



Patient Information

Adjusting to Postdeployment Life

After a deployment, the transition to life back home isn't always smooth. The deployment may have affected you in ways you didn't expect. It's common for communication lines between you and your family to get crossed—you have all changed in some way. If you're returning to a civilian job, you may find that your responsibilities there have changed. You may be feeling disconnected from others and wondering where you fit in. At the same time, you may feel tense, irritable, or "let down," or you may be experiencing physical problems (such as short-term impotence).

Are my reactions normal?

Service members involved in combat operations must deal with types of stress most U.S. civilians never experience. Normal reactions to combat stress include: headaches, chest pain, trembling hands, rapid heart rate, nightmares, heightened alertness, difficulty concentrating, appetite changes, anxiety, fear, guilt, grief, anger, irritability, and depression. Some of these symptoms may appear during your deployment, but others may occur months later.

How can I cope?

First, it's important to recognize that combat stress reactions are normal and that symptoms are likely to decrease over time. Don't try to block out any feelings about your combat experience. Talk with your family,

fellow service members or veterans who've had similar experiences, and your doctor (who needs to be aware of any health problems you're having).

Working can be very therapeutic, giving you a sense of purpose, personal satisfaction, and reconnection with others. Participating in recreational activities also helps you stay occupied and avoid isolating yourself. And be sure to take good care of yourself with a healthy diet, exercise, and proper hygiene—it can boost your energy and your self-esteem.

If you or others notice that your behavior has changed (for example, you're drinking more alcohol than you used to, or you've become more prone to outbursts), counseling is recommended. This type of therapy allows you to "vent" and to explore your feelings and experiences with someone separate from your family and friends. Some facilities even offer computer-based counseling for increased privacy.

How do I recognize a more serious problem?

Posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, is a prolonged, unhealthy reaction to extreme stress. According to the National Center for PTSD, about 30% of people who've spent time in war zones develop PTSD—and an additional 25% experience partial PTSD at some point in their lives.

Many of the normal reactions to combat stress are also PTSD symptoms. But in



PTSD, these symptoms last for at least a month and interfere substantially with the person's daily life. In addition, people with PTSD often reexperience a traumatic event (through nightmares, flashbacks, hallucinations, or strong memories); avoid people, places, activities, or even thoughts or feelings that remind them of the trauma; distance themselves emotionally from others; lose interest in activities they used to enjoy; or have difficulty expressing their feelings.

Another concern after deployment is clinical depression. Aside from feeling sad, people with clinical depression may feel "empty," worthless, or guilty; lose energy and interest in activities; have trouble concentrating; develop sleep, appetite, or weight problems; contemplate death or suicide; and experience frequent headaches or body aches. They may turn to drugs or alcohol, which only worsen the problem.

If you're having symptoms of PTSD or clinical depression, see a doctor or counselor right away. If you are diagnosed with PTSD or depression, your provider probably will recommend counseling, medication, or both. Even if you don't have one of these conditions, you may find these professionals can help you adjust to your new life.

What physical problems are related to deployments?

Besides extreme stress, your deployment may have exposed you to infectious diseases, chemicals, pollution, improper nutrition, harsh weather, or poor hygiene. These can all cause physical symptoms that should be assessed by your doctor.

The term medically unexplained physical symptoms is used to describe ongoing physical problems for which the doctor can't find a specific cause. Some veterans (many of whom fought in the 1991 Persian Gulf War) have reported unexplained headaches, fatigue, memory loss, weight changes, sleep problems, joint problems, skin rash, and digestive problems. Just because they're unexplained doesn't mean these symptoms are "only in your head."

Always tell your doctor about any health concerns you're having and identify whether you believe them to be related to a deployment. Even if the exact cause isn't found, your symptoms will be treated and your doctor may be able to rule out serious or life-threatening conditions.

Where can I find help?

The DoD and VA offer a variety of resources for returning service members. In addition to health care, chaplain, family counseling, and other supportive services, the DoD offers a Transition Assistance Program to help ease the shift from military to civilian life, including assistance with job searches. To find the program location closest to you, log on to the DoD transition portal web site (www.dodtransportal.org).

The VA operates over 100 PTSD programs nationwide. Also, its Readjustment Counseling Service runs community-based Vet Centers that help veterans and their families deal with postwar adjustment issues. Among other services, these centers offer bereavement counseling, educational information, and PTSD evaluations. A directory of Vet Centers can be found on the internet at www.va.gov/rcs. ●

