

# Relationship Challenges During Military Deployment: A Fact Sheet

## Background

Life in the U.S. has changed in many ways since September 11, 2001. This is particularly true for members of the U.S. Armed Forces (including the National Guard) and their families. Personnel in all branches of the U.S. military have experienced an increase in the number and frequency of combat deployments. Between 2001 and 2007, 1.9 million troops were deployed to Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).<sup>1</sup> Forty percent of military personnel have been deployed at least once since 2001, and 263,150 service members have been deployed multiple times.<sup>2</sup>

This increase in combat deployments has changed the dynamic of romantic relationships for military members and their partners. Separations have become almost a routine part of military couple relationships. The average length of separation varies depending on the branch of service. The Army currently has the longest average deployment length (more than 200 days). The Air Force has the shortest average deployment length (fewer than 150 days).<sup>3</sup> The pace of recent U.S. military operations overseas has also led to shorter periods at home between deployments than recommended by military policy. Currently, the recommended time at home between deployments is two years for Active Duty service members and five years for Reservists.<sup>4</sup>

Deployments have not prevented military couples from experiencing happy, healthy, and successful



marriages and relationships. Some couples feel that dealing with the challenges of deployment brought them closer together.<sup>5</sup> However, even the strongest couples can have problems in their relationships when they live such large portions of their lives separately.<sup>6</sup> Since 2003, separation from family has been a top concern of deployed service members.<sup>7</sup>

Although more research is needed to fully understand the impact of lengthy and repeated deployments on military couple relationships, it is clear that deployments place stress on these relationships. Infidelity has been identified anecdotally as a concern for both service members and their partners. Stressors such as communication barriers, trust issues, and deployment related stress—and how these issues relate to infidelity—are being examined.

## Definitions

*Deployment* – Deployment is “the relocation of forces and material to desired operational areas” (e.g., Iraq and Afghanistan).<sup>8</sup> Deployments can last for extended time periods (up to 15 months).<sup>9</sup>

*Infidelity* – Experts do not agree on what specific behaviors constitute infidelity. However, it is commonly agreed that infidelity can be either physical or emotional in nature. Physical infidelity refers to physical acts of a romantic or sexual nature with someone other than one’s partner. Depending on one’s beliefs, anything from hand-holding to sexual intercourse may be considered physical infidelity. Emotional infidelity includes acts of emotional intimacy or “falling in love” with someone other than one’s partner.<sup>10</sup> Examples of emotional infidelity include having close emotional connections with others that exclude one’s partner.<sup>11</sup>

*U.S. Armed Forces* – This term refers to the five branches of service that serve the federal government: the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard (including the Reserves). The National Guard serves both state and federal governments.<sup>12</sup>

## Headlines/Trends

Results of a recent battlefield survey of U.S. service members in Afghanistan indicated that the high prevalence of marital problems—including suspected infidelity—among junior enlisted service members contributed to decreases in troop morale.<sup>13</sup> To date, little or no empirical research has been carried out to investigate whether infidelity is a particularly common problem among military couples separated by deployment. Studies of infidelity among civilians estimate that between

1.5% and 20% of people have extra-marital sex.<sup>14</sup> These numbers vary considerably and may depend on a number of factors, such as gender.<sup>15</sup> Given the wide variation in these civilian estimates, it would be difficult to compare the frequency of infidelity in civilian couples to military couples. The specific impacts of deployment on military couple relationships remain unclear. What is apparent, however, is that extended and frequent separations due to deployments are stressful for military couples and these stressors have implications for infidelity.

## Data – Difficulties couples face during deployment and their implications for infidelity

Infidelity is notoriously difficult to study, regardless of whether partners are civilians or service members. Few individuals are willing to admit to being unfaithful. The civilian studies that have been conducted were criticized for significant methodological flaws.<sup>16</sup> For example, numerous studies asked people to imagine how they would react to hypothetical infidelity, rather than studying actual instances of infidelity.<sup>17</sup> Despite infidelity researchers’ hesitance to draw definite conclusions from such studies, there are a number of aspects on which they tend to agree and which may be relevant to understanding the experiences of military couples dealing with deployment. The following section highlights some deployment-related difficulties and the implications of these challenges for potential infidelity.

*Communication:* While communication is an important element of all romantic relationships, this may be especially true for couples separated by deployment. In a National Military Family

Association's 2005 survey, 17% of respondents reported that communication with their service member was the top challenge during deployment.<sup>18</sup> One soldier stated that, "Successful deployments are about communication." Modern technology has made it easier than ever before for couples to maintain communication during deployments (e.g., e-mail, social media, video conferencing, etc.). Although many military couples report that this has improved the deployment experience,<sup>19</sup> the challenge of communication during deployment is not purely technological. Many couples report that the improved ability to communicate can be a two-edged sword.<sup>20</sup> Sudden, unforeseen lapses in communication can cause intense worry and anxiety for one partner, if contact previously had been frequent.<sup>21</sup> The distance between partners makes it impossible to distinguish between intentional and unintentional lapses in communication. As a result, "[the meaning of] communications [or lack thereof] between husband and wife are much more vulnerable to distortion and misperception."<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> At-home spouses 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 spouse.<sup>24</sup> 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. Such misunderstandings can cause relationship problems.<sup>25</sup>

What appears to matter most for marital 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.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the quality of communication between partners is also highly correlated with relationship satisfaction.<sup>27</sup> Most infidelity researchers agree that relationship satisfaction plays a role in infidelity—lower relationship satisfaction is related to increased interest in extramarital relationships.<sup>28</sup> The correlation between lower relationship satisfaction and infidelity held for both physical and emotional infidelity.<sup>29</sup>

*Stress, anxiety, increased demands:* When the service member is deployed, he or she can no longer carry out his or her family roles in the same way. Therefore, the non-deployed partner often takes on all responsibilities for the couple's finances, household, and children. This can cause stress-related problems for at-home spouses, including physical and mental illnesses.<sup>30</sup> In one 2009 study, spouses of deployed service members reported experiencing significantly more stress and physical illnesses than spouses of non-deployed service members.<sup>31</sup> Another 2009 study found that 32.8% of a sample of spouses of deployed service members had received some sort of mental health treatment, and 43.7% met criteria for clinical depression.<sup>32</sup>

Stress, anxiety, and increased work demands may be correlated with higher incidences of infidelity. Both men and women with jobs that wield a great deal of power and influence over others have been found to engage in more infidelity than those in jobs with less power and influence.<sup>33</sup> In one study, individuals who had more stressful, higher-paying jobs were more likely to commit infidelity.<sup>34</sup>

*Rebuilding trust:* When infidelity occurs in a relationship, trust is often the main casualty. It can be extremely difficult to rebuild trust after infidelity.<sup>35</sup> Research suggests that openness is important to rebuilding lost trust after infidelity occurs. In a 2005 study of couples who had experienced infidelity, couples therapy led to relationship improvements only for couples in which the partner who committed infidelity disclosed the infidelity and made it the focus of treatment.<sup>36</sup>

Many relationships are able to flourish in spite of military deployments. However, deployments often bring about a number of risk factors for relationships. Communication challenges and the stress of military life may increase concerns about infidelity and the actual risk of infidelity occurring. More research is needed to ascertain how military relationships are affected by infidelity.

**The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Matt Primeau and Abigail Christiansen of the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University for their contributions to this Fact Sheet. This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, PhD, and project manager Rich Batten, ThM, MEd, CFLE.**

## Data Sources

- 1 Committee on the Initial Assessment of Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, and their Families (2010). *Returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan: Preliminary assessment of readjustment needs of veterans, service members, and their families*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press. Retrieved from <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/12812.html>
- 2 Committee on the Initial Assessment of Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, and their Families (2010). *Returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan: Preliminary assessment of readjustment needs of veterans, service members, and their families*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press. Retrieved from <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/12812.html>
- 3 Committee on the Initial Assessment of Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, and their Families (2010). *Returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan: Preliminary assessment of readjustment needs of veterans, service members, and their families*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press. Retrieved from <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/12812.html>
- 4 Committee on the Initial Assessment of Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, and their Families (2010). *Returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan: Preliminary assessment of readjustment needs of veterans, service members, and their families*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press. Retrieved from <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/12812.html>
- 5 Segal, M. W., & Harris, J. (1993). *What we know about Army families*. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute.
- 6 Office of the Surgeon Multinational Force–Iraq and Office of the Surgeon General United States Army Medical Command. 2008. *Mental Health Advisory Team V (MHAT-V) Operation Iraqi Freedom 06-08: Iraq; Operation Enduring Freedom 8: Afghanistan*. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army.
- 7 National Military Family Association (2005). Report on the Cycles of Deployment: An analysis of survey responses from April through September 2005. Retrieved from <http://support.militaryfamily.org/site/DocServer/NMFACyclesofDeployment9.pdf?docID=5401>
- 8 Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Related Terms [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp1\\_02.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf)
- 9 Warner, C. H., Appenzeller, G. N., Warner, C. M., & Grieger, T. (2009). Psychological effects of deployments on military families. *Psychiatric Annals*, 39 (2), 56-63. doi: 10.3928/00485713-20090201-11
- 10 Whitty, M. T., & Quigley, L. (2008). Emotional and sexual infidelity offline and in cyberspace. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 34, 461-468.
- 11 Whitty, M. T., & Quigley, L. (2008). Emotional and sexual infidelity offline and in cyberspace. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 34, 461-468.
- 12 National Guard 2010. <http://www.ng.mil/About/default.aspx>
- 13 Jelinek, P. Troop morale down in Afghanistan, study

- shows. Army Times. Associated Press. [http://www.armytimes.com/news/2009/11/ap\\_afghanistan\\_morale\\_111309/](http://www.armytimes.com/news/2009/11/ap_afghanistan_morale_111309/)
- 14 Blow, A. J., & Hartnett, K. (2005). Infidelity in committed relationships II: A substantive review. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 31*, 217-233.
  - 15 Blow, A. J., & Hartnett, K. (2005). Infidelity in committed relationships II: A substantive review. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 31*, 217-233.
  - 16 Blow, A. J., & Hartnett, K. (2005). Infidelity in committed relationships I: A methodological review. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 31*, 183-216.
  - 17 Blow, A. J., & Hartnett, K. (2005). Infidelity in committed relationships I: A methodological review. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 31*, 183-216.
  - 18 National Military Family Association (2005). Report on the Cycles of Deployment: An analysis of survey responses from April through September 2005. Retrieved from <http://support.militaryfamily.org/site/DocServer/NMFACyclesofDeployment9.pdf?docID=5401>
  - 19 Faber, A. J., Willerton, E., Clymer, S. R., MacDermid, S. M., & Weiss, H. M. (2008). Ambiguous absence, ambiguous presence: A qualitative study of military reserve families in wartime. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*, 222-230. doi: 10.1037/0893-3200.22.2.222
  - 20 McNulty, P. A. F. (2005). Reported stressors and health care needs of active duty Navy personnel during three phases of deployment in support of the war in Iraq. *Military Medicine, 170*, 530-535.
  - 21 National Military Family Association (2005). Report on the Cycles of Deployment: An analysis of survey responses from April through September 2005. Retrieved from <http://support.militaryfamily.org/site/DocServer/NMFACyclesofDeployment9.pdf?docID=5401>
  - 22 <http://www.hooah4health.com/deployment/familymatters/emotionalcycle2.htm>
  - 23 Faber, A. J., Willerton, E., Clymer, S. R., MacDermid, S. M., & Weiss, H. M. (2008). Ambiguous absence, ambiguous presence: A qualitative study of military reserve families in wartime. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*, 222-230. doi: 10.1037/0893-3200.22.2.222
  - 24 National Military Family Association (2005). Report on the Cycles of Deployment: An analysis of survey responses from April through September 2005. Retrieved from <http://support.militaryfamily.org/site/DocServer/NMFACyclesofDeployment9.pdf?docID=5401>
  - 25 <http://www.hooah4health.com/deployment/familymatters/emotionalcycle2.htm>
  - 26 Allen, E. S., Klinerhoades, G., Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., Williams, T., Melton, J., Clements, M. L. (2008). Premarital precursors of marital infidelity. *Family Process, 47*, 243-259.
  - 27 Meeks, B. S., Hendrick, S. S., & Hendrick, C. (1998). Communication, love, and relationship satisfaction. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 15*, 755-773. doi: 10.1177/0265407598156003
  - 28 Prins, K. S., Buunk, B. P., & VanYperen, N. W. (1993). Equity, normative disapproval, and extramarital relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 10*, 39-53.
  - 29 Glass, S. P., & Wright, T. L. (1985). Sex differences in type of extramarital involvement and marital dissatisfaction. *Sex Roles, 12*, 1101-1120.
  - 30 Warner, C. H., Appenzeller, G. N., Warner, C. M., & Grieger, T. (2009). Psychological effects of deployments on military families. *Psychiatric Annals, 39* (2), 56-63. doi: 10.3928/00485713-20090201-11
  - 31 Burton, T., Farley, D., & Rhea, A. (2009). Stress-induced somatization in spouses of deployed and nondeployed servicemen. *Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, 21*, 332-339. doi: 10.1111/j.1745-7599.2009.00411.x
  - 32 Warner, C. H., Appenzeller, G. N., Warner, C. M., & Grieger, T. (2009). Psychological effects of deployments on military families. *Psychiatric Annals, 39* (2), 56-63. doi: 10.3928/00485713-20090201-11
  - 33 Lammers, J., Stoker, J., Jordan, J., Pollmann, M., & Stapel, D. (in press). Power increases infidelity among men and women. *Psychological Science*.
  - 34 Atkins, D. C., Baucom, D. H., & Jacobson, N. S. (2001). Understanding infidelity: Correlates in a national random sample. *Journal of Family Psychology, 15*, 735-749.
  - 35 Blow, A. J., & Hartnett, K. (2005). Infidelity in committed relationships II: A substantive review. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 31*, 217-233.
  - 36 Atkins, D. C., Eldridge, K. A., Baucom, D. H., & Christensen, A. (2005). Infidelity and behavioral couple therapy: Optimism in the face of betrayal. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 73*, 144-150.