

Being separated from family and friends is never easy, but the Predeployment Guide provided here can make it a more bearable experience for you. The PreDeployment Guide will answer your questions on deployment as well as the reunion of friends and family. Please select from the following categories.

## Coping with Separation

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Family separation periods provide for a time of self-growth. Not many civilian spouses have the built-in opportunity for a time to take a good look at themselves.

### HOW IS YOUR ATTITUDE

What is your attitude? It is the state of mind with which you approach a situation. Why is your attitude so important? Because it affects how you look, what you say, and what you do. It affects how you feel, both physically and mentally, and it largely affects how successful you are in achieving your purpose in life. What could be more important?

Negative attitudes make life difficult for everyone. Positive attitudes help everyone get the most out of life. While talent is important and knowledge is essential, the most important key to success is your state of mind!

When the spouse goes away, you have to make a choice. You can apply a positive attitude, and make the best of the time you have to be apart, or, you can apply negative attitude, draw the drapes, withdraw and complain until they come home. Given the two choices, the first one is healthier and much to your advantage.

Time passes quickly when you are busy. It also makes for better, longer and more interesting letters to your spouse. Find something you enjoy doing. Something that says YOU! Set goals for tomorrow, next week, next month. The completion of a project will give you a sense of satisfaction. Have you thought about:

- Going back to school?
- Taking up a new hobby?
- Pursuing an aerobic or weight program?
- Seeking part-time or full-time employment?
- Participating in Airman & Family Readiness Center or other base programs?
- Volunteering?

### HANDLING STRESS

Take care of yourself. Don't try to fix family and friends.

Get involved in things that make you happy.

Avoid self-medication and abusing substances like drugs, alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, and food. Liquor and drugs reduce the perception of stress, but don't reduce stress.

Be flexible; accept that you can't control everything.

Plan for stress. Set realistic goals that leave time for breaks and limit work. Take a stress reduction class.

Learn how to praise yourself and accept praise. Turn off the "constant censure" voice that always says "you should."

Keep a sense of humor with you at all times.

Start thinking about what you really want out of life and begin to work towards those goals.

Take a mental health day every two or three months.

Avoid sulking. Let people know what you want.

Learn how to express irritation and appreciation to others.

Pick out somebody you work with and tell them something about yourself that you haven't told anyone else.

### **WHEN THE BLUES GET BLUER**

Loneliness. Most people find the dinner hour and Sunday afternoon the times when they miss their spouses the most. Additionally, everybody has an occasional blue Monday.

If your blue days are increasing in frequency, pay attention to what is going on around and in you. Are you:

- Letting things go?
- Gaining weight?
- Yelling at the kids?
- Constantly watching TV?
- Sleeping in late?
- Withdrawing from people?
- Dropping out of organizations?
- Spending a lot of time with your thoughts?
- Drinking more than usual or drinking alone?

No one takes a giant leap into depression. It is more of a cumulative process. Your favorite words are "I can't."

Some use alcohol and drugs as a remedy. But that doesn't work. Drinking does nothing to answer life's problem. In fact, drinking just helps you to relax and forget--but the problems are still there.

The cure for depression is the same as the prevention. Take positive action. Behavior is changed by thoughts and feelings.

If you can, talk to a friend. If you are alone, and problems seem overwhelming, call the Airman & Family Readiness Center, Chapel, or Mental Health Clinic. They have people who can help.

When your spouse is away, you need to get the sense that you are moving up and forward. Frustration comes when spouses see others accomplishing things while they are immobile waiting for their spouse to return.

**YOU CAN DO IT!!!!**

### **Children Issues**

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Parents can help children understand and accept the separation and their feelings about it by planning ahead. Anticipate the problems and discuss them with the entire family.

### **PRE-FAMILY SEPARATION**

The pre-family separation period is stressful for parents and children. Confronted with an extended absence of a parent, family members sense a loss of continuity and security. Children may not fully understand why one of their parents must leave. Very often young children may become confused and fearful that Mommy or Daddy will desert them.

Children are not very good at expressing fears and feelings in words. Anger and a desire for revenge, as well as guilt for feeling that way, are often demonstrated in the child's behavior. Change is puzzling to children. They want everything to remain the same. When changes occur, children usually have no other way to release anxieties, and no where to go for help. At a time when the separated spouse's responsibility to the Air Force becomes more demanding of their time and energy, the remaining spouse may feel overwhelmed, as they prepare to solely support the children, home and car.

What can be done about relieving the stress of the pre-family separation period? Think about the following ideas which have been helpful to others in similar situations:

### **TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT THE ASSIGNMENT OR DEPLOYMENT BEFORE IT HAPPENS.**

Communicate your thoughts and feelings about the separation. Be open and honest. Some parents worry that advance warning will only give the child more time to fret. However, children can sense when something is about to happen and worry more when they are left in the dark. Knowing about the assignment or deployment in advance helps in adjusting to the idea.

### **BUILDING AN EMOTIONAL BOND**

The departing parent needs to spend some QUALITY time with each child before they leave. Younger children (under 8) will be willing to accept a half hour of face-to-face communication. Don't be afraid to hug your child. A display of affection is powerful communication. Older children (8 and over) appreciate being consulted when deciding how long and where this "special" time together can occur.

Use this time to share pride in your work, squadron, the Air Force, and the purpose for your assignment or deployment. Children of school age are beginning to understand that some events must happen for the good of everyone. It is a little easier to let go if Mom or Dad's job is seen as essential to the mission of the Air Force.

Often when asked if something is bothering them, a child will say "no." But there are ways to get through. Make some casual reference to your own worries or ambivalent feelings about the impending assignment or deployment. Something that enables parent and child to share similar feelings. It also helps a child to realize their parent is a real person who can cry as well as laugh, and it models an appropriate way to release feelings--talk about them.

### **VISIT YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER**

Frequently children react to the assignment or deployment by misbehaving in class or performing poorly in their studies. A teacher who is aware of the situation is in a better position to be sensitive and encouraging.

### **CHILDREN NEED TO SEE THE PARENT'S WORKPLACE**

Very young children need to see where Mom or Dad eats, sleeps, and spends some of their day when away from home. You can do this through pictures or TV videos. This provides them with a concrete image of where the parent is when they can't come home. Older children can learn a great deal from the parent about the function of his or her job, the sophisticated technology, interdependence of each division of the military with the other, and of course, career direction. (Statistics indicate that about 30% of our present day military personnel were raised in a military family.)

### **PLAN FOR COMMUNICATING**

Expect children to stay in touch with the departed spouse. A lively discussion needs to take place before departure. Encourage children to brainstorm the many ways communication can occur in addition to letter writing, such as cassette tape exchanges, photographs with their parents, encoded messages, "puzzle messages" (a written letter cut into puzzle parts that must be assembled in order to read), unusual papers for stationery, and pictures drawn by preschoolers.

### **HELP CHILDREN TO PLAN FOR THE DEPARTURE**

While the spouse is packing their bags, allow your children to assist you in some way. Suggest a "swap" of some token, something of your child's that can be packed in a duffel bag in return for something that belongs to the departing spouse.

Discuss the household chores and let your children choose (as much as possible) the ones they would rather do. Mother and Father need to agree with each other that division of household chores is reasonable. The role of disciplinarian needs to be supported by the departing member.

### **BEING A LONG DISTANCE PARENT**

Parenting while away from home is not easy. Some separated parents find it so emotionally difficult they withdraw

and become significantly less involved in the lives of their children while they are apart. This, of course, is not good either for the parent or the children, not to mention the difficulty it causes the parent/caregiver who is at home alone. The most important aspect of parenting from a distance is making those small efforts to stay in touch. Doing something to say the parent is thinking about and missing the child is what is most important. Here are some practical suggestions to help keep the absentee parent involved with their children:

Letters and cards from mom or dad are important. The length and contents are not nearly as important as the presence of something in the mail from the absent parent. When sending picture post cards, make little notes about the place or write that you stood right here "x" in the picture. Any small thing which makes the card personal will have tremendous meaning to children at home.

Cut out and send things from the local paper or magazines. This is a tangible way to help them feel connected and give them an idea of what life is like there.

For older children, a subscription to a favorite magazine is a gift that keeps on giving.

When using a tape recorder, remember to be creative: sing "Happy Birthday," tell a story, read scripture, take it with you on your job or when visiting with other members of your unit. Don't try to fill a tape completely in one sitting. Make sure you describe the surroundings, the time of day, and what you are doing, etc.

Try not to forget birthdays and special holidays which would be important to a child, particularly Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, Halloween, or Valentine's Day.

Try to schedule phone calls when children are likely to be at home. Keep a mental list of things you want to talk about with each child, such as their friends, school, ball games, etc. Ask each child to send you something from the activities they are involved in at school, home or outside activities like dance lessons, youth groups or scouts.

If your child has a pet, make sure to ask about it.

Send an age appropriate gift for each child. It should be something special just for them. Some interesting and creative gifts include a special notebook for school, a book for coloring or reading, or something unique from where you are stationed.

**BECOME FAMILIAR WITH SOME OF THE EXCELLENT CHILDREN'S BOOKS THAT DEAL IN A SENSITIVE MANNER WITH A VARIETY OF FAMILY-CHANGE SITUATIONS:**

"A Special Family Friend and a New Adventure"  
by Hoffman and Sitler

"Will Dad Ever Move Back Home"  
by Paula Hogan

"All Kinds of Families"  
by Norma Simon

"If You Listen"  
by Charlotte Zolotow

"The Goodbye Painting"  
by Linda Berman

"The Giving Tree"  
by Shel Silverstein

Reading them with your child can help clarify facts and identify feelings.

**TURN ON YOUR SENSORS AND TUNE IN TO YOUR CHILD'S WORRIES ABOUT THE ASSIGNMENT OR DEPLOYMENT**

Just because a child doesn't tell you about their concerns doesn't mean that they are not troubled. Children don't usually recognize the cause nor will they tell you they are concerned. The spouse that is departing should communicate with each child individually. There is no substitute for a letter with your own name on the envelope.

Send postcards, snapshots, and tape recordings of the sounds around you where you are deployed. Use unusual stamps, felt-tip pens, colored pencils, and different styles of alphabets and lettering.

### TIPS FOR THE SPOUSE LEFT BEHIND

It is very possible you will admit feelings of sadness, self-doubt, fear, or loneliness to your spouse and children. Most parents will agree that these are acceptable risks, and the feelings revealed are much easier to deal with when they can be expressed within the comfort and security of the family.

Be honest about your feelings. Do not attempt to hide feelings--your own or the children's. Many times we try to spare our children from knowledge of our own concerns, self-doubts, and fears.

Give children a method of measuring the passage of time. Families use such techniques as a ceremonial crossing-off of each day on a calendar as it passes, or of tearing a link off a paper chain consisting of the number of days or weeks the departed spouse will be away.

Make sure the departed spouse stays well informed. Do not make the mistake of depriving your spouse of knowledge of what is happening at home, or the way things are being handled, out of fear of "distracting" or "worrying" him or her on the job. ( One parent was "spared" the knowledge that his or her son had to be hospitalized for emergency surgery.)

Be responsible for all disciplining. Do not fall into the trap of using "Just wait until your Father or Mother gets home" as the ultimate threat. How can a child be expected to greet with joy and affections a parent that has been held over their head for months as the ultimate punisher.

### Communication

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Learn to be tactfully honest without being brutally frank. If you want to know what is going on with another person, listen to what that person is saying.

### KEEPING IN TOUCH

Communicating. It is an important part of keeping any marriage alive. But when you are separated for so long by so many miles, communication becomes a vital necessity. As much as you need air and water, you NEED to hear from your spouse, and they from you. You both have several communication options available to you during a family separation, several of which will be discussed in this chapter.

Now is the time to open the communication lines between you. Honestly discuss with each other your feelings about the assignment or deployment. What are your fears and expectations? Have you both considered and discussed what kind of changes can be expected by the time the separation is over? The spouse at home will be more independent than either of you can imagine. Your financial situation may change by the separation's end. The spouse at home may begin or end a job. Personalities will definitely change, especially those of the children. By the time the service member returns, goals may have changed for either or both of you. Instead of wanting to learn to change a tire, for example, you may be ready to rebuild an engine.

### LETTERS

Letters are your lifeline to sanity. (Wait till you have not received one in a week and see if you don't think so.) But it takes a special skill, one you can easily develop, to write a letter during a family separation. You must walk a fine line between "Everything's falling apart and I can not handle it without you," and "Everything's falling apart but I do not need you anymore to fix it."

Some spouses send letters about how great everything is, and how angelic the children are. Come on! They know things do not run that smoothly even when they are home. The more "everything is great" letter they get, the more they worry. In time, they begin to believe that you do not need them around anymore. (That is one of the worst, most common fears the spouse will have while separated.)

Other spouses go entirely the other way--every little problem or irritation goes into a letter. It is full of complaints

about how they must come home immediately to change a flat tire or discipline a child for a minor infraction. This kind of letter writer can make a family separation a living nightmare for the service member.

Handle your letter writing with the same tact and understanding you want your spouse to have for you. You want to know everything that goes on around them, good or bad. You want to know about their friends and how they spend their off-duty time. You want to know they still love and need you. They want to hear those things from you also. PATIENCE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT WORD IN FAMILY SEPARATION COMMUNICATIONS.

Remember that mail is irregular at best. Letters and packages seldom arrive two days in a row--sometimes as much as two to three weeks pass between the time you place in the mail and the time they received it.

## A LETTER WRITER'S GUIDE

Here are a few ways to enhance talking back and forth to each other by letter:

Answer all questions. Write with your spouse's letter and picture in front of you, as though talking directly to them.

Ask advice when needed.

Explain problems clearly. If vague and unresolved, your spouse will worry.

Express an appreciation for letters, tapes, etc., mentioning one or two points of special interest.

Tell of daily activities in amusing and interesting ways.

Remember, it is important to frequently express your affection for your partner.

Share your feelings as openly and freely as you can without indulging in self-pity. Let your spouse know you would like to share their feelings.

Above all, express yourself clearly and unequivocally so that your spouse will not have to say, "I wonder what was meant by that!" Neither husband nor wife should try to interpret what the other says, read between the lines, or discern the meanings. If you do not understand, ask questions--otherwise take things at "face value."

If you have children and they can write, have them enclose notes or pictures in your letters. Children can use separate envelopes. Send pictures of home, the Christmas tree, activities around the house, etc. Have your spouse write separate letters to the children rather than a joint letter.

Relay news of the neighborhood, friends, and relatives. Clip out newspaper articles that might be of interest to your spouse.

Write often. If that is hard, supplement with cards (funny or romantic). Cards can help to express your thoughts and feelings, often in a unique or humorous way.

Consider OCCASIONAL phone calls, if possible.

## MESSAGES

Some occasions might call for a speedier method of contacting the service member than a letter: a serious illness or injury, a death in the family, a birth, routine or unexpected hospitalization.

Depending upon the severity of the situation, there are two primary ways to send a message--emergency Red Cross or Western Union messages. If you are in doubt as to which method to use, contact your Airman & Family Readiness Center for advice. In either case, it is always a good precautionary action to follow a message with a written letter, clarifying the details of what has actually happened.

## AMERICAN RED CROSS

In order for the Red Cross to send a message to your spouse, they must have verified information. They do not send greetings, only emergency information, and they do not grant emergency leave. If the emergency situation does not occur in the local area, you will save some time by contacting the Red Cross chapter where it does. Ask the Red Cross there to make verification and to contact the service member. In most cases, Red Cross notification is

necessary for emergency leave to be granted by the spouse's commander. THERE IS NO CHARGE FOR RED CROSS MESSAGES. Before you call, have the following information on hand: grade, full name, SSAN, and complete duty address.

## WESTERN UNION MESSAGES

Personal and non-emergency messages should be sent through the Western Union system. These include births, seasonal salutations, birthday and anniversary greetings, expected hospitalization, etc.

Many people are going to see whatever message you send--before the service member is given the message. Do not say anything that might embarrass you or your spouse.

It is recommended that you do not use Western Union to send the service member bad news that is going to cause pain or distress: serious illness, hospitalization complications, a death or injury in the family. If these are sent through Red Cross, it will not cost anything, and the service member will be given the message by the Commander or Chaplain who will be able to advise and comfort your spouse. Otherwise, the message may be delivered with no preliminaries or support.

PLEASE!!! If you do send a message about an illness, injury, or hospitalization, be sure to include the doctor's diagnosis, the prognosis, and the length of any expected hospital stay or recovery period. The service member will feel better if they know everything that you know.

**Air Force:** Depending on where your spouse is deployed, your Airman & Family Readiness Center might be able to get a message to your spouse through the Family Network (Air Force). Check with your local A&FRC.

## OVERSEAS CALLS

Nothing can substitute for your spouse's voice. That is why overseas calls are so popular. But the cost is exorbitant! Agree before the separation or deployment starts how many times, and when, they can call. Budget money for the calls during the assignment or deployment so you are financially prepared when the bills start coming in.

One way to keep your phone cost down is to be prepared for the call. Keep a list near the phone so you know what to talk about. However, be prepared for the unexpected tears, both yours and your spouse's.

It will also be cheaper if, when your spouse calls, you accept the call and ask them to give you the country access code (you can also find this in the information part of your phone book), city code, and phone number, and then you call them back. You will still be charged for the initial three minutes, but it is cheaper when you call your spouse direct if you plan on talking for more than five to ten minutes. Look in the phone book or call the operator and see what hours are cheaper; ask your spouse to use those hours whenever they can. Agree if you cannot get through in fifteen minutes that your spouse will call you back.

In some cases, your spouse might be able to call you free of charge from his/her deployed location through government telephone lines (DSN).

## CARE PACKAGES

A "care package" is exactly what it sounds like--a little bit of home that says, "I love you; I'm thinking about you." With just a little planning, they can be a great link over the distances. Care packages are also a morale builder during remote assignments or deployments. Speculation and excitement run throughout an entire shop when just one package arrives. When you get your first "Thank You" letter, you will be eager to start your next package.

Be careful of what you send--the one rare commodity is privacy. What you send will undoubtedly be seen by a number of people. Even most officers share their quarters. Packages going overseas are subject to customs inspection and may be opened by the host country inspectors. Do not expect a lot of romantic talk on any recorded messages your spouse may send home--most spouses would be too embarrassed for anyone else to hear what they most want to say.

## MAILING TIPS

Check with UPS on mailing restrictions.

Do not use wrapping paper if you can help it, and string will foul up the postal machines. The post office recommends

you use the reinforced, nylon strapping tape.

Sender will not have to pay custom tariffs on packages mailed to an APO or FPO.

Put an extra address card **INSIDE** before you seal the package. If the box should be damaged, and neither address on the outside can be read, it will be opened by the post office. If they can not find where it should go from the contents, the whole package goes to the dead-letter bin.

Be sure that if you are sending a package for a special occasion to mail it so it has plenty of time to arrive. Better to arrive a little early than to let them think you have forgotten them.

Do not forget to mark any packages that contain a recorded message, music, or VCR tape with the words "MAGNETIC RECORDED TAPES INSIDE--DO NOT X-RAY".