



Improving deployment resilience

Guidelines for families.

By Maj Adrian Van Breda, Social Work Research & Development, Military Psychological Institute

MILITARY FAMILIES EXPERIENCE a broad range of stressors which are unique to the military context. These stressors include the demand to be combat ready, frequent geographical transfers and isolation from the broader community.

One of the most common stressors in any defence force is the deployment of soldiers, sailors, air force personnel and medical staff. Many SANDF members are separated from their families for six to nine months of the year. It is also true that many members deploy routinely for several years in a row, resulting in a kind of chronic state deployment.

Extensive studies into military families

in the SANDF have shown that while some cope well with deployments, many families experience deployments as stressful and demanding. It is not uncommon for families to break down completely as a result of deployments. Conversely, some families experience great difficulty when the military member is finally no longer deployed.

In our studies, however, we have found families who cope very well with deployments and some who even find them valuable. We set about studying what enables these families to cope well and were able to identify seven significant areas of family life. These families experienced the same deployments as everyone else, but had the ability to resist the stress of the deployments. We called this ability "deployment resilience," or the ability to resist the stress which can result from deployments.

The seven deployment resilience factors

are: Emotional cycles of deployment, attitudes, social support networks, financial preparation, family structures, separation and children, and marital relationship.

We have found that when families are able to develop these seven areas of deployment resilience they feel less stressed by the deployments. Military members who develop deployment resilience are able to be more productive and efficient at work. We have developed a social work programme called the Deployment Resilience Seminar to develop these seven factors in families. The main ideas are briefly presented here.

Emotional cycles

Most families go through a cycle of emotions during a deployment, starting a few weeks before the deployment and ending a few weeks afterwards. Prior to a deploy-

ment, for example, many families find that they quarrel or feel emotionally cut off from each other. Both of these serve to enable an emotional separation prior to the actual employment. During the initial stages of the deployment the family which remains behind may feel disorientated, depressed and tired. With time, however, most families learn to adjust to this "single parent" lifestyle. The members who are deployed typically throw themselves into their work and try not to think about home.

Just prior to coming home, many people experience a mixture of excitement and nervousness. Having been apart for a while, people are unsure how things will go when they are back together again. The first few days together can often be quite tense and difficult. Families who cope well with deployments have a less intense emotional cycle and have learned that these cycles are normal. Although they experience emotional changes, these changes do not restrict their general satisfaction with life.

Attitudes

There are often many reasons to be unhappy about deployments or with the SANDF - frequent duties, slow promotions, lack of contact with families, etc. Many people focus a great deal on these negative aspects. In the process, they grow angry, helpless, resentful and exhausted. We have found that focusing excessively on these things makes them worse. Families who cope well with deployments acknowledge that deployments are stressful and that there may be problems at work. However, they focus on what is positive and try to find out what they can gain from the separations.

Support networks

One of the best forms of protection during difficult times is the presence of support networks. Families who have good relationships with other military families, with their extended families, with the communities in which they live and with a religious community have the highest levels of deployment resilience. Family relationships are important because these are often the people we are closest to. Good military friendships help because other military people understand the military system and its stressors. Researchers tell us that supportive relationships "buffer" us against stress in life. The stress doesn't get less, but it has less of a negative impact on us. It is as if we have cocooned ourselves in cotton wool.

Financial preparation

Finance is a problem for most of us. In studies in the SA Navy we found that the vast majority of people were very concerned about their financial situation. During

deployments, finances become even more limited, because of the extra costs of having two households. We have found that people who prepare themselves financially for deployments have less deployment stress. Although money is still limited, these families know that there is money available should something go wrong during a deployment.

Family structures

Some families cope very well while the military member is away - the families take over the members' responsibilities and quite enjoy not having them there. Unfortunately, when they come back, there is no place in the family for them. We call this style of relating the "closed ranks" approach, because the families close ranks against the members.

Other families have an "open ranks" approach. These families keep the military members' places open, so that when they return, their places are waiting and they can just pick up where they left off. But these families fall apart during the deployment.

Some families cope well during deployments and others cope well between deployments, but only a few families cope well both during and between deployments. These families adopt a "partner aware" family approach. In this approach the families understand that the military members are away, but also keep their place open during the deployment.

Separation and children

Children of all ages experience stress during deployments. Even though they may not be able to put it in words, they do not like their parent going away. Some children get angry with the absent parent, become disoriented, sleep badly, do poorly at school or wet their beds. Families that cope well with deployments find ways to prepare the children prior to deployments and to maintain a connection with the absent parent during the separation.

Marital relationship

A good, secure, trusting marital relationship (or partnership) is, by far, the most important deployment resilience factor. Couples who cope well with deployments are able to work their conflicts out, avoid violence and aggression, are sexually faithful, understand and tolerate the changes in the levels of intimacy and closeness and communicate well.

Research shows that women who are more independent and self-sufficient have greater deployment resilience than women who are very dependent on their partners and feel unable (or unallowed) to make decisions on their own. Furthermore, men

who feel comfortable and secure with a partner who is independent have the most deployment resilience.

Guidelines

The *Deployment Resilience Seminar* proposes many guidelines which can improve deployment resilience. Here are some of them:

- * Talk to your partner about your feelings about deployments.
- * Accept that there will be some emotional distancing or conflict prior to a deployment.
- * Think about the positive aspects and find the opportunities hidden in the deployments.
- * Get your whole family involved in military activities from time to time.
- * Make good friends with at least one other family in your unit.
- * Make use of monthly budgeting.
- * Save R100 each month for emergencies.
- * Pay off your debts as quickly as possible - pay more than you are required to.
- * Make arrangements to pay your salary into a bank account that your family has access to during deployments.
- * Ensure that your family has signing powers on your bank accounts.
- * Write a love letter to your partner before a deployment.
- * Get a photo of your whole family to keep while on deployment.
- * Write a short letter to each member of your family during deployment.
- * Ask your family to organize a welcome home party for you.
- * Ask your partner to also consider what you would want when making decisions.
- * Encourage your partner to be independent while you are away. Support your partner's decisions.
- * Don't treat your family like military employees when you get home.
- * Record stories on cassette tape for your children while you are away.
- * Do not tell your eldest son to be the man of the house while you are away.
- * Show your children on a map where you will be during a deployment.
- * Draw a worm and divide it into the same number of segments as day you will be away. Have your child colour in a segment each day until you get home.
- * Help your children talk about their feelings about your going away - share your own feelings with them.
- * Maintain the usual routines and rules with your children during and after deployments.
- * Ask your unit social worker to run the Deployment Resilience Seminar. ✪