



Answers for
Sailors, Marines & their families

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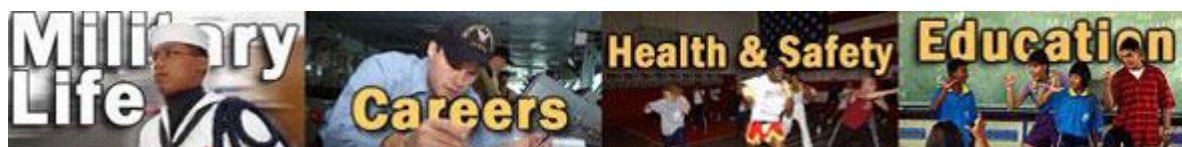
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Just the Two of Us: Married Without Children

By Jennifer Dyer Cornelissen

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For many military families, the day their service member departs for a long separation or deployment is tough. After sharing final goodbyes, Sailors and Marines trust their loved ones to keep the home fires burning until they return.

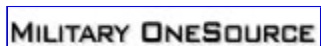
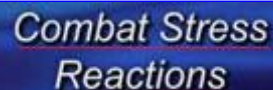
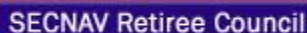
Spouses who remain behind might focus on the needs of their children or take comfort in the normalcy of routine activities. While this picture is typical of many, it isn't the norm for Navy and Marine couples who don't have children. These wives and husbands face a long deployment and wonder how they'll get through it without their partners.

When Cory's husband, a Marine Staff Sergeant, first deployed with Operation Desert Storm, their separation seemed unbearable. "I thought I would die," she says. "But, with time, I learned that you don't realize how you get through — but you do."

Cory maintained a positive attitude and kept busy. When her husband returned, she realized that during their time apart, she had explored new opportunities and developed fresh interests that made the time pass quickly. Understanding the typical emotional cycle of deployment was also helpful for Cory.

Natural Feelings

Whether or not they have children, many wives and husbands who endure a long separation go through a normal cycle of emotions. Before the deployment, the stay-

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at-home spouse may experience denial, resentment, and emotional withdrawal, and in the first weeks afterward, uncertainty, sadness, and loss. These feelings usually resolve into calmness, confidence, hope, and occasional loneliness for most of the deployment.

Near the end of the separation, spouses may become excited yet apprehensive about reunion. After the initial euphoria of return comes a period of readjustment during which both partners may experience role confusion but also satisfaction to be together again. Recognizing the regularity of these feelings can help you get through deployments successfully. Tried-and-true strategies also make the time pass rapidly.

Keeping Active

It can be challenging to get out of the house and not dwell on a loved ones absence. Renee, the spouse of a Marine pilot, explains that keeping busy prevented her from brooding during her husbands seven-month deployment to the Mediterranean Sea.

She started a two-year professional degree program in nursing, participated regularly in social activities with other spouses, and completed several home improvement projects while her Marine was away.

"I didn't have time to grieve for the fact he was gone," she says. "His deployment became a chance to do those things I'd wanted to do but never did before."

While six-month and shorter deployments are the norm, some spouses must cope with one-year unaccompanied tours. Allison, the wife of a Navy physician, faced a year apart from her husband when he got orders to Japan. Instead of regretting their separation, she relocated to New York City, freelanced in her career field of textile engineering, and squeezed in three short visits to her husband during his tour.

"We began to see beyond the grief and realize what an opportunity this would be for me," she says. Without any family commitments, Allison was able to travel, nurture her career, and pursue her own interests. After her husband returned, the couple renewed their marital vows as a sign of their commitment to one another.

Instead of isolating themselves, Navy and Marine spouses such as Renee and Allison occupy their time with employment, school, church, and charitable activities. These knowledgeable spouses recognize that their well-being during separation depends on staying active, getting out of the house, and meeting people.

Maintaining Routines

Coming home to an empty house can be difficult. However, following a regular routine keeps the loneliness at bay. When Donna's husband, a Marine Gunnery

Sergeant, left for a six-month deployment to Okinawa, "I found comfort in my routine," she says. "Getting up at a certain time and going to work meant that there was no time to think about missing him."

Making an effort to live well also helps. "You have to make a point of going out and having fun," Cory says. Whether cooking gourmet meals for one or going to the gym daily, stateside spouses should enjoy their activities and take care of their own needs without guilt.

Several spouses mentioned the importance of maintaining regular habits, such as walking the dog after dinner or going to church on Sunday. No matter what, its important to realize that life doesn't stop for partners who remain at home. "Just because your husband is gone doesn't mean you aren't who you are anymore," Renee says.

Reaching Out

Spouses without children need to make an extra effort to reach out and connect with other people during deployments. Donna was very lonely when her husband first left. However, spending time with her family and friends made a difference.

"I basically said to myself, he's gone for six months, but life has to go on." So she filled her weekends and evenings with activities involving her network of supporters. "I worked at a nursing home and volunteered to read for the blind ... I made friends with my co-workers, stayed in contact with my parents, and got in touch with civilian friends."

While she and her husband got through their separation successfully, Donna says its important to respect marital commitments while apart, and warns, "If you're going through that first deployment, don't make the mistake of living like you're single again while your partner is gone."

Friends in similar circumstances offer spouses who stay behind complete understanding. Karin, the wife of a Naval aviator, says, "I made sure to surround myself with other military wives who could understand what I was going through."

Those who live on or near bases may find other wives and husbands coping with a loved ones absence through spouse clubs and volunteer networks. Online communities such as MilitaryWives.com, provide encouragement and support for family members who live farther away.

Staying Connected

Sharing with others can lead to lifelong connections. Phone calls, e-mail, and visits

with family and friends are invaluable pick-me-ups. Tami developed a "tremendous sense of sisterhood" with other wives and had a great time with her newfound friends during her husbands deployment with the Marines.

Stateside spouses also benefit from the generosity of others. When Rebeca's Naval officer husband deployed unexpectedly with Operation Enduring Freedom, she learned to accept help when it was offered. With little time to prepare for his departure, Rebeca found the support and aid of family, friends, and co-workers to be crucial.

While conventional wisdom suggests that people provide the best emotional support, [pets](#) also offer relief and companionship. During her husbands three deployments, Anneliese took comfort in their five cats and three dogs.

"The animals kept me busy and were great company," she says. With a house full of furry friends, she felt safe and surrounded while her Marine was away. "They're like a security blanket," Renee adds.

Finally, staying in touch with your spouse is vital. Regular communication will help both of you feel connected and keep your marriage strong. Letters, care packages, e-mail, phone calls, and, if possible, visits, all provide a sense of togetherness even when you're thousands of miles apart.

"I put pictures of us all over my apartment," Allison says. Jenny purchased a digital camera and sent pictures of herself and the family pets to her spouse while he was deployed. "I really enjoyed opening my e-mail and receiving reminders of our life together," her Naval officer husband says.

Thinking Positive

Having survived three six-month deployments, Cory found that thinking positive helped her thrive. She didn't waste precious minutes complaining to her husband during the rare phone calls — instead, she wrote upbeat letters and e-mail. Cory allowed herself to miss her husband, but refused to agonize over what couldn't be changed.

Instead, she says, "I tried to think myself happy." This point is echoed by Allison, who learned that "a good attitude and prayer are essential" during the year she spent apart from her husband.

Being independent is also important. These spouses think of a deployment as an opportunity to accomplish difficult tasks or try something new, such as learning how to change the oil in the car, taking classes in a new subject, or redecorating the downstairs bathroom.

For Cory, thinking "I can" instead of "I can't" made her see herself in a new way. She discovered that being independent allowed her to accomplish tasks she never thought she could do alone. When the family car broke down, Cory walked to school daily until it was fixed and still attained a professional paralegal certificate in half the time at her local community college.

After her husband returned, Cory not only appreciated him more but also valued her newfound independence. In the same way, Rebeca realized that during the separation, "I had much more strength than I gave myself credit for."

Seeing the Sights

During a loved ones absence, stateside spouses have the chance to enjoy their short-term liberty. Weekend trips to nearby attractions are a great way to have fun and see new places. Donna traveled extensively throughout California while her husband was gone, exploring Disneyland and touring San Francisco. Allison spent much of her free time visiting museums and trying new restaurants in New York City. Renee and some friends took a ferry to a nearby island and explored a century-old lighthouse.

Even trips to exotic locales are a possibility if cost is not a concern. Whether scuba diving in the Caribbean or sampling baguettes in Montreal, traveling offers a change of scenery, an opportunity for adventure, and fun-filled memories.

If the service members command approves and the destination is considered safe, spouses can also visit their deployed partner. When Karin's husband left for six months, she met him in Japan at the halfway mark. Renee flew to Italy to visit her spouse and then traveled in Europe. Packing the car and taking an extended vacation to catch up with distant family and friends is another option. Whatever path of discovery you choose, getting out of town can be the best medicine for a bad case of loneliness.

Setting Goals

Focusing on short- and long-term goals gives you something to concentrate on while your service member is away. Tami decided to run a marathon during her husbands six-month deployment. She trained for months, and the process made the time go by rapidly. After completing the marathon, Tami experienced a tremendous feeling of achievement.

"If you're facing deployment," she says, "focus on goals for yourself, and take the separation day by day. You can do it even though it seems scary. You'll find the strength inside you that you didn't know you had."

Even simple objectives are helpful. Numerous spouses have learned to look at

deployment as an opportunity to finish old projects and complete to-do lists. Whether updating a scrapbook, organizing a messy closet, or losing those last 10 pounds, achieving goals can be very satisfying and gives you a sense of accomplishment.

Homecoming Challenges

While nothing is as difficult as coping with a long-term deployment, reunions can be challenging too. Homecomings are exhilarating, but you can expect some bumps in the road. Each of you has grown and changed during your time apart, so finding normalcy again may take time.

Yet the return of a loved one also brings unexpected benefits. Some couples discover that the separation strengthens their marriage because they appreciate each other more afterward. Habits that were once a source of annoyance seem trivial when a couple is reunited. "No matter what, it was great to be able to spend time together," says Anneliese.

Coping with the absence of a loved one is the toughest part of being married without children in the military. Yet finding a way to be content is vital for the happiness of both the service member and the stateside spouse.

"Don't waste away waiting for your loved one to come home," Tami says. "Make it a positive experience." After all, service members need to focus on their job and not worry about their partners well-being. Their safety and the country's security depends on their full attention to the task at hand.

"I look at this as my duty," Cory adds. "This is my role in the military."



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