

HOMECOMING: RESILIENCE AFTER WARTIME

Prepared by the American Psychological Association

Even when the war is over, stress and uncertainty can require the skills of resilience both from those coming home and from those who stayed home. Resilience is defined as the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or other significant sources of stress.

Homecoming Can Be Stressful

Reuniting with family often is idealized as a quick, smooth return to "normal." The reality may fall short of that ideal.

Those returning from military service often are hit right away with a laundry list of problems, including bills, family disputes, and expectations that family interactions and intimacy will spring back to pre-war levels.

Stress and anxiety can be the result of culture shock, with a quick flight from the foxhole to the front porch and no time to decompress en route.

It may take some service members and family members time to readjust--and the failure to effectively manage during this period can create a great deal of stress, anxiety, frustration and anger.

For National Guard and reservists:

Returning to work creates other tensions. Employers of reservists may tend to underestimate how long it will take someone who's been away to shift gears.

Some employers may feel that they kept jobs open to do their part for America--now they want to get back to business as usual.

Fellow workers may want to talk about the war when the returning employee wants to forget. Or conversely, fellow workers may not provide an opening for a service member who does need to talk.

Stress Will Be More Difficult for Some

How much stress returning military personnel experience may be affected in part by many factors:

- Extent to which their duty was dangerous (even if they were only awaiting this danger).
- Death or serious injury in their military unit.
- Possibility of exposure to chemical warfare or other weapons of mass destruction.
- Length of time they spent overseas.
- Exposure to dead and wounded (including enemy combatants and civilians).
- Past traumas, which can be heightened by the stress of war.
- Degree to which family dynamics have changed during their absence, such as increased dependency or independence on the part of children and a spouse.

Families have been stressed, too. The families of deployed personnel have had their own set of problems during the conflict, such as:

- Fear for the deployed family member's safety.
- Disruption of established patterns and routines.
- Reduced income and increased financial worry.
- Negative reactions from children to sudden changes in the family environment.

- Need to develop new resilience skills, renewed family relationships, new friends and support groups.
- Being overburdened by new roles and responsibilities.

Many families will continue to have pressures during the homecoming period, including:

- Being second-guessed for decisions made while a family member was away because of the war.
- Conflict over new relationships--such as a new baby and new friends.
- Shifts in decision-making.
- The fact that the family dynamics can never return to the idealized version of how they were before deployment.

There Are Many Roads to Resilience

The number and intensity of stressful experiences notwithstanding, most returning personnel and their families should be able to bounce back successfully.

Even those who have learned resilience skills, however, should not expect homecoming to be effortless or free of emotion. It is quite normal to experience days or even several weeks of mild to moderate symptoms of depression, anxiety, and anger, even if the initial homecoming was full of joy.

Children, for example, reassured with the safe return of a parent or sibling, may now feel they can express some of their negative feelings of fear or anger over what they may feel was abandonment.

Normal is what works for you. There are no standard or normal stages for reentry. The process varies from person to person.

Understanding that homecoming has its own brand of stress is a first step in the process of a long-term successful reentry for military personnel, their families, and the community.

10 Tips For Resilience During Homecoming

- Early in the process, identify people who can help--a friend, clergy, mental health professional, financial advisor--and seek help if needed. Some of these sources can supply emotional support, while others can provide direct help with day-to-day problem solving. Resolve to be open about problems and work on solving them together, either with family members or those professionals who can help.
- Dismantle big problems into manageable smaller parts. Then attack and solve these parts as a means of rebuilding confidence. A step-by-step approach can eventually resolve the larger problem.
- Social involvement through religious organizations, hobby groups, exercise clubs, social groups, etc. helps individuals rejoin the community. Be an active player, not a passive victim.
- Don't wait to solve problems. Begin to work on them immediately; inaction can reinforce the feeling that a problem is out of your control.
- Seeking solace in drugs or alcohol not only fails to solve the problems at hand, but creates new ones.
- Family readjustment problems are normal. Don't blame others for your distress, and don't blame yourself excessively.
- Cynicism or excessive pessimism about life and the future can become self-fulfilling and have a negative impact on you and others. Keep things in perspective--not every problem is a catastrophe. Although it sounds simplistic, a positive outlook helps raise morale and increases resilience.
- Recall how you met past challenges and use those strategies to meet the stresses of homecoming. By facing current problems with an eye to solutions, you are more likely to achieve a sense of progress, of "getting ahead" with life.

- Realize that the stress of homecoming can magnify other daily stressors. Make allowances for yourself and your family.
- Accept some setbacks in the return to "life as normal" as inevitable, whether they be emotional, financial, physical, or job-related, but be aware that the skills of resilience can help you bounce back.

Children Have Some Special Needs

Children will experience a wide range of stressful emotions and experiences around the war and homecoming, but are less likely than adults to speak directly about what bothers them. Their problems may be displayed in poor school performance; inability to get along with siblings, peers, or parents; or becoming withdrawn or accident-prone.

For a child whose parent(s) went to war, the trauma of separation may have been severe. These children are more likely than adults to act out their feelings, in part because they have less experience in coping with life stress.

To help children deal with war-related stress, parents and teachers should:

- Listen to children's thoughts and concerns about the war in a nonjudgmental fashion.
- Provide warmth and reassurance, without minimizing the child's concerns.
- Avoid imposing their own fears on children. Adult difficulties should be worked out without burdening a child or expecting the child to support the adult for any prolonged period. Children can provide important love and comfort, but they need strong adult support to do so.
- Recognize that children, like most adults, will bounce back successfully. Relate this positive expectation to them, so that their past experience will not lead them to a pessimistic view of the future.
- Remember that a child often will mirror a parent's reaction. If parents demonstrate resilience, the child will have positive role models.
- Seek help from a mental health professional for the family if the family is unable to function on a daily basis.

Warning Symptom Checklist: It's important to recognize the symptoms of stress that has not been effectively managed. Following is a checklist of warning symptoms:

- Guilt about actions or shame over some failure.
- Excessive drinking or drug use.
- Uncontrolled or frequent crying and other extreme reactions to events that normally would be handled more calmly.
- Sleep problems (too little, too much).
- Depression, anxiety, or anger.
- Depending too much on others.
- Verbal or physical family violence.
- Stress-related physical illness (head and backache, gastrointestinal problems, poor stamina).
- Inability to escape from horror scenes remembered from the war.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Suicidal thoughts or plans.

Families, too, may exhibit symptoms of stress that has not been dealt with effectively, including

- Family conflict that is not resolved.
- Family members becoming isolated from one another.
- Overdependency and clinging.

- Scapegoating one or two family members (often children).
- Disciplinary or academic problems in children.

If you or a family member continues to feel stress, anxiety, or frustration, or experiences any of the negative signs of coping discussed here, asking for help can be one of the quickest ways to recover a sense of control and balance. For many people, using the skills of resilience will help with the homecoming. But for individuals--and for families--who are unable to perform the functions of daily life as a result of stress or trauma, seeking the help of a licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can help them progress beyond the difficulties of homecoming.

Information contained in this brochure should not be used as a substitute for professional health and mental health care or consultation. Individuals who believe they may need or benefit from care should consult a psychologist or other licensed health/mental health professional.

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