

Facing routine father absences

Van Breda, AD

Routine father absences are a part of the lives of many people, but perhaps affects no group more than military families. The South African Navy is unique in that for many of its members, routine deployments are a way of life and large formal and informal structures have been developed to assist families in adjusting to this life style.

However, over the past two years there has been an increase in the extent of deployments in the Navy, and a concomitant increase in the stress experienced by Naval families. The social workers have become more intrinsically involved in various aspects of support to sailors and their families. As part of this effort, a large study was recently conducted on sea-going families to determine the effects of such deployments on sailors and their wives.

EMOTIONAL CYCLES OF DEPLOYMENT

A detailed content analysis of 68 subjects' responses (40 married men and 28 wives) has enabled the researcher to describe the various emotional and relational changes experienced by Naval couples over the course of cycle of a deployment.

The pre-deployment phase seems characterised by marital conflict, anxiety and sadness or depression. In addition, many couples seem to withdraw from each other just prior to the actual separation. Apprehension about the deployment, as well as feelings of optimism or bravery, were evident here. The conflict and withdrawal seem to be used by couples to prepare for the inevitable separation. One subject responded, "Sometimes I pick fights to make the parting easier."

These findings correlate quite closely with those of other researchers. Logan (1987) notes that in this stage of the deployment women tend to feel angry and resentful of the husband's abandonment, while men tend to feel guilty about their own abandonment of their wife. She also comments that the husband and wife, while still physically together, have separated emotionally. Other writers (Bey & Lange, 1974, pp.283- 284) describe the pre- deployment phase in terms of the stages of mourning, noting feelings of "numbness, shock and disbelief," anger towards the Navy, emotional distance from their husbands, "despair, inertia and hopelessness," sadness and apprehension.

The deployment itself is characterised by loneliness and longing for each other. Men express marked concern about the family's coping during their absence. People tend to throw themselves into their work in order to avoid the lonely feelings. As the deployment progresses people seem to feel they have adjusted to the separation, and life takes on a new routine. However, feelings of frustration and boredom begin to emerge. As home- coming draws closer, men and women become excited and nervous. One man wrote, "I hope there's enough love when I get home."

Most international studies into deployment have focused on wives' responses to the deployment phase. During this period wives experience markedly more actual illnesses (Snyder, 1978), clinical levels of depression (Beckman, Marsella & Finney, 1979), intensification of problems (Decker, 1978), and feelings of loneliness, worry, sadness and anxiety (Wexler & McGrath, 1991). Men tend to worry about their families and experience the

alienation of being cut off from significant relationships (Rosenfeld, Rosestein & Raab, 1973).

Happiness and contentment are the hallmarks of the post- deployment phase, with a growing sense of having adjusted back to "normal family life." Anxiety and marital conflict frequently follow immediately after the reunion, but give way to a sense of calm after a week or so. Sometimes there is apprehension about the next deployment, and so the cycle repeats itself.

Although one may expect the post- deployment phase to be a happy and conflict- free one, researchers have noted that the "stress of father- return after prolonged absence is as great as that experienced at the time of his departure" (Baker, Fisher, Cove & Master, 1968, p.347). During this period couples are renegotiating their marital roles and family routines (Logan, 1987).

RISK FACTORS

It was interesting to find that, after extensive statistical analyses, certain groups did not differ markedly in their experience of deployments. Most notably, gender was not found to be a significant variable. Men tend only to be slightly more defended against anxiety than women. Women's employment status, contrary to expectations, does not influence their experience. Age was not found to be especially significant, except that as women get older they tend to become increasingly self- reliant and independent.

Four main areas were, however, found to be significant determinants of coping. Firstly, rank. Petty officers were the rank group most at risk, followed by the junior ranks. These subjects experience the greatest anxiety

Facing routine father absences *(continued)*

and loneliness, and the least feelings of happiness and adjustment. They have the most concern about their finances and experience the greatest difficulties in making changes in marital roles over deployment cycles. It is hypothesised that two mediating factors play a role here, viz. low status and youth. Petty officers, particularly, have low status (in comparison with same-aged officers), low income and young families.

A second significant area involves the nature of the separations, that is, the ship on which the husband works. Subjects who are associated with ships who experience erratic and unpredictable deployments experience the greatest stress. Longer and more predictable separations are adjusted to with greater ease, particularly if social support is available. Unpredictable rapid separations prevent couples from making the necessary adjustments, particularly in marital roles and intimacy. One woman wrote, "If he goes for a long period I adjust quickly and cope as well as I can, but for the short trips I feel frustrated because I just start adjusting and then he returns.

Thirdly, the presence of social support, while not leading directly to better coping, is associated with other areas of better coping. For example, subjects who experience unpredictable deployments but feel supported by the unit cope better than those who are not supported.

Lastly, people who find the changes in marital roles difficult tend to find the whole deployment experience difficult, tend to feel unsupported by other members of their unit, and experience greater anxiety and marital conflict. One man wrote that role changes are "confusing and always leading to arguments. If something is not done or incorrectly handled the blame is always shifted to and fro."

CONCLUSIONS

Family separations are a routine yet stressful part of military life. Deployments to sea were the subject of this study, but the results may well be relevant to all separations, eg military courses. High risk groups, such as junior non-commissioned officers and those whose separations are unpredictable, require extra support. Social workers need to pay particular attention to assisting couples in making shifts in their marital roles. The provision of support by the husband's unit and by other wives in the unit (eg Ladies Associations), by means of periodic phone calls and offers of assistance in times of need, contributes positively to the effective coping of both husbands and wives. For the men (or women) who are deployed, opportunities to speak about their feelings have been found to be beneficial.

REFERENCES

BAKER, S.L., FISCHER, E.G., COVE, L.A. & MASTER, F.D.

1968. Impact of father absence : problems of family reintegration following prolonged father absence. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 38 : 347.

BECKMAN, K., MARSELLA, A.J. & FINNEY, R. 1979. Depression in the Wives of Nuclear Submarine Personnel. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 136(4) : 524- 526.

BEY, D.R. & LANGE, J. 1974. Waiting Wives : Women Under Stress. *American Journal Psychiatry*, 131 (3) : 283- 286.

DECKER, K.B. 1978. Coping with Sea Duty : Problems Encountered and Resources Utilized during Periods of Family Separation. In: HUNTER, E.J. & NICE, D.S. (eds). *Military Families : Adaptation to Change*. New York : Praeger Publishers, 113- 129.

LOGAN, K.V. 1987. The Emotional Cycle of Deployment. *Proceedings*, February : 43- 47.

ROSENFELD, J.M., ROSENSTEIN, E. & RAAB, M. 1973. Sailor

Families : The Nature and Effects of One Kind of Father Absence. *Child Welfare*, 52(1) : 33- 44.

SNYDER, A.I. 1978. Periodic Marital Separation and Physical Illness. *American Journal Orthopsychiatry*, 48(4) : 637- 643.

WEXLER, H.K. & McGRATH, E. 1991. Family Member Stress Reactions to Military Involvement Separation. *Psychotherapy*, 28(3) : 515- 519.

EFFEKTETRUSTS GRATIS!



Daaglikse effektetrust
koop- en verkooptekens
sowel as 'n volledige
kwartaalike effektetrust
verslag.

Skakel Hugo Snyman by
die Buro vir Finansiële
Ontleding en Beplanning
in Pretoria by
(012) 64-7471.

BELASTING-VRIENDELIKE BELEGGINGS?

Gesels met Hugo Snyman
by (012) 64-7471 oor
belasting-vriendelike
beleggings.