

Adjusting to Civilian Life After Combat Duty with the Guard or Reserve

Overview

Returning to civilian life after combat duty with the Guard or Reserve.

- Giving yourself time to readjust
- Reestablishing relationships with family and friends
- Reconnecting on the job
- Understanding combat stress reactions
- Finding a place in your community
- Counseling and support resources
- Online information and support resources

If you've recently returned from deployment with your Guard or Reserve unit, you may be finding that your transition to civilian life is more challenging than you expected. Like many combat veterans, you may continue to relive your experiences after the initial joy and relief of being back home subside. Or you may find yourself reacting to situations in ways that were appropriate in a combat zone but not at home or on the job. You might even believe your experiences have changed you so much that you can't recapture the relationships you once had with family, friends, and people at work.

Although you probably won't go back to being exactly the same person you were before deployment, there are things you can do to reach the point when you feel you're *really* home.

Giving yourself time to readjust

Every service member returning from a combat zone needs time to readjust. It's not possible to leave an environment where you've witnessed death and destruction, been exposed to life-threatening events, or suffered personal losses without bringing intense feelings and memories of your experiences with you. In past wars, combat veterans were able to decompress as they came back with their unit by ship, but today you can be in a high-threat environment one day and back home the next day.

Even if you didn't have intense combat experiences, you're still making a transition to completely different surroundings. After months of working long hours in demanding and high-stress conditions to achieve a critical military mission, you may find yourself bored with civilian life. Or maybe you're struggling with uncertainties in your life and miss the clear purpose and objectives of military duty.

It's important to recognize that the mental journey back to civilian life will take longer than the physical journey. After the homecoming celebrations have stopped, you'll still be in transition. During this time, most experts recommend that you focus on taking care of yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually by:

- getting plenty of rest and good nutrition
- taking care of any health issues

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- talking about your experiences with buddies from your unit or supportive family and friends
- keeping active and fit
- focusing on things you can do to reconnect with family, friends, and co-workers and find meaning in civilian life after combat

Reestablishing relationships with family and friends

Service members returning from combat often find that their relationships present the greatest challenges. Getting back together with family and friends can seem like starting over rather than picking up where you left off. Not only have you returned a different person as a result of your experiences, but:

- Your spouse may seem changed by the experience of managing without you for a long time.
- Your children are at a different stage of development and have new behavior and attitudes that you'll need to get used to.
- Your parents might have difficulty recognizing how your combat experiences have shaped and defined who you are now.
- Your old friends and you may no longer have the same interests and social activities in common with you.

Reestablishing positive relationships with family and friends after combat duty will require you to be patient and understanding, and to accept changes in yourself and others. Good communication will also be important to your progress in reconnecting and rebuilding healthy relationships.

What you can do as a husband or wife

While you've been away your spouse at home will have changed in some ways, too. After taking care of the household single-handedly, your spouse may have newfound feelings of independence and self-reliance, and will have established some new routines. It will take time to return to comfortable daily life as a couple.

- *Learn about your spouse's experiences on the home front.* This means asking questions and accepting the answers without being judgmental. Through talking together and listening to each other, you can come to an understanding of the changes in each of you. And you can begin to find the trust and comfort you both need in your relationship.
- *Share what you can about your combat duty.* It can be easier for service members to talk about their experiences with buddies who were there than with their spouse. It may take some time to feel comfortable opening up, but it's an important step in reaching a new level of trust and intimacy in your relationship.

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- *Try to adapt to new or different routines instead of expecting your spouse to start doing things your way immediately.* This can be difficult for someone used to calling the shots in a high-threat environment. If you take the time to understand and appreciate how things have been working in your absence, it'll be easier for you to negotiate shared responsibilities for the future.
- *Watch for indications that stress reactions are affecting your relationship.* Angry outbursts, aggression, physical and emotional withdrawal, unrealistic expectations, and frequent unresolved conflicts can tear down even the best relationship if not checked. Consider getting professional help if you see that your behavior is hurting your relationship.
- *Go slow.* Even when getting back together seems to be going well, it makes sense not to rush things. It takes time to reconnect and achieve the emotional and physical closeness that you both want. Patience is a quality every couple needs in abundance after a long and difficult separation.

What you can do as a parent

As a parent, you know that children learn and change quickly: the middle-schooler who was playing with dolls when you left may have put them away and moved on to softball or computer games. Again, you'll need to be patient and to listen.

- *Recognize and accept children's new developmental stages.* After a long absence, service members are often taken aback by how their children have grown and changed. Listen to your children and talk to your spouse, teachers, and caregivers to understand who they've become. Then you can work to relate to them where they are now and not where they were when you deployed.
- *Give yourself time to get back into the role of parent.* Your children may need time to reconnect and feel comfortable with you as their parent again. You and your spouse may also need time to talk about and negotiate your return to shared parenting responsibilities. Be careful not to push your way back into the parent role all at once, and be patient if your children don't respond as quickly or as positively as you'd like.

What you can do as a single service member

If you're single, you are likely to find that reestablishing a relationship with your parents will take patience and some work.

- *Be understanding and respectful with your parents.* It may be difficult for them to understand how you've changed. They may be so relieved to have you back home that they fuss over you too much or tiptoe around you. Try to understand their needs and be careful not to push them away. You can use your time together to begin negotiating the kind of relationship you want to have with your parents as an adult.

- *Expect that people will make continuing demands for your time and attention.* Even after you've been back for awhile, parents, relatives, and friends may continue to put you at the center of activities and events or have unrealistic expectations for your time and energy. It's good to think about how to manage these demands and negotiate what you're comfortable doing.
- *Resist becoming isolated.* Single service members often feel that they're in a different place emotionally and intellectually from their old friends without service experience. Sometimes it's easier to withdraw than to spend time with people you don't feel a connection with, but it's important to resist the impulse to stay alone. You can fight isolation and loneliness by reaching out to other veterans for friendship and getting involved in activities where you can meet new people.

Reconnecting on the job

Going back into the civilian work force after a long absence and intense experiences in a combat zone also has its challenges. You may be assigned different work or different people to work with. There may be unfamiliar new policies, procedures, and programs to learn. And your own perceptions and attitudes about your job may have been affected by your military experiences.

Combat veterans returning to civilian work after a long absence often need a period of adjustment before they feel connected to their work and their co-workers. In the beginning, don't be surprised if you:

- feel out of place or not sure where you fit in
- miss the intensity and emotional commitment typical of combat duty
- have mixed feelings about how your job was handled while you were gone
- lack the enthusiasm and motivation you once had for your job

These feelings are part of the process of readjusting to civilian employment after military deployment. There are things you can do to make your work transition as smooth as possible.

Before you go back to work

Returning to the civilian workplace poses its own set of challenges.

- *Meet with your supervisor to learn about changes that may have taken place while you were gone and about what your responsibilities will be now that you're back.* You might ask for a briefing to be brought up to speed so you'll know what to expect on your first day back. Make sure you understand what will be expected of you and how processes, goals, and personnel may have changed. You can also learn a great deal about changes that have taken place by talking to co-workers.

- *Know your rights.* Employed Guard and Reserve service members called to active duty are protected by the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Rights Act (USERRA). You can learn about your rights under USERRA by visiting the Web site of ESGR (Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve) at www.esgr.org (click on “Resources”). The site provides a summary of the law, answers to frequently asked questions, and tips for service members on how to encourage continued employer support for their military service.

After you go back to work

It will take some time to feel at ease again in your workplace. You’ll make better progress if you:

- *Show your appreciation for the people who performed your job while you were away.* You’ll need their support and insight as you get up to speed, and your good will can make it easier for them to adjust to their new roles in the workplace.
- *Stay aware of how your combat experiences may change the way you see your job.* Most service members returning to a civilian job after military duty in a combat zone find that their day-to-day work life has changed dramatically. Your job may not seem as exciting, interesting, or meaningful as what you were doing on active service. A military-style approach to solving problems may not work well at your civilian job. But you may have new skills and knowledge from your military experiences that can bolster your performance and benefit your organization.
- *Get support if you’re having difficulty performing your work.* You may have rushed back to work without giving the readjustment process enough time. Or you may be dealing with ongoing physical or emotional issues that interfere with your job performance. Employers will usually work with veterans to find accommodations that allow them to continue working, or they may offer the services of an employee assistance program. Sometimes, simply talking to a trusted friend, fellow veteran, or family member is enough to help you gain perspective about work-related concerns.

Understanding combat stress reactions

It’s not uncommon for service members to be still dealing with the effects of combat stress after deactivation. Stress reactions are uncomfortable physical, mental, emotional, and behavioral symptoms that are a normal response to traumatic or disturbing experiences. They can last for days or weeks after combat duty and may include:

- feeling irritable or jumpy
- becoming easily annoyed or frustrated
- feeling numb
- feeling disconnected from family and friends
- having difficulty concentrating or remembering things

- experiencing sadness or feelings of guilt
- sleeping too little or too much
- getting into unnecessary conflicts with loved ones
- being uncomfortable with physical and/or emotional intimacy
- having intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, or nightmares about events you experienced

Modify combat-zone responses for your civilian lifestyle

It's important to recognize that many of your reactions are actually learned responses that you depended on to keep you safe during deployment. Your combat-zone responses can stay with you and make your transition more difficult if you're not aware of them and make a conscious effort to adapt them for your present surroundings.

For example, your habitual state of alertness against enemy threats may keep you unnecessarily keyed up at home and at work. Or the emotional control needed for combat situations may make you seem detached and uncaring around your family, friends, and co-workers.

The Battlemind Training series developed by Walter Reed Army Institute of Research can help service members and their families identify potential problem areas. If you haven't been exposed to Battlemind Training during post-deployment health assessment and re-assessment, the program is available online at www.battlemind.org.

Know when to get help

Of course, not everyone will have the same stress reactions, and these reactions can vary in intensity and duration from one person to another. When the transition to civilian life isn't going well, getting treatment is often necessary to help turn things around.

Unfortunately, many service members still try to cope on their own because they believe mental health treatment is a sign of weakness. But combat stress reactions can affect anyone without regard to age, gender, mental and physical toughness, or military experience. It's actually a sign of strength to get help.

If you're concerned about how your transition back to civilian life is going, it's time to consider talking with an expert. Signs you can look for include:

- Symptoms aren't getting better or have become worse after several weeks back.
- You're concerned that you can't control your anger.
- Your work performance isn't what it should be.
- You're withdrawn and isolated.

- You've developed unhealthy behavior patterns (excessive drinking or drug use, gambling, compulsive spending, etc.) as a means of coping with your experiences.
- You have one or more persistent symptoms of depression such as prolonged sadness, loss of interest in things you once enjoyed, chronic fatigue, or feelings of worthlessness.
- Your relationships with family members and friends aren't going well.
- People close to you have been urging you to get help.

Remember that treatment works. And the earlier you get it, the better your chances are of preventing normal stress reactions from becoming self-destructive or turning into a more serious mental health problem like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Sources of help are listed at the end of this article.

Finding a place in your community

For many service members, getting connected to a larger community is an important step toward feeling at home. Being involved in your community gives you a wider circle of friends and neighbors who support you and appreciate your service.

“Community” is a concept with different meanings. Some people experience a sense of community by joining service organizations, clubs, or civic groups. Others find community through volunteering to help others or to make their neighborhood a better place to live. Many veterans find community through their faith by participating in the activities of their place of worship.

Whatever your interests are, there will be opportunities for community where you live. You may have to push yourself at first to get involved outside of work and family, but it will help you as you readjust. Veterans often discover that focusing on needs beyond their own has a way of reducing the time it takes to feel like a whole civilian again.

Counseling and support resources

Military OneSource

This free 24-hour service, provided by the Department of Defense, is available to all Guard and Reserve members and their families regardless of activation status. Services include consultation online or by telephone with referral for up to six free face-to-face counseling sessions (per issue) with a professional in your community. Your privacy is assured and no one knows you reached out for support unless there is a threat of harm to yourself or others. Contact Military OneSource by calling toll-free 1-800-342-9646 or through the Web site at www.militaryonesource.com.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

Readjustment Counseling Services

The VA provides free services at over 200 clinics in communities across the country. Services include individual counseling, group counseling, marital and family counseling, medical referrals, help with applying for VA benefits, employment counseling, alcohol and drug assessments and information, and referral to community resources. Counselors at community-based Vet Centers are veterans with personal understanding of the experiences of combat. Find the nearest Vet Center by calling 1-800-905-4675 (Eastern) and 1-866-496-8838 (Pacific) or go to www.va.gov/rcs.

National Guard Family Assistance Centers

Family assistance centers are at multiple locations in each state and territory. You can call or visit a family assistance center to get information on military and civilian support services and referral to programs in your community. To find the family assistance center nearest you, go to www.guardfamily.org and follow links to the locator for your state.

Installation family centers

You may also call or visit an installation family center of any service branch for information and referral to community-based programs and services. While on active duty, you and your family members are eligible for installation services including counseling and educational programs offered by the family center. Contact information and directions for installation family centers are available on the Military HOMEFRONT Web site, www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil (click on “Military Installations”).

Military and civilian clergy members

Military chaplains and civilian religious leaders in your community are usually trained in counseling and available to offer guidance, referrals, and spiritual support.

Online information and support resources

DoD Deployment Health Clinical Center (DHCC)

www.pdhealth.mil

Provides information and links to other sites addressing a wide variety of deployment-related issues. The site includes a Reserve Component Resource Center with information on health care, stress, and family support.

Beyond the Yellow Ribbon

www.minnesotanationalguard.org (click on “Beyond the Yellow Ribbon”)

This reintegration program provided by the Minnesota National Guard offers online information and podcasts helpful to all returning service members.

Army Behavioral Health

www.behavioralhealth.army.mil

Information and resources related to soldier mental health, including information on post-deployment adjustment issues with sections specifically for Guard and Reserve.

Marine Corps Community Services

www.usmc-mccs.org

Downloadable booklets on combat and operational stress, one for Marines and the other for their family and friends.

National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

www.ncptsd.va.gov

The VA's center for excellence in research, education, and training in the science, diagnosis, and treatment of PTSD and stress-related disorders. Its Web site provides a wide range of downloadable pamphlets, articles, and fact sheets.

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

www.centerforthestudyoftraumaticstress.org

A program of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, this center for research, education, consultation, and training has a Web site with information, links, and resources related to the impact of traumatic events. Look for the Courage to Care series by clicking on "Fact Sheets."

This article was written with the help of Chaplain (LTC) John J. Morris, Deputy State Chaplain, Minnesota Army National Guard.