



# Supporting Defence families



## Your family and the Australian Defence Force

Entering into a relationship with a serving member of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) means entering into a relationship with the ADF itself. The following pages discuss some of the factors shaping a military relationship, providing tips for healthy and positive interaction in this context.

### What living in the Australian Defence Force environment means

In addition to the 'regular' issues faced by civilian couples, a military couple must consider the additional demands and influences placed upon them by their association with the ADF. The military command structure provides the backdrop for the relationship and as such has a significant role in shaping features of the partnership.

### Military command structure

Members of the ADF work within a military command framework known as the 'chain of command'. The chain of command enables the smoothest possible flow of orders, information, and actions. All members of the ADF are trained to know their place in the chain, and are able to identify their superiors, peers and subordinates.

Failure to use the chain of command for desired action, or failure to obey orders that flow through the command framework, may lead to disciplinary action being taken against members.

The chain of command is not just the framework for passing on orders and information. It is also the avenue for communication, by both the member and their superiors. The system ensures that all members are confident to communicate their needs, aspirations, recommendations and grievances. The first point of contact for a member to discuss and resolve any work-related concerns is the supervisor/section commander in their chain of command.

### Separation and relocation

Separation and relocation are some of the key features of a military lifestyle. Separation occurs when the military member is required to spend

time away from home on deployment, exercises or for training. Relocation refers to military postings, when the military member is required to move to a new location on posting.

Defence knows that members perform at their best when their families are well cared for and they are confident that life at home will run smoothly while they are away. The best way to achieve this is by planning ahead about family requirements during separations and relocations, and having access to appropriate support services.

Family readiness is just as important for single members. Informing and involving parents, siblings, friends and other people who are important to you when preparing for relocations, separations and the unique demands of military service, are critical to sustaining these relationships.

### Unrestricted service

Unrestricted service means that members are required to serve in any location, at any time, in accordance with ADF requirements. ADF personnel may be required to work long or irregular hours, be on call, or perform shift work. No penalty rates or overtime is paid in such circumstances; however, Service Allowance is intended to provide compensation for the special demands of Service life. Work hours are generally from Monday to Friday, 7:30 am to 4 pm. If overtime is worked, most commanders will endeavour to recompense this time, however, there is no guarantee that this will occur as a matter of course.

Unrestricted service also means that at times members will need to deploy on exercises and operations without their families. Military postings





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will also occur when members have to change their home base, or place where they undertake their duties. Families may also be required to move at these times. Many support services are offered to help families during these periods.

## Defence Force Discipline Act

Members of the armed forces are expected to be of the highest calibre, both physically and ethically, therefore the ADF has in place a number of regulations which impact on the lifestyle of military personnel. All members of the ADF are required to conform to the rules, laws and obligations as defined within the *Defence Force Discipline Act 1982* (DFDA).

These rules address various forms of criminal conduct, both of a civil and military nature. They also relate to areas such as the non-medical use of drugs, consumption of alcohol, unacceptable sexual behaviour and indebtedness. Many of the practices banned by the military regulations are sometimes permissible under civil law and, in many cases, seen by some in the community as acceptable. So, members should always be aware of DFDA regulations and ensure that their behaviour is appropriate at all times.

Having a 'zero tolerance' policy means that the ADF does not tolerate unacceptable behaviour, discrimination, nor the mismanagement or disregard of complaints in this area. A zero tolerance policy is also held in regard to the use of prohibited substances

In addition to disciplinary or administrative action, members charged under the DFDA can face serious penalties, including imprisonment or dismissal from the ADF.

## The posting process

Once initial training has been completed, members will be posted to a base where they will be employed as per their job classification. Generally, a posting is for 2 to 4 years. However, a posting may be shorter or longer due to Service requirements.

Defence posting policy reflects the need to fill current vacancies and to rotate Service men and women through operational, staff and training

appointments to develop their skills and experience. Members are given the opportunity to express a preference for the localities to which they would like to be posted. While Defence will try to fulfil all posting preferences, members may be posted to any locality if there is a Service requirement

Defence has military bases located all over Australia as well as a presence on bases overseas. Serving members may be required to post to any of these locations, which may be in state capital cities or in very remote or isolated locations, in accordance with Defence requirements for the member's skills and qualifications

## Exercises, operations and deployments

The Defence mission is to defend Australia and its national interests.

In carrying out this mission, members of the ADF can be called upon at short notice to deploy anywhere in Australia or around the world. Deployments of ADF personnel within Australia and overseas occur on a regular basis in response to events such as peacekeeping missions, planned exercises and natural disasters. In many cases, members are required to move at short notice to areas providing only basic amenities.

Planned exercises occur regularly in Australia and overseas to help the Services to work efficiently and effectively together. These often involve individual or a combination of the Services, and overseas forces as well.

The amount of time members are deployed may vary depending on the operational requirement or exercise schedule. The member's Service also impacts on the amount of time away, for example, Navy's ships and submarines take a long time to get to a destination, compared with the Air Force's aircraft which can deploy and return rapidly.





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## How does deployment affect the ADF member?

Such exercises, operations and deployments result in the separation of members from their families for the period concerned. Members and family members often experience various emotions throughout stages of deployment, all of which are normal, but may feel strange at the time. Defence strongly recognises these periods of hardship, therefore members and their families have access to a broad range of support services to help cope with separation.

Deployments create an environment that can place unique stresses on both the deploying Defence member and their partner. Defence psychologists routinely interview all contingent members before and after their deployments. Help is also available for members and their families from the Defence Community Organisation.

For Defence members, deployments can be a special challenge. The levels of stress experienced can range from low or moderate to very high. Traumatic experiences are not uncommon, and incidents that appear life threatening may occur.

Events such as these can elicit stress responses from members. These responses may range from momentary physical reactions such as profuse sweating or trembling, to long term more serious emotional responses such as anxiety and depression. These experiences, as well as prolonged separation from family, may cause frustration and various other stress reactions. Such reactions should not be considered abnormal or a sign of weakness.

Sometimes stress responses do not subside quickly, but may continue long after the incidents that caused them, and after the member has returned home. In many cases the members will be able to manage stress, however, sometimes specialist attention may be required.

## How does deployment affect the family?

For partners, especially those with children, deployments can also offer new challenges. Time

can become a premium, and the added responsibilities of work, single parenting, and taking care of the house can cause additional stress. Below are some hints to help manage this.

- Don't forget to take care of yourself!
- Get involved in things that make you happy
- Avoid too much alcohol, caffeine, nicotine and excess food. Alcohol and drugs may reduce the perception of stress, but they don't really reduce the stress.
- Be flexible: accept that you can't remain in control of everything all the time.
- Plan for stress. Set realistic achievable goals that leave time for breaks and limit work.
- Learn how to praise yourself and accept praise.
- Keep a sense of humour with you at all times.
- Start thinking about what you really want out of life and begin to work towards these goals.
- Take a relaxation or health day regularly.
- Avoid turning in on yourself. Let people know what you want.
- Learn how to express irritation and appreciation to others.
- Talk with friends and seek help if you need it.

Defence families can access 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by calling the Defence Family Helpline on 1800 624 608 or at [DefenceFamilyHelpline@defence.gov.au](mailto:DefenceFamilyHelpline@defence.gov.au).

## YOUR RELATIONSHIP

### Expectations

It's important that you understand each other's sense of purpose during separation

The quality of interaction between partners has been found to be a strong predictor of relationship distress and future breakdown.

The returning service member's sense of purpose has often been shaped by:

- Traumatic events that can be difficult to talk about, or even think about.





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- Strong bonds formed with fellow service members and their military unit, who have shared similar experiences.
- Regimented highly structured environment and routines of 24/7 military life.
- Having taken on a more aggressive attitude, which is often necessary when deployed in hostile settings. Often heightened sensory experiences including sights, sounds and smells.
- An altered sense of self and identity shaped by war.
- An altered view of the world.
- Stress and fatigue, or seeing and doing things that are difficult for them to integrate into their lives.

The partner's sense of purpose has been shaped by a range of factors too:

- Partners at home may have to make the most changes during a deployment with new roles and responsibilities.
- Many partners have assumed new roles in managing day-to-day events and challenges. They have to take on many, if not all, of the tasks their partners did while at home.
- Emotional changes. Some may have experienced growing independence and thrived on it; others may have found this a difficult time leading to depression, anxiety, and other symptoms of stress.

While these added responsibilities can increase the spouse's stress level, they can also lead to:

- a sense of great accomplishment and pride.
- Newly identified skills and strengths.
- Increased leadership role in the home

Each phase of deployment brings comes with its own set of challenges. The end of a deployment, homecoming, can be an extremely frustrating and upsetting experience.

Typically, a 'honeymoon' period follows in which couples reunite physically, but not necessarily emotionally. Some partners express a sense of awkwardness in addition to excitement. For others

the desire for sexual intimacy may require time in order to reconnect emotionally first.

Getting back together as a couple after a deployment isn't always something that happens naturally, or easily. Effort and an understanding that each person has grown and changed during the separation are required.

This may not happen overnight; it will take time, mutual compassion and a desire to do so.

Concern about having grown apart, growing close again without giving up individual growth and viewpoints, issues of fidelity, and being able to discuss these issues without raising more anxiety or anger challenge many couples.

Intimacy is a combination of emotional and physical togetherness. It is not easily re-established after stressful separations creating an emotional disconnect.

Partners may also experience high or low sexual interest causing disappointment, friction or a sense of rejection. In due time, this may pass, but present concerns may include hoping one is still loved, dealing with rumours or concern about faithfulness, concern about medications that can affect desire and performance, and expected fatigue and alterations in sleep cycles.

It is helpful to remember that life at home does not have the edge and adrenaline associated with wartime duty, which often leads to let down, disappointment and difficulty shifting gears.

## The emotional stages of deployment

For family and friends who are 'left behind' when a member leaves on deployment, and for the member themselves, each stage of a deployment may be characterised by some fairly usual expectations, feelings and reactions.

Emotions ranging from fear, anger and abandonment, through to excitement, hope, satisfaction and relief, may arise before, during and after the separation period. Individuals will vary in the kind and strength of their feelings. It is important to accept that separation is an emotive issue, and experiencing a variety of emotions during this time is completely normal. Although it





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may be difficult, talking through such emotions can be extremely beneficial.

A summary of the emotional stages of deployment and what emotions may be experienced is presented below.

## Expectation of separation (6 to 8 weeks prior to deployment)

Possible feelings	Possible reactions
Excitement Denial Fear Anger Resentment Hurt	

## Emotional withdrawal (1 week prior to deployment)

Possible feelings	Possible reactions
Confusion Ambivalence Anger Withdrawal	Coolness Arguments and disagreements

## Emotional confusion (1 to 6 weeks after departure)

Possible feelings	Possible reactions
Sense of abandonment Loss Emptiness Pain Disorganisation Intense business Activities: being busier than usual	Crying Loss of sleep Loss of appetite

## The adjustment (most of deployment)

Possible feelings	Possible reactions
Hope Confidence Calm Less anger Loneliness Activities: Establishing routine and communications Self-growth Independence	

## Reunion – the honeymoon

Possible feelings	Possible reactions
Euphoria Excitement Confusion	Talking Re-establishing intimacy Readjusting

## Readjustment after a deployment (1 to 6 weeks following return)

Possible feelings	Possible reactions
Discomfort Role confusion Satisfaction Happiness	Renegotiating relationships Redefining roles Settling in

Everyone will experience different emotions at each of the stages of deployment, all of which are normal. The examples above are provided as an illustrative guide only.

A useful thing to remember when facing deployment is that the leaving and the returning are not easy, but they don't last forever. Neither the separation nor reunion is ever as imagined. Both have their drawbacks, but both have their rewards too.





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## Help from Defence Community Organisation

Professional staff at Defence Community Organisation (DCO) are available for anyone to talk with if they need to or to provide further information on coping with deployment or associated emotions.

You can contact the Defence Family Helpline on 1800 624 608 or at [DefenceFamilyHelpline@defence.gov.au](mailto:DefenceFamilyHelpline@defence.gov.au) to access this support. The Helpline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

## COMMUNICATION

Over long distances and without face-to-face contact, communication between partners is much more vulnerable to distortion or misperception. Given this limitation, discussing "hot topics" in a relationship can be problematic and are probably best left on hold until after the deployment when they can be resolved more fully.

In the event of an emergency communication is through the Soldier's command is able to coordinate emergency leave if required.

Many partners report significant frustration because phone contact is unidirectional and must be initiated by the Soldier.

What appears to matter most for fidelity is the quality of the communication between partners. Results from a longitudinal study of marriage indicated that both men and women who went on to commit marital infidelity were characterized by significantly lower levels of positive communication before they were married. Furthermore, the quality of communication between partners is also highly correlated with relationship satisfaction.

*(The National Healthy Marriage Resource Centre (NHMRC))*

## Making a long distance relationship work

Define expectations BEFORE the separation.

Discuss in detail each partner's picture of how the separation will be:

- what they need, desire and want.
- How will this look?
- What do you each need to do to fulfil these expectations?

Agree on arrangements if it becomes beyond your control to meet these expectations.

Set boundaries regarding friends of the opposite sex.

Discuss and respect what your partner is comfortable with.

Discuss your expectations.

Be creative in your communications and interactions.

Have regular date nights – If at all possible schedule a telephone date night when you know you have time and coverage.

Keep each other informed.

Try, at all costs, to let your partner know what is happening and if there are any changes to contact times and arrangements. Neglecting to contact your partner without warning can cause feelings of being forgotten and uncared for.

Try your best not to make assumptions about how your partner is feeling about the relationships when you are not around. Similarly, make every effort not to make assumptions about what your partner is doing when you are not around.

Communicating will allow you to maintain your relationship.

Spending time together and experiencing new things together as a couple will allow your relationship to grow

## Details, details, details...

Stay emotionally and intimately connected.

Details may seem mundane, but couples that see each other regularly share the 'nuts and bolts' of their day with each other – the frustrations, successes, disappointments and humour in their day. It is easy to forget to mention these tidbits in long distance communication.





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Face to face couples communicate their intimate desires and needs. Being able to articulate emotionally and verbally about your own needs and desires for intimacy heightens your partner's awareness as well as building confidence and trust in your relationship.

Not all barriers to communication are technology-related. Service members often report that they do not want to talk because they worry that doing so will make them sad or homesick. They are afraid that these thoughts and feelings will distract them from their mission and that they will be less likely to make it back home alive. At-home partners can be equally reluctant to report problems or to ask for help because of a desire not to create any additional worries for the deployed partner. The nature of deployment may make it hard for couples to determine if the lack of communication or withheld information is because there are problems in the relationship or if partners are trying to protect themselves and each other. However, such misunderstanding can cause relationship stress.

## Conflict resolution

### 'Learning how to fight appropriately'

Learning how to fight appropriately (conflict resolution) is an integral part of relationship communication. Honest communication involving intense feelings is a necessary process in any intimate relationship. Couples must learn to feel safe enough in the relationship to express difficult thoughts and feelings. Here are some insights that may assist couples to fight more constructively:

- Recognise that some conflict is an inevitable, unavoidable by-product of any meaningful relationship.
- Respond rather than react. Promote understanding in the relationship by remaining calm, and asking your partner questions for clarification.
- It's perfectly acceptable to disagree. You don't always have to be right! Accept and respect differences of opinions.

- Listen carefully to each other without making value judgments.
- RESPECT each other
- Remember this is a relationship – not a short term contact. Life needs to go on after the conflict.
- Avoid getting defensive and intent on justifying your perspective.
- Avoid shutting the conversation down unless you need a time out. Mutually decide when to resume discussing the issue.
- Stressors, including unresolved family-of-origin issues can affect current communications. Recognize the stressors, acknowledge them to your partner
- Avoid manipulating by using family comparisons. This pattern only exacerbates reactivity.
- If you get off track in your communications and you feel unsafe, call a truce and resume your discussion later.
- Reinforce one another when you are able to get closure on an issue.
- Communicating through conflict takes patience and perseverance. Remember that conflict is inevitable, and that one's style of relating may affect the outcome.
- Learn to respond rather than react to problems.
- Couples can learn to make their point in a kind, considerate manner that will help foster successful conflict resolution. (*Krehbiel*)
- Take ownership of your thoughts and feelings

## Responding vs. Reacting

- ...makes me feel...
- I am struggling with ....
- When this happens then I feel....
- When this happens I really struggle with....
- I was wondering if we could think about...
- This is making me feel....





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Keep your relationship as priority and not your reaction to the conflict or the conflict itself

## DECISION MAKING

Decision-making as an individual can be a challenge, but when a couple needs to make a collective decision, the challenge becomes greater. If either of you take on a dominating role and expect to make all the major decisions in your relationship, your partnership will suffer.

### Listen to your partner's perspective.

See things through their eyes, without being judgmental, defensive or emotional. You want to make the best possible decision, and in doing that, you need to consider your partner's feelings.

If any decision could later make you feel remorseful, you better review it carefully

Regardless of the nature of the decision, the decision-making process is the same.

How you go about the process of decision making is the key to success.

Approaching each decision with the same game plan will create positive habits and processes for each decision to be made.

### Set a specific goal

Make sure you are very specific about what you want - the more specific you are, the better.

### Monitor your discussion

As you are discussing the decision at hand, check that you are staying on track and pull back to the specific goal.

### Time the situation for success

Decision-making doesn't work well when someone is tired, hungry, short of time or preoccupied with other activities. Ensure each of you is in the right frame of mind and you have the time.

### Recruit support from one another

A collective decision means there may be a compromise. Making a collective decision is not

about going into the discussion to win; not about going in to fight a battle.

It is helpful to remind each other that you are a team and not adversaries.

### YOU ARE ON THE SAME TEAM

Given that decision-making can be one of the toughest challenges a couple faces, celebrate the success of a decision together.

*(Dr. Josh Klapow, 2009)*

## What is a healthy relationship?

People in a healthy relationship...

- Can be themselves whilst still being together.
- Bring out the best in each other.
- Support each other.
- Don't attempt to change or control the other.
- Trust one another.
- Have fun together.
- Are comfortable with each other.
- Respect each other's decisions, feelings and thoughts.
- Are honest with each other and themselves.
- Are willing to compromise and work together.
- Accept the good and the bad.
- Can talk to each other openly, without ridicule.

## Is your relationship healthy?

- Do you have to be careful to control your behaviour?
- Do you feel pressured by your partner when it comes to sex?
- Are you scared of disagreeing with your partner?
- Does your partner criticise you, or humiliate you in front of others?
- Is your partner always checking up or questioning you about what you do without them?





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- Does your partner tell you that you are responsible for the way they behave?
- Does your partner's jealousy stop you from seeing friends or family?
- Does your partner make you feel like you are wrong, stupid, crazy or inadequate?
- Has your partner ever scared you with violence or threatening behaviour?
- Do you often do things to please your partner, rather than yourself?
- Does your partner prevent you from going out or doing things you want to do?
- Does your partner say they will kill or hurt themselves if you break up with them?
- Does your partner make excuses for their abusive behaviour by saying 'it's because of alcohol or drugs' or because they 'can't control their temper', or that they were 'just joking'.

## Self check-up

- Does your partner have to be careful to control their behaviour?
- Does your partner feel pressured by you when it comes to sex?
- Is your partner scared of disagreeing with you?
- Do you criticise, or humiliate your partner in front of others?
- Are you always checking up or questioning your partner about what they do without you?
- Do you tell partner that they are responsible for the way you behave?
- Does your jealousy stop your partner from seeing his/her friends or family?
- Do you make your partner feel like they are wrong, stupid, crazy or inadequate?
- Have you ever scared your partner with violence or threatening behaviour?
- Do you often do things to please yourself, rather than partner?

- Do you ever prevent your partner from going out or doing things they want to do?
- Do you ever say to your partner that you will kill or hurt yourself if they break up with you?
- Do you make excuses for your behaviour by saying 'it's because of alcohol or drugs' or because you 'can't control their temper', or that you were 'just joking'?

Both parties in a relationship should feel loved, respected and free to be yourselves. Your feelings and safety are important. That is what healthy relationships are about. In a healthy relationship you should be able to feel OK just being yourself and doing what you want to do. Being pressured into making decisions is not the sign of a healthy relationship.

## Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse is when your partner: (the same applies to your behaviour toward your partner)

- Puts you down.
- Wants you to stop spending time with your friends.
- Questions you on every detail of what you have done without them.
- Uses jealousy or anger to intimidate you or control you behaviour.
- Humiliates you in front of others.
- Threatens to hurt themselves or other people if you break up with them.
- Uses ANY form of emotional 'blackmail'. 'If you....then I'll....'
- Seek assistance.

*(Living with Love. Geraldton Sexual Assault Resource Centre, Centacare)*

