well as marriage workshops and resources.

Some other ideas: Look into Marriage Encounter groups through your local church. Subscribe to magazines like Marriage Partnership or Marriage Magazine...both are full of helpful articles on improving your relationship and enhancing intimacy. One book I highly recommend is The Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman. It is a wonderful resource that can help couples better understand each other’s emotional needs and how you as a couple can keep the “love bank” full. It also contains helpful discussion questions that can help couples improve their relationship.

4. **What about sex?** One of the biggest complaints wives have about their husbands following a long deployment is, “All he ever wants to do is have sex”. Help your husband to understand that while sex is a healthy and enjoyable part of your marriage, you also need to be held....you need to talk....you need to be cuddled. It is important to communicate your needs to your husband. One thing that gets in the way when it comes

to intimacy is that men often equate intimacy with sex. Men are just “hard wired” that way. Men often interpret snuggling and cuddling as a green light to the bedroom. If you just need to be held, let him know that. One way to think about the differences between men and women when it comes to intimacy is: “Men are like microwaves. Women are like crock pots.” For the first few days it may seem like all he wants to do is have sex. Make sure you communicate clearly your needs for intimacy.

Well, there you have it. I hope some of this information will be helpful as you prepare for your loved one’s return. Those last few days before the ship returns can seem like an eternity. When that big day finally arrives, let your loved one know you are glad to see him/her. Be patient. It will take some time for your loved one to feel at home and it will take time before both of you feel like a couple again. You can facilitate the process by clearly communicating your needs and desires. Believe it or not, most spouses are not very good mind readers. Make time for each other. Go on a date and get reacquainted. Carve out some specific time at home (when you are both refreshed) to talk about issues. Most couples pick the worst possible times to have serious issue discussions. When one of you is putting dinner on the table, giving the baby a bath, or heading out the door to work is not the time for a good discussion. Schedule a time when both of you can sit down and calmly discuss your issues as friends. Control your issues...don’t let the issues control you! Protect your “fun time”. If you are out on a date together, don’t let issue discussions ruin your time together. Make this one of the ground rules for your relationship. Schedule specific times to have those kinds of discussions, rather than letting them intrude into your fun time. One suggestion is to set up a weekly couple meeting where you discuss issues. Most problems (about 80%) in a relationship can be solved simply when couples take the time to sit down and listen to each other. Another tip: Don’t approach every issue like there has to be a “winner” and a “loser”. Approach your issues as a team and work together to find solutions. Understanding each other’s position is the goal, not agreement. Research shows that the #1 predictor of unhappiness and divorce is unresolved conflict. Don’t let your issues go unresolved. Sign up for a marriage enrichment weekend or seek marriage counseling from a chaplain, pastor, or counselor.

If you have any questions or need assistance or advice, please contact me. I will be glad to talk with you or refer you to other resources. You can email me at john.a.swanson@uscg.mil. Remember, good marriages don’t just happen...they take clear commitment and a lot of work. For more information, check out www.militaryonesource.com.