

National Guard Top Ten Issues Facing Couples

National Guard couples and families face a variety of distinct issues that add stress and complication to their lives and can either directly or indirectly affect marriage and relationship quality. As a marriage and relationship educator, you will benefit from knowing and understanding these issues in broad terms. This knowledge will help you best meet the needs of the couples and families in your community as well as your local National Guard population.

The following “Top Ten” list gives you, in no particular order, a glimpse into the main areas of concern of National Guard couples and families.

1. **Separation (and return):** Because of the service requirements of the National Guard member, couples and families are often separated from each other. Deployments, trainings, weekend drills, and other missions create the possibility that the National Guard member will regularly be away from home for days, weeks, months, or more. But just as separation yields numerous difficulties, reuniting after separation can come with its own set of challenges. While most separated National Guard members and partners long for the reunion, changed dynamics and other issues can cause strain on relationships. As an educator, you can help ease the potential distress in families by teaching healthy communication and conflict resolution techniques. In doing so, couples learn how to problem solve together as a team whether they are together or apart.
2. **Employment/Re-employment:** Because most National Guard members are “citizens first,” they have to maintain full-time jobs as police officers, teachers, accountants, students, homemakers, business and retail employees, and so on. The demands of National Guard service can often take away from the ability to fully commit to their full-time job, especially in the area of work attendance. At a minimum, most guard members need two weeks of time each year to meet their unit’s annual training needs. The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) protects most guard members from repercussions due to military-related absence, but this does not negate the repercussions for employers, families, and guard members themselves. Especially in a weak economy, guard members may have a hard time establishing and maintaining solid employment because of the demands of military life. Being aware of this challenge can help you when scheduling your marriage and relationship education programs. It will be important to be sensitive to the time demands already placed on National Guard families.
3. **Finances:** National Guard service comes with pay and benefits. Soldiers and Airmen get paid for their weekend drills, trainings and deployments based on their rank and time in service. Depending on both the military and civilian status and pay of the guard member, this can create unique dynamics when managing the family’s overall finances. For example, a soldier in the Army National Guard might make a very decent wage in civilian employment, but because of a lower rank in the guard, make only a small salary while in National Guard service. If this soldier were to deploy for a year, in most cases the civilian pay would stop and the family would need to live on the much lower military pay. The opposite can also cause financial strain. An airman in the Air National

Guard might not make very much in his civilian employment but may draw a decent salary from military service because of a higher rank. A yearlong deployment would certainly increase the income for the family. Often, however, families do not have a financial plan in place, and the new standard of living during the deployment is difficult to give up when the guardsman returns home. These adjustments can strain the couple relationship if they are not managed strategically. To help couples think through their finances, encourage them to invest some time in financial planning, and consider incorporating a section on finances into the program that you already provide.

4. **Legal Issues:** National Guard service can open the door for increased legal issues that are faced far less often by civilians. National Guard members who are deploying for a significant period of time often need to have a Power of Attorney on file so that a trusted family member or friend can take care of basic matters on their behalf. If a specialized need arises during the deployment (such as the need for the family to purchase or rent a new home) a special or specific Power of Attorney will need to be appointed. While these are very common practices in both the military and legal worlds, they make the guard members much more vulnerable to having their personal affairs mismanaged or even defrauded. Based on long-term experience with a spouse's personality or spending habits, some guard members are not comfortable leaving their own spouse as their personal power of attorney. Many marriage and relationship education curricula address stress management, which can be of significant help to National Guard families juggling many unique challenges, including legal issues.

5. **Children and Dependents:** Many National Guard members have minor children or other individuals dependent upon them for care. In many cases, the National Guard member might be the only caregiver (such as single father or mother). Obvious complications and stresses can arise when coordinating care for these dependents to meet the obligations of the National Guard. Single service members generally need to complete a Family Care Plan that documents who will care for dependents in their absence and then hope and trust that their dependents will be cared for appropriately by the appointed guardian(s). But even for married couples, leaving behind a spouse with all the responsibilities of care for children and dependents can create immense stress on the relationship. Additionally, the children often develop emotional or behavioral problems because of the frequent or long absence of their National Guard father, mother or caregiver. An often-overlooked burden is on grandparents who may have assumed child-rearing duties when their National Guard son or daughter has been deployed. In tailoring your program for National Guard families, consider opening it up to grandparents and guardians to help equip all those affected by deployment with the same skills, strengthening the entire family unit.

6. **Emotional Well-being:** Many National Guard members and families would agree that military life can be full of both emotional highs and lows. It may be common for guard spouses and children to feel immense pride for the contribution they and their guard member are making to our country, but also feel anger and rage for being left behind or alone with the burden of family responsibilities. Other emotions such as fear, sadness, love, worry, ambivalence, apathy, and joy can be very normal at any given point in a day and dealing with these intense and often opposing emotions can be very difficult for guard members and their spouse or significant other. Even if you are not licensed or able to address challenging emotional needs yourself, ensure you are trained on appropriate referrals who understand the circumstances of military families.

7. **Physical Well-being:** Guard members place themselves in harm's way on a consistent basis. Exposure to combative situations creates ample opportunity for serious injury. Many Guard members have lost the use of limbs, brain function, and the ability for "normal" living after being involved in a combatant attack. However, even for those not directly exposed to combat, the risk of accident related injury or an onset of an illness is not uncommon. This increased risk creates a significant amount of worry for the family and other loved ones who support the guard member. In the tragic event that the guard member incurs a serious injury or illness, the family will likely be left with an overwhelming and life-changing burden of caring for the guard member. Knowing this very real concern that families may have can renew your sense of value in the work that you do – equipping couples and families with the skills needed to navigate the tough discussions and being able to plan together as a team.

8. **Post-traumatic/Combat Stress:** Soldiers and airmen who are exposed to traumatic situations (such as combat experience, witnessing the injury or death of a fellow service member, seeing the suffering of other humans in the country they are deployed to, etc.) can be at risk of developing short- or even long-term psychological problems and reactions. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or other stress-related symptoms and reactions can place a serious strain on marriage and other relationships back home. While the in-depth treatment of PTSD and other stress-related diagnoses is beyond the scope of an MRE program, as a practitioner, you should know the warning signs and build referral and resource lists. You also can educate the guard members and spouses on what to watch for in identifying stress-related disorders. Even spouses and other loved ones who are not directly exposed to combat and carnage can experience stress that can lead to psychological, emotional, and behavioral issues. Addressing these needs is highly specialized work, but educators still have an important role in helping service members and families seek the help that they need. Before your program begins, be sure and identify local resources available and also have the resource list so participants can contact the additional services they need.

9. **Suicide:** An ugly truth in the National Guard is that suicides among members have been on the rise in recent years. Suicide is a very real issue that has affected hundreds of guard members and their families. Military leaders have made an investment in providing education, research, and prevention and intervention resources to help reduce the suicide rate. Relationship dissolution and dissatisfaction are common "reasons" for guard members to entertain and act on suicidal thoughts. MRE programming can add elements of support to what is already available by not only educating on the risk factors of suicide, but also by simply providing knowledge and skills that enhance the quality of life and relationships for the guard member.

10. **Death:** Guard members and their families often avoid talking about the dangerous line of work guard members are in and the possibility of combat- or accident-related death. With advanced medical and other techniques, the death rate in U.S. current military operations is significantly lower than in past war times, but the possibility is still very real. In other areas of this toolkit, specifically the Elephant in the Room activity, there are resources for you as an educator to encourage couples to begin to talk about even hard life issues that they may face. The death of a loved one due to military service is among the most significant concern of guard families. This fear creates a need for both support for the worrying family, and, in the tragic event that a death occurs, support for the grieving family.

As a marriage and relationship educator, it is important to understand these top 10 issues in the lives of guard couples and families. Each of these issues needs to be approached with great sensitivity and tact, as many may not have been faced or discussed before. Knowing the specific needs of those you will be working with, as well as your own strengths and limitations when it comes to supporting these issues, will be key factors in meeting the needs of your audience. An additional worksheet allows you to apply what you have learned to the context in which you will be working. Also, many of the resources found in this Toolkit can provide you a basis for incorporating the education of these issues into your programs and workshops.