



Elephant in the Room

Step-by-Step Instructions:

Most couples will have serious concerns about their relationships and family and personal well-being during deployment. Talking about sensitive issues is not easy for National Guard couples, but it is important that they do so prior to the deployment. Much care and tact needs to be in place to successfully navigate a conversation about these issues. It might be helpful to have a professional counselor or National Guard chaplain on hand (along with a private area for them to go to) in case items discussed by individual couples get to be too much to handle in a group setting.

1. Ask the couples how many have ever heard of the “Elephant in the Room” concept. Ask someone to describe what it means. The “Elephant in the Room” is a metaphor that refers to a very large and obvious issue that might exist (such as an elephant sitting in the middle of a room) that no one wants to talk about, so it gets ignored. People will go out of their way to skirt around the elephant just so they do not have to discuss it.
2. Display the stuffed elephant that you brought in front of the room where all can see. Tell the couples that there are many “elephants,” or large issues that might exist in a National Guard marriage. This elephant is designed to represent some of those and the goal of this exercise is to ensure that some of these issues are brought to the surface.
3. Tell the couples that as they probably well know, being in the National Guard can have some very scary risks — some of which they might not have ever planned for, especially if it is a first deployment. Point out that the intent here is not to scare anyone, but to simply bring to light the concerns that we might have trouble voicing

Group Size: All

Time Needed: 30 minutes

Goal: To create an awareness of some of the difficult issues that a National Guard couple might potentially face, and start a dialogue on the subject

Audience: National Guard couples, typically before deployment

Special Considerations: This activity should be used with an established group of people that are comfortable with each other. If you have not taught the session *Communicating with Love* or some other structured communication model, you might want to consider doing so before attempting this session. Also, you might invite a professional counselor or National Guard Chaplain to be available during this activity as an added resource. End this session with a positive activity.

Resources Needed:

- ✓ PowerPoint capabilities
- ✓ A stuffed elephant (the bigger the better) or a picture of an elephant
- ✓ A sticky note for each person and something to write with
- ✓ Notepad/marker board
- ✓ Copies of the *Resource List* for each couple

on a day-to-day basis. When personal “elephants” have been identified, couples can discuss, plan for, and find resources so that we can face our concerns as a team.

4. Ask the participants to think through what concerns them the most about the notion of their service member being deployed (or being deployed themselves)? Show the list of the “Tough Questions” PowerPoint and talk about how many military members and families over the years have voiced these as some of the toughest struggles:

Tough Questions

- a. What if he/she is seriously injured?
- b. What if my partner is unfaithful while we are separated?
- c. What if he/she struggles with post-traumatic stress upon return?
- d. What if I am overwhelmed with life and the kids, and there is no one to help?
- e. What if we can not communicate much or stay in touch?
- f. What if, upon return, he/she is depressed or suicidal?
- g. What if he/she dies?

Note for Facilitator: At the heart of all of these questions are some very real fears: risk of serious physical injury (loss of limb, brain injury, etc.); increased “opportunity” for infidelity in the relationship while the National Guard member is away from home; and risk of mental/emotional effects of combat (depression, suicide, post-traumatic or combat-related stress; risk of death).

5. Hand out a sticky note to each person. Ask the participants to write down the toughest issue on their minds as it relates to their relationship as a National Guard couple. This really can be anything; it does not have to be something from the list. This is a very personal issue for some of the participants.
6. As the participants write down their toughest issue, invite them to come to the front of the room and attach their sticky note to the stuffed elephant. Tell them that this represents the important step of identifying the issue.
7. Have the participants share with their partners what they wrote down as the toughest issue they see in their National Guard marriage. If it is helpful, you might consider giving them this basic structure for communicating (if you do not already have some other communication system you have been working on with them).
 - a. “For me, the ‘elephant’ in our marriage is _____.”
 - b. “When I think about this ‘elephant’ I feel _____.”
 - c. The listener should be able to repeat back/restate what the speaker just said.
8. Once one partner has shared his or her elephant, allow time for the other partner to share.
 - a. Point out the importance of not brushing off or over dramatizing these fears. The most important thing right now is that the partner’s fears are heard and acknowledged. When there is a basic understanding from the partner’s point of view, the stage is set for more discussion and maybe even some sort of planning on the topic.

9. Bring the couples back together. You might read a few of the sticky notes to acknowledge some of the issues that were brought up and discussed. Each sticky note should be anonymous. Reading the notes should unite the group and give them assurance that others might have similar fears.

Process:

Ask for general comments and feedback from the group on how it was to voice these tough issues they might not have ever discussed or even thought about. If there are members of the group who have experienced deployment and have experienced some of the “elephants” that were just discussed, perhaps they can share what they did about them.

Conclude:

Remind the group that this is just a start to the communication and planning process that might need to occur in order to most effectively deal with the tough issues that exist in a National Guard marriage. Tell them that while even the best discussion and planning can fully prepare a couple for some of these tough issues, starting a dialogue now will only help. Encourage them to keep discussing the “elephants” and seeking resources to help in their planning. The *National Guard Marriage and Relationship Education Toolkit* contains a *Resource Listing* that might be a valuable tool to provide the couples at this time.

When completing this activity, make sure the workshop session ends on a high note. This activity can bring up major issues for couples and you want to ensure time is available for couples to regroup and energize with a topic or activity that encourages fun and friendship among partners.