

# Preparing

## for what lays AHEAD

Predeployment: How to prepare your children, your emotions, and what to expect from sex

by Karen Pavlicin

**W**hen Anna Mallery found out her husband Garret would be deploying to Iraq, she attended a pre-deployment briefing. "It was important stuff about the deployment and reminders about the paperwork we needed to get in order," she says. "But all I could think about was the fact that Garret and I weren't having sex." They were newlyweds and sex had been frequent – until news of the deployment.

"That whole summer," Anna explains, "Garret just didn't seem interested and I had to initiate everything. I knew he was tired from training and had a lot on his mind about the upcoming deployment. That last month my nerves were so tense I didn't even pursue it. But I couldn't help feeling unattractive, that it was somehow me and that we were the only couple going through this." About a month after Garret deployed, Anna asked her Family Readiness Group leader about it and finally discovered that physical and emotional detachment is perfectly normal.

Sex isn't the only thing that's tough to talk about when you're facing a deployment. So you should also know that it's normal to cry at nothing, argue over unimportant things, obsess about projects and fix-it lists, for your kids to go bonkers, and for one or both of you to emotionally shutdown or feel guilty or angry or relieved. Though you are still physically together, you are mentally and emotionally preparing for separation.

There are many things that will pull you in different directions in the months and weeks before the deployment. Yes, you'll need to make time to put affairs in order and plan for your separation. But the best way to begin is to forget the rest of the world for a moment and just focus on each other.

photo by Lindsey Bergstrom

### Spend Time Together

Salina Stevens, whose husband, Blaine, is deployed to Afghanistan, says, "It's hard not to be stressed in the months before the deployment, but make time to do the little things together. In a deployment, we hold much dearer those things that used to be routine and we took for granted – holding hands, saying grace, eating dinner together."

Haven Raynerson, whose husband Ken is also deployed to Afghanistan, agrees. "Find time every day to connect with each other before it gets crazy with packing," she says. "Spend time as a couple and family as well as with each child. Most of all, support each other. This is a big deal you are all going through."

### Reconfirm Your Commitment To Each Other

Long separations cause loneliness, and high stress can lead to increased sensitivity about your choices for dealing with that loneliness.

Take steps now to build trust and reconfirm your commitment to each other. Much of distrust and jealousy is due to insecurity. Start by expressing how you feel about each other – say "I love you."

Karen T. Cimini, PhD, a relationship and sex therapist in Akron, Ohio, who provides free counseling to military couples, advises, "Before the deployment, acknowledge that you will be extremely lonely at times. Talk to each other about how you will each deal with that and what you are comfortable with. Pledge your commitment to each other." And then avoid temptation. "If you don't want to slip, don't go to slippery places," Dr. Cimini cautions. "Look for people – of the same gender -- who can support you and your marriage. Don't look for support from someone of the opposite sex; just listening can be very seductive."

### Reach Out to Others

You may find support in different places, through family, friends, work colleagues, or other spouses who are going or have been through a deployment. Choose positive people who can help you keep your spirits up and deal with challenges in a healthy way.

Know that there are others going through the same issues. "I felt funny at first bringing up sensitive topics like sex in FRG meetings," Anna says. "It seemed like people don't want to talk about such personal things. But these are the same things that make us feel isolated. We spouses don't need to put on a front or try to appear so tough. Open up to your feelings and stress. Get to know other spouses going through this. Reach out to people so you know you aren't alone."

### Get Paperwork Out of The Way

There are some things you'll need to take care of that are not fun or romantic but are necessary. You should both have a will and power of attorney. Anna advises, "Drawing up a will is not something you want to do at the last minute. For one thing, it can be hard to get an appointment at the last minute. And you want to give yourself time to discuss it." Death is difficult to talk about in detail, especially when you are preparing to send your part-

ner on a military assignment. At least discuss the basics: life insurance, burial place, children's guardians, and what you each would want for the other.

If possible, have your service member make changes to accounts, such as suspending a cell phone, before leaving as some companies do not make it easy to use powers of attorney.

### Plan What You Can

During a deployment, it's often the daily chores and unexpected disruptions that can send us over that emotional cliff. So take time together now to put a few things in order and give each other guidance for how to handle the headaches. Know where all the files are, what bills need to be paid, and what items need regular maintenance.

### Agree On a Communication Plan

Communication is the number one thing that keeps you connected during deployment. Talk about your options

and expectations. How often do you expect to be able to talk with each other? Can you schedule a time to talk or will calls be random? How often will you write to each other? How long will it likely take for a response? Do you expect there will be long periods of no communication?

Each deployment is different, but in many cases today's technology allows for some form of instant communication from even the remotest areas. While it's wonderful to have that option, it also requires boundaries. "Ken can reach me anytime, anywhere by text messaging my cell phone," says Haven. "He expects that whenever he has downtime and can talk, I'll be available. It doesn't always work that way but he gets very upset if I don't answer immediately."

Think about what type of information you want to include in your communication. Dr. Cimini suggests, "Plan

"Sometimes just knowing where to go and what to do makes all the difference."

to limit the amount of time you talk about problems and make sure you allot time on each call or email or letter to have love talk, praise the kids' accomplishments, and tell each other something funny you can both laugh at. Agree to this ahead of time."

In addition to instant communication options, also plan to write letters. As Ken Raynerson says, "There's nothing like the feeling of mail call and receiving something from home." Salina Stevens adds, "There's nothing like curling up at night with a piece of paper that says 'I love you and miss you.'"

### Create Tangible Reminders

As you prepare yourself and your children for this time apart, create tangible reference points that can serve as reminders of love during the deployment.

If you have time, take pictures and videos of your family doing everyday things together like reading stories, eating dinner, or playing a game. Help chil-

## Cover spouse

LeeAnne Bielar is a Critical Care RN. Lee Anne and her family got notice of her husband's impending deployment in the second trimester of her most recent pregnancy. LeeAnne and her husband Jon are stationed in San Diego, Calif. with their two children, Francesca, age 9, and Dillon Orr, age 13.

The Bielar family prepared for their most recent deployment by going out to dinner at their favorite Thai restaurant for their last meal as a family before their separation. The day before Jon deployed he took the children to see a movie with "just them." LeeAnne is a committed woman with a strong family and friend support network at home. "I have the utmost respect for his job and position and will do what I can to make things go smoothly for him and our country."

LeeAnne is due to deliver a baby girl while Jon is deployed in the western pacific. LeeAnne says, "We tried not to make too much of a big deal of it (the future deployment), but Frani (Francesca), our usual motor-mouth, was very quiet with tears in her eyes on the way home from dropping him off."



photo by Deb Schwedhelm



photo by Lindsey Bergstrom

>>> dren find something special they can use to think about a parent – a journal, a bracelet, a teddy bear – that they can hold and look at when missing the parent. Dr. Cimini also recommends that the parent who is leaving set up a common sound cue for each child, such as hearing the wind or a clock ticking or bell ringing. "Tell the child, 'when you hear this sound, you'll know it's my voice saying I love you.'" This is an easy, no-cost way to make a special connection during the deployment.

### Take Care of Yourself

Have a plan for how you'll spend your time. Haven suggests, "Start before the deployment so you are in the routine and your kids are used to seeing you do it. Don't underestimate the enormous amount of time it takes to be responsible for everyone and everything. If you start before the deployment making time for yourself, a schedule for working out, and plans for healthy meals, it helps reduce stress before the deployment and sets the expectation to continue during deployment."

Salina adds, "Set up a positive way for you to mark time and feel good, especially during those really lonely hours at night when the house is quiet. I read a daily meditation book. It gives me something positive to think about. I also write in a journal. When you write things down, you can look back and say, wow, I made it through all this."

If you have children, prepare for the challenges of single parenthood. This includes finding a reliable babysitter, car pools with neighbors, and planned breaks for yourself and your children.

### Prepare Your Children, But Let Them Be Kids

Help children understand that their parent is leaving to do a job — not because of anything the child has done. Answer questions honestly and age appropriately. Kids feel many of the same emotions you do but know less about how to deal with them. Let them know they aren't alone and that you will get through this as a family.

Don't let kids think they are supposed to be adults.

Haven shares, "Our son, Joe (age 9), is always saving someone in his dreams. Ken told him before he left to 'take care of things at home.' Joe thinks he is supposed to be the man of the house and it creates tension between us. He is still a child and I am the decision maker. Sometimes he gets that confused. It's fine to give kids a sense of responsibility for their actions and tell them to listen and help out. But let them be kids."

### Plan For a Positive Goodbye

The last day is not the time to deal with major issues. It is a time for a nice hug and kiss, a smile, a parting that gives you a good feeling and memory to lead you into the separation. So let your only last-minute job be the farewell.

Salina shares how she and Blaine made their parting special. "We had spent time with our kids and as a family. Then the day before he left, we had the best date of our lives. We put the kids in daycare and took the day for ourselves. We went to the movies, had a romantic lunch, relived the first time we met and our first date. It's those special times that I have focused on during our separation.

"I knew I didn't want to take a day off the morning he was leaving. That last day is so stressful. I couldn't bear being at home in an empty house feeling sad. The kids and I dropped him off at ten o'clock

If you have children, prepare for the challenges of single parenthood.

and they went to school and I went to work. That day we needed to stay busy and feel like life would continue on. I'm glad Blaine and I took the day before to have a wonderful time together. It made saying goodbye a little easier." **MSM**

\* Karen Pavlicin is the author of *Surviving Deployment: A guide for military families and Life After Deployment: Military families share reunion stories and advice, both available from [www.militaryfamily-books.com](http://www.militaryfamily-books.com)*