

A time to rebuild, reunite and rekindle your marriage and relationship.

The reunion of a family after a separation can be just as stressful as the separation itself. If your family has experienced some strain or tension during a reunion, you are not alone. You may have wondered why an occasion that is "supposed" to be so romantic and exciting should turn out less than perfect.

From the moment you are separated from the person you care about, you may begin to build up an image of that person in your mind. You may fantasize about how wonderful everything will be when you are together again.

You may remember the members of your family as they appear in the photograph in your wallet--the picture perfect all-American family. A similar process is happening with the spouse and children. The missing member may be placed on a pedestal as the warrior out defending the country. Memories of everyday life such as making ends meet, occasional disagreements, and disciplining the children, begin to fade from everyone's mind. The reunion is seen as the solution to all problems. "Once we are together again, everything will be perfect." However, reality rarely has a chance to live up to the high expectations you have set in your minds.

This is not meant to be a forecast of "doom and gloom." Homecomings can be very happy occasions as long as all family members make an effort to be as realistic as possible. If the tendency to not pick after oneself around the house occurred before the separation, that habit probably has not miraculously disappeared. If a weight problem existed prior to the separation, do not expect a fifty-pound loss to have occurred during the separation. If one of the children was experiencing problems at school, do not expect the problem to disappear at reunion time.

Talking to one another and working through the everyday challenges that family life presents is what is important. This does not all have to be accomplished on the day of the family reunion. Give yourselves some time to enjoy one another. Everyone needs to get reacquainted before problem-solving begins.

AIR FORCE MEMBER

Ease yourself back into the family gradually. If you come on like a "Sherman tank" and try to bulldoze your way back into your family's life, feelings of resentment will surface. See yourself as a "Special Guest" for a while.

Take some time to observe how the family has been running in your absence. You might be tempted to jump right in with "Now that I am home, there are going to be a few changes around here." You will see that some things will change naturally as a result of your presence in the family. If you disagree about the way other things have been handled, wait a few days and discuss it openly with your spouse.

Do not try to take over the finances immediately. A complete interrogation regarding the state of the checkbook as soon as you walk through the door is bound to create hostility. Set aside some time when things have calmed down to review the financial situation with your spouse.

Take it easy with the children in terms of discipline. For a while, stick with the rules your spouse has established during your absence. Immediately playing the "heavy" will not open up opportunities for you and the children to get to know one another again. It is not difficult to understand why some children are afraid of the returning parent if all they have to look forward to is "a changing of the guard."

On the other hand, sometimes it is easy to spoil your children. If you have not seen them for a long period of time, or you are home for only short periods of time, you may find yourself not wanting to discipline them. You are probably eager to make up for the time you were unable to spend with them. This is certainly understandable. But do not put your spouse in the position of constantly playing the "heavy" while you have all the fun with the children.

Do not be surprised if your spouse is a little envious of your travels. Your life may look very exciting compared to the job of "keeping the home fires burning." Surprise your spouse with a gift when you return from a new place. This way they can show off their "treasures" from different states or countries and cultures, and share in your experiences.

Expect your spouse to have changed. Neither of you is the same person you were a few months ago, or even a few weeks ago. The main adjustment for military families after a separation is the change in roles. Your spouse has learned to cope alone as a matter of survival. Out of necessity, some of your roles have been taken over in order to compensate for your absence. Try not to be threatened if you find an independent person when you return home. The fact that your spouse can cope without you does not necessarily mean that he or she cares about you any less.

SPOUSE

Keep in mind that your spouse has been operating in a regimented environment with a daily routine. Transition to family life takes a while. In some instances, your spouse might be rebellious against any kind of schedule or preplanned activity you have set up. Be patient! There might also be some trouble sleeping soundly throughout the night at first. It takes some time to make the transition from barracks-style living to home living, especially if your spouse has been standing rotating shifts or working irregular hours.

Do not take it personally if you find your spouse day dreaming about work-related issues. Your spouse has been immersed in a totally work-related environment while away from home. It takes a while to let go of that world, even when a spouse is relieved to be away from it and home with the family.

You might find that your spouse is either surprised or even hurt that you have been able to manage everything so well alone. Try not to get defensive. Everyone wants to feel needed. Reassure your partner that although you are capable of handling the household and family on your own, you need companionship and emotional support. Point out that it also makes life a lot easier when you have someone with whom you can share these responsibilities.

CHILDREN

Some children will keep their distances from the returning parent for a while. They may still have unresolved feelings of anger toward that individual for leaving them, and are not ready to allow that parent to be part of their lives yet. They may have to be "courted" for a while until they feel comfortable again.

Other children will become "clingers." Each time the parent disappears from sight for a few moments, they think the adult has gone away from home again. As a result they tend to hold on for dear life and not let the parent out of their sight. Be patient. This will pass with time as they see you leave and return again.

At reunion time Dad could be meeting his new infant son or daughter for the first time. This can be quite an emotional experience for everyone, including the infant. Parents, do not feel that you have to thrust a crying infant into the arms of the returning members. Do not feel overwhelming rejection if your infant will not come to you at first. Give the child some time. Infants are people too, and they need time to develop trust before they feel comfortable with a new adult in their lives.

Plan to spend some time individually with each one of your children by doing some activity that is special to them. This allows the parent to get reacquainted with each child in a way that is most comfortable for that particular child. It also makes each child feel special and appreciated for their individuality.

Expect your children to have changed, both physically and emotionally. Sometimes the changes are barely noticeable from day to day, but if you go away, you might discover upon your return that your toddler is walking, your fourth grader has learned the multiplication tables, and your teenage daughter has a new boyfriend.