

Understanding the Emotional Cycle of Deployment

The definition of *deployment*, in a broad context, usually refers to the use, movement or distribution of military forces to conduct a battle in a wartime situation; however, for the National Guard, the term *deployment* must be expanded to address the missions that they do on U.S. soil. Either way, *deployment* usually consists of separation from home and family for a short or long period of time. Although the deployment itself refers only to the guard member, this cycle impacts the couple relationship in each phase. For the purpose of this toolkit, we'll define *deployment* as it's listed below.

de•ploy•ment: the use, movement, or distribution of military forces to conduct a battle in a wartime situation or to support domestic security, recovery, and disaster operations.

Deployment in support of a domestic or foreign military operation is often the most stressful part of National Guard family life. It is a period of separation, changing roles, sacrifice, missed life experiences, and fear. Services may be available for spouses and significant others to prepare for and cope with the deployment. However, these services are voluntary and may not be well attended by family members.

For a military unit, the cycle of the deployment experience is fairly consistent with five distinguishable stages. These stages, along with the relative time frames are as follows:

1. Pre-deployment – starts when unit receives notice and ends when unit actually deploys (Time Frame: variable)
2. Deployment – initial time of separation from home and family (Time Frame: first month after departure)
3. Sustainment – second month to approximately one to two months prior to return (Time Frame: varies depending on length of tour)
4. Re-deployment – preparation for return (Time Frame: one to two months prior to return)
5. Post-deployment – once unit returns (Time Frame: three to six months after return)

Because many National Guard members experience multiple deployments, the stages of deployment are often not a one-time event in the life of service members and their families. Depending on the need, National Guard units typically have a significant “dwell time” (usually several years) before they are called up again for deployment. Then the cycle begins again.

During the physical, concrete stages of deployment, those who are affected by deployment experience an emotional cycle. This emotional cycle of deployment is often an overlooked reality and can affect the service member, spouse, and other loved ones in significant ways. The following outline explains the stages and characteristics of the emotional cycle of deployment from the perspective of the spouse or other family member. However, the service member and others affected by the deployment may have very similar reactions.

Stage 1: Anticipation of Loss (Pre-deployment: one to six weeks prior to departure)

- Denial: “You are not really going, are you?”
- May experience tension, arguments, and fear
- Clinginess and increased demands on time or distancing behavior may occur

Stage 2: Detachment (Pre-deployment: one week prior to departure)

- Withdrawal from deploying person
- Aggression and bitterness: “If you have to go, just go”
- A time of great pride and patriotism, mixed with fear and worry

Stage 3: Disorganization (Deployment: first month after departure)

- Overall confusion about what to expect
- Mixed emotions (relief, despair, anger, fear, pride)
- Difficulty maintaining family roles and routines (compensating for deployed person)

Stage 4: Stabilization (Sustainment: during time of departure)

- Roles and routines in home negotiated and mostly effective
- Often increased and consistent communication with deployed person
- “Hey, I am/we are doing OK!”

Stage 5: Anticipation of Return (Re-deployment: one month prior to return)

- Excitement to see and be with deployed person
- Apprehension or nervousness about reunion/and changing roles
- “Will he or she be different?” “Will he or she like the changes in me?”

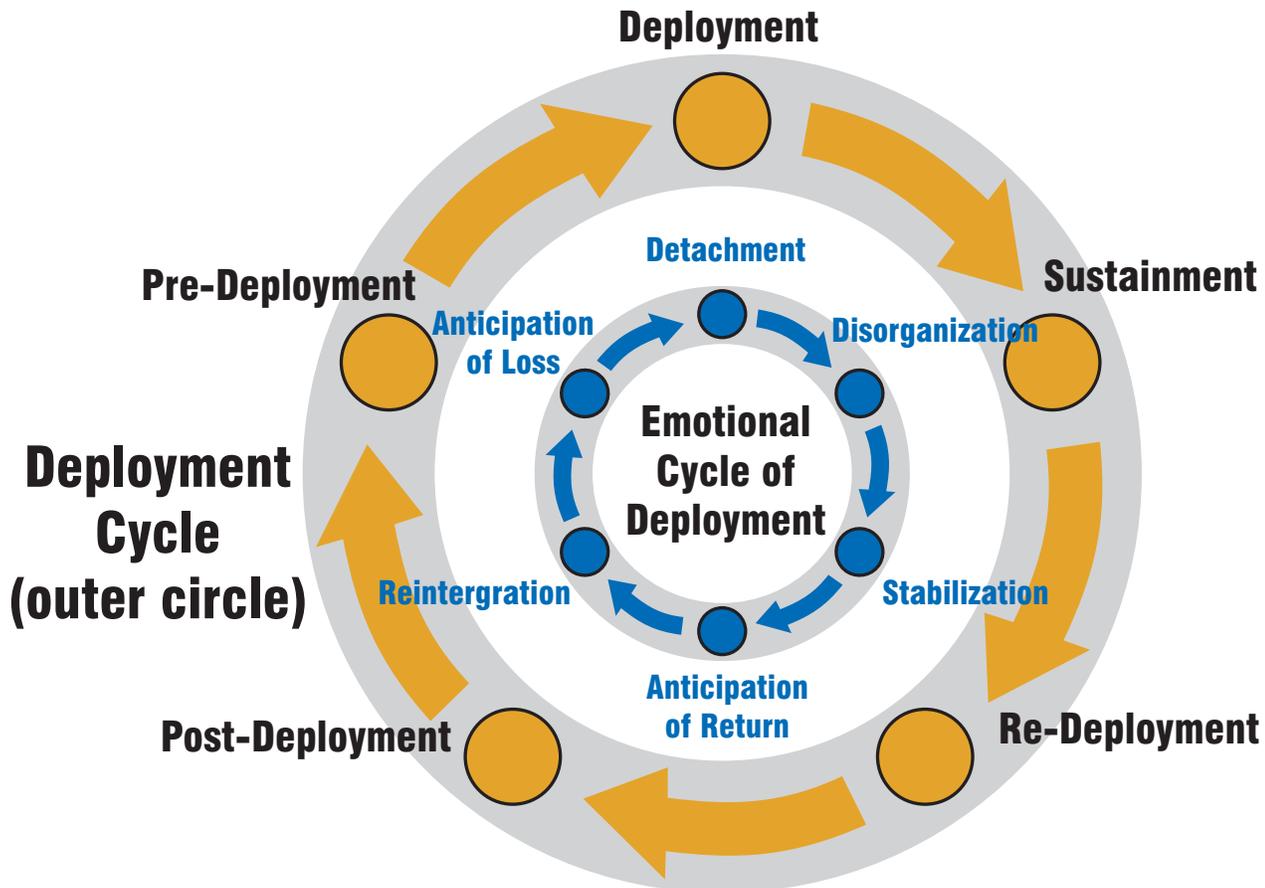
Stage 6: Reintegration (Post-deployment: up to six months after return)

- Re-negotiation of roles and routines
- Can have conflict: “Hey, I managed things just fine without you, and now you want to take that role back? You are messing up MY system!”
- Probably the most important stage to navigate for long-term relationship health

The following graphic depicts the emotional cycle of deployment in relation to the practical stages of the service member’s time away from home and family.



The Emotional Cycle of Deployment Worksheet



Knowing each of these stages can be of great importance to how you adapt your MRE practices to meet the needs of your audience. Do you know what stage they are in? Is it possible that those in the room are at different stages, and — if so — what can you do to adapt and individualize your curriculum?