



Surviving Deployment

Making it through the deployment phase.

by Karen Pavlicin

When Sherri Fassbender's husband, Carl, received orders to deploy to Iraq, she had no doubt she would be able to cope with the deployment. "I'm an over-achiever, independent. And since I had been a family readiness group leader, I thought I could handle anything," she said. "But what I quickly learned after Carl left is that it's a whole lot different when it's your own family."

Each deployment is unique, whether this is your first or fifth. The deployment assignment; your age, perspective and maturity; your relationship as a couple; and the make-up of your family are likely to all be different each time you go through a deployment. Sometimes lessons from previous experiences will help make this one easier, and sometimes you just have to roll with the changes. No matter what your situation, there are a few things that can help make this deployment a positive one.

Find a Balance

When Carl deployed, Sherri was working two jobs and taking college courses to become a pharmacist, all while trying to find time for their four children, ages 17, 15, 10 and seven. "I was totally Gumby, pulled in so many different directions," she said. "I needed to be a rock for my family but I felt like a jelly fish. This deployment was too long of a time to say 'we'll make do until it's over.' I knew we had to deal with it and adjust."

After a couple months, Sherri quit one job, changed her hours at the other job so she could work during the kids' school hours and dropped her own classes.

Abby Sobaski's greatest challenge during her husband's second deployment on a Navy ship was loneliness. "The second deployment I was much more lonely," she said. "I thought it would be easier. It felt like all I did was work and come home to an empty house. It was just me and the cat." She didn't know what to do with her time without Bryan there. "I wasn't following my own advice from the first deployment to keep busy," she explained.

To get back in balance, Abby made an effort to meet friends for coffee or walks, joined a book club and redecorated their house.

Whether you have too much on your plate or not enough, you know when your life feels out of balance. As quickly as possible, make changes to your daily routine and responsibilities, so you can focus your energy where you need it most.

Make Time For You

There are 1,440 minutes in a day. You can spend 60 of those on yourself and still have plenty for everyone else. So as you make those changes to find balance in your life, make sure you count time for you.

Every day, you need the basics: sleep, healthy foods and exercise.

Give yourself time for a creative outlet. Using your creative talents to make something or to express yourself can help you balance those emotions that tend to run strong during this challenging time.

Renew Your Inner Strength

What's your source of faith? What inspires you? Make quiet time to nurture that so you and your family can believe that everything will be okay, no matter what happens.

Surround Yourself With Positive, Supportive People

Rachel Robertson, author of the Deployment Journal series, said that it's hard to remember to take care of ourselves when we have so many other things going on. "Sometimes we keep ourselves so busy that we don't even realize we need to take care of ourselves. Sometimes we're so overwhelmed we don't know where to start," she said. "One way or another, we'll get through this, but it's up to us to choose between merely surviving and actually thriving."

Get a Support System

There are plenty of people out there who want to do something to support the troops and their families. Let them. "I was in a coffee shop and the woman at the checkout noticed my pin with Carl's picture on it," Sherri said. "We started talking about the deployment, and it turns out she's a massage therapist, and she offered me a free one-hour massage. What a wonderful gift it was

for this total stranger to recognize that what I needed most was just a few minutes to myself to relax."

You might find support in your community, your family, your church, your military support group, or online support groups. There are times in every deployment when it's nice to have someone who understands how you feel or someone who knows how to fix the leaky faucet.

Making new friends and helping others can also be healing, Rachel said. "When my husband was deployed, my neighbor would call me and say, 'Get over here, I'm making pancakes.' She was always there for me, and I helped her through a few days as well," Rachel said. "Who knows if we ever would have crossed paths in civilian life, but now we are forever connected. What I do know is that feeling like I was in this with others made a world of difference."

Help Your Kids

Sherri said her biggest challenge was dealing with her kids' behavior. "My 17-year-old dealt with the deployment differently than my 7-year-old. It was hard to know what is normal behavior for a child's age or if their behavior is due to the deployment. I didn't know whether I should be more lenient or not. Suddenly I lacked confidence in my own parenting."

Gail Mossman, State Youth Coordinator for the Minnesota National Guard Family Programs, said parents should not be more lenient because of the deployment. "Keep your expectations high and consequences in place, but don't be disappointed when they can't meet your expectations," she advised.

Gail added that all kids have some response to the deployment. "If they did not react to deployment, it would be unusual," she said. "But the reactions of children and teens can vary remarkably. Some may over-achieve and some may become so stressed out they have seizures or begin self-injurious habits." The key, she said, is to get your home life feeling as normal as possible and to deal with situations as they arise. A few tips she shares: [continues on page 28 >>](#)

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- >>> Ask the parent who is deployed to send home funny stories so kids know that it's not all sad and a tough spot over there. Kids worry about how their deployed parent is dealing with the seriousness.
- > Develop an attitude that you can make it. Gail's motto: Tomorrow I'll still be standing.
- > Keep kids involved in out-of-school activities.
- > Don't give too much responsibility. Let them be kids.



Many kids don't want to tell a parent honestly how they feel because they know their parent is also stressed. Help kids find one other person they can talk with. Find opportunities to connect with your kids over normal everyday activities such as washing dishes, setting the table, or bath time.

Give your kids honest information about the deployment. Answer their questions, but don't give them more information than they need.

Communicate The Right Things

You may have agreed on how many letters to write or how often you might be able to talk by phone. But as life goes on during the deployment, with all its ups and downs, it can be hard not to vent emotions or try to solve problems that can't be solved from miles away.

Julie LaBelle discovered that her husband Ed did not need to know every little thing that went wrong during his deployment. "I vented to him about the washing machine overflowing, our teenager going wild, all the overwhelming things that were happening in my life at home," she explained. "I found out later that he would get off the phone stressed and feeling deflated because he couldn't be home helping with all of that. He needed to feel like everything was OK."

For Abby, a letter or phone call was a chance to express love and commitment. She said, "I needed to know he loved me. I needed to hear it. Bryan is not a real verbal guy. I would say, 'Do you even miss me?' He learned that I need reassurances in our communication."

Choose the right method of communication as well as the right things to

share. E-mail can be easily misunderstood. A letter can take days or weeks to arrive. If you have hot emotions or a problem that needs to be solved quickly, write yourself a letter to vent or talk with a friend or neighbor who can help immediately. Make time in each letter or phone call to express positive feelings for each other and talk about something positive that happened recently.

Use Your Sense of Humor

As often as possible, laugh good hearty belly laughs. A good sense of humor can lighten the moment and give you just the perspective you need to more effectively deal with an emotion or situation. A deployment does not have to be all gloomy and serious; give yourself permission to enjoy life. Laugh at least once a day.

You can use humor to respond to a situation with less stress or to set up unusual and fun routines for yourself and your family. Julie said, "The fast food joint down the street offered cheeseburgers for 10 cents. And the gas station offered a car wash for 99 cents if you filled up your vehicle. So I would load up the van with kids, drive through for burgers, and then swing over to the gas station. The rule was: no eating until we were inside the car wash. As we pulled in, the kids said their prayers and then dug in as the machines started. They loved it! It became a weekly ritual we all looked forward to. They called it Mom's Restaurant, and my youngest says she still craves food every time she sees a car wash. Not only did I get a lot accomplished in a short period of time, but we also created a warm family memory."

Keep Reminders of Your Love Visible

During her husband's R&R, Sara Reilly took new pictures to put around their house. "It was scary sending him back," she said. "I needed something fresh and new to look at for the next several months."

Find ways to remind yourself how much you love your service member and your family. Keep a fun photo by your bedside. Watch your children sleep. Let simple reminders of your love turn moments of anger, stress, or impatience into moments of tenderness, forgiveness and joy.

Look For The Positive Blessings

Sara felt more independent because of this deployment. "We never had a mouse problem when my husband was home. The mice only came when everything else was upside down. I looked in a book how to set traps," she said. "I didn't know how tough I could be."

Sherri saw her family grow in ways she never expected. She said, "Our teens have become so responsible and independent. They have more confidence in what they're exposed to now. And they can cook." Sherri was also blessed with a new friendship with her neighbor Tracy. "We had time to really get to know each other and we developed this really deep relationship, close like sisters." She added, "For all the challenges, there have definitely been blessings from this experience." **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.militaryfamilybooks.com or www.karenpavlicin.com

