

What to Expect on an R&R During Times of Deployment

Overview

What to expect on an R&R during a deployment, and ways to make the most of this time as a family.

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“Rest and Recuperation” visits home during a deployment are looked forward to with great anticipation. R&R is a happy time for couples, children, extended family, and service members. Along with the excitement and happiness, what else should loved ones expect when a service member returns home on a brief leave? What are some ways to prepare and make the most of this time as a family and as a couple? Are there special things to consider if the person is returning home on leave from a conflict or war zone? Following is information that can help.

What to expect as a family

A home leave is a happy time for most families. It can also be an emotional time. Here are some things to expect:

- *R&R plans can change.* It’s not uncommon for the needs of the service or the unit’s mission to override R&R plans. An R&R might be cancelled unexpectedly or delayed for an unknown period of time. Such changes might be good news; sometimes it might mean that the service member is being redeployed and is returning home from active duty sooner than expected. As you plan for or anticipate an upcoming R&R, keep in mind that plans can and do change.
- *Try to have realistic expectations.* It’s normal to have fantasies about what your time together will be like. But try to give up any ideas you may have about homecoming day and R&R and let things happen naturally. In reality, you may have emotional ups and downs during an R&R. You may feel very happy being together again. You may also feel stressed or sad knowing that the leave is short and that the service member will be leaving again, possibly to return to a war zone. You may have emotions that are unexpected, or even difficult to handle. It helps to remember that anxiety is a natural and normal part of getting back together. These mixed emotions pass soon enough and should not interfere with your time together.
- *The service member will need time to adjust and decompress.* He or she may be getting over jet lag, may need to catch up on missed sleep, or may simply need time alone to get used to being home.
- *If he or she was in a combat zone, the service member may not want to talk much about combat experiences.* There may be things he or she is not allowed to talk about. Avoid prying or asking too many questions. Instead, do what you can to help your loved one relax and unwind.

- *Children may need help reconnecting with the returning service member.* For example, younger children may keep their distance from the returning parent at first. You can help by making time for your children to spend time with the returning spouse. Here is a helpful tip from *Soldiers Magazine*: “Have a true ‘family reunion’ before taking time alone with your spouse.” Children are often more willing to give their parents uninterrupted time together if they have had special time with the returning service member first.
- *Try to maintain peace and calm at home as much as possible.* The service member may have a difficult time with loud noises, loud voices, or a lot of commotion. These may unexpectedly trigger shock reactions or other painful emotions, especially if the person has just returned from a war zone. It is not unheard of for a service member to dive to the floor upon hearing a loud noise; if he or she fears for the safety of those nearby, he or she may take them down to the floor as well.
- *The returning service member may experience stress-related symptoms if he or she is returning from a combat situation.* Traumatic events, such as combat, can trigger nightmares, flashbacks, and feelings of panic, anxiety, nervousness, or irritability. Help is available. Encourage the service member to take advantage of the services and programs available through the military and to seek professional help if necessary. Or seek assistance through the service that brought you this article.
- *Talk with couples that have been through your situation.* They may have valuable suggestions and helpful ideas on how to make the most of an R&R and how to handle the sadness of another goodbye.

Tips for couples

- *Make an extra effort to be considerate and understanding with one another.* Avoid “hot button” issues and topics that you know may lead to an argument or disagreement. This will help you make the most of your precious days together.
- *Realize that both partners may need a break.* The parent at home with young children may be looking forward to an R&R, too, when the service member returns home. He or she may have been up nights with a cranky baby or a sick toddler and be looking forward to a break from child care. The returning service member may be just as tired and in need of relaxation. Give yourselves as much time as possible to rest and relax together. You’ll enjoy each other more that way.
- *Hold off giving your returning partner a lengthy “honey do” list.* You may be eager to catch up on some of the household or yard jobs that were your spouse’s specialty. But let your spouse rest first. Then start with either the easiest jobs or the most important ones. Be sure your partner understands that you are

happy that he or she is back, and that you are not just happy to have another hand to get chores or yard work done.

- *Expect that your partner or spouse may have changed, even if you have been apart for only a few months.* Neither of you is the same person you were before your separation. Both of you may feel more independent. The service member may have changed priorities, especially if friends were wounded or killed as a result of accidents or combat. It may take some time to get reacquainted with one another, especially if your separation was prolonged. Things may feel awkward at first. Spend time getting to know one another again.
- *Avoid trying to switch gears too much or too quickly in your time together.* Family members at home have probably gotten into new patterns and routines while the service member was absent. Trying to return to old patterns -- and then back to the new patterns once the R&R is over -- is too much to expect of family members. Such changes are difficult enough during a final reunion, when there is much more time to adjust.
- *Share your feelings.* Communication is key to all good relationships and to making your time together the best it can be. Talk about your feelings and encourage your partner to talk. Listen to one another. Spend time together without talking, too. Sometimes just snuggling or giving each other a massage or back rub communicates as much love and affection as words.
- *Try to accommodate to one another's needs.* You may have different ideas about how you want to spend these days together. You may have different physical or emotional needs and this can sometimes cause tensions or strains in a relationship. For example, one partner may want to rush into sexual intimacy right away while the other isn't ready. Intimate relations may be awkward at first. Make time to be alone and to talk about your feelings and needs.
- *Realize that it takes time to rebuild feelings of intimacy.* It may not happen in one day. As experts at the National Mental Health Association explain, "Sex can resume immediately, but intimacy takes longer to re-establish."
- *Don't expect an R&R to solve long-standing relationship or marital problems.* Couple problems that were there before the R&R will still be there. An R&R isn't a time to try to solve major problems in your relationship. Instead, try to enjoy your time together as a couple and agree to work on your problems when you have more time together in the future.
- *Do your best to avoid a "harsh start-up."* In some cases, a partner or spouse may have something on their chest, "bad news" that they feel they must share the moment the returning service member walks in the door or arrives at the airport. Researchers refer to this as a "harsh start-up." A harsh start-up can spoil an R&R. Once an interaction starts off on a bad note, it's very hard to turn it around and make things positive. It's much better to save difficult issues

for later on, when you have extended time together as a couple and can work through issues or problems and possibly seek professional assistance.

Making the most of a brief visit home

A colonel describes the common problems he sees during R&Rs: service members spend out of control, eat out of control, and don't get enough sleep. Here are some ways to avoid such problems and make the most of a home visit:

- *Communicate ahead of time if possible about how you would like to spend the time that you are together.* In phone calls, emails, or letters, share ideas and plans of what you would like to do.
- *Don't overschedule yourselves.* Most service members appreciate just being home and being with family at this time. Resist the temptation to do too much. Instead of late-night partying, focus on relaxation, downtime, and spending time together. Focus on doing those things you cannot do while you are apart.
- *Encourage the returning service member to get enough sleep and to eat well.* During times of celebration and when we're out of our normal routines, there is the temptation to eat and drink too much. It's better for everyone's physical and mental health if you all avoid drinking too much alcohol and if you make an effort to stick to a healthy diet. Avoid eating too much fast food and sweets, and avoid foods loaded with sugar and salt. The excitement and stress of being home can lower the body's immune system, making you more susceptible to catching a cold or the flu. You'll all feel better and enjoy your time together if you stick to healthy habits as much as possible.
- *Take lots of pictures or movies of your time together.* If you don't have a camera or camcorder, consider borrowing one from a friend. Another inexpensive solution is to buy a disposable camera; they only cost about five dollars.

A second goodbye

The hardest part of a home leave is in knowing that the visit will end and that another "goodbye" is just around the corner. Here are some ways to make this time easier:

- *Keep in mind that children may have a hard time understanding why daddy or mommy has to go again.* Talk with your children about the upcoming separation, and make sure that the service member spends some special time with each child before leaving again.
- *Be aware that there is often tension in families before separations and goodbyes.* This is normal. But the tension can also taint the joy of being together again. Try to focus on the here and now and the happiness you are having together rather than the goodbyes to come.

- ***Keep the focus on enjoying one another.*** Try to stay focused in the moment. Take the days one at a time. And try not to let the pending departure preoccupy your thoughts. Planning ahead for the departure is important, but don't let it take away from your happy time together.
- ***Take advantage of the services and programs available to you through the military if you could use support.*** There are organizations and clubs for spouses, such as the Key Volunteer Network, military family support groups, online support groups, and support groups that meet in person. If you live on or near a military installation, consider using one of the many support services available to you, including the installation chaplain. Resources and information are also available through the service that brought you this article.

Written with the help of Dr. D. Bruce Bell, senior research psychologist with the U. S. Army Research Institute for the Social and Behavioral Sciences and Dr. Walter R. Schumm, Retired Army Reserve Colonel and professor of family studies and human services at Kansas State University. They are the authors of numerous publications on military family life. U.S. Army Colonel Charles J. Barr also contributed to this article.