



Practical Advice for Sailors & Marines* Returning Home from the War

Return from Deployment

*And for loved ones who want to understand their feelings



Over there:

"I can't wait to get home!"

Back home:

I feel like an outsider."

"I'd rather be by myself than with my family and friends."

"I don't have feelings for people I used to care about."

"I don't want to be around civilians."

"I can't wait to go back."



Despite the available information, some people are oblivious about the intensity of what is happening in Afghanistan and Iraq. Others have many misconceptions about the war.

Coming home from war is different than returning from a WestPac tour or isolated duty on Okinawa or being part of the Marine Security Guard. War changes people in ways they did not expect.

Home might not seem as familiar. Your family might have made adjustments in your absence that you don't like. Your friends ask dumb questions. Civilians don't have a clue about what's really going on. You want to go back to war so you can have some closure.

These are all normal reactions for the service member returning from combat. But they are not healthy feelings to cling to. You may have learned to disconnect from your emotions while in the war because you had to—it was a survival tool to deal with destruction, chaos and death.

Now it's time to reconnect. While you might want to avoid people and situations, isolation only deepens depression and makes stress worse. You need to take action to get back into mainstream life.

First Steps

Start slow. It takes time to get to know your family and friends again. You've changed and they've changed, too. Try not to be judgmental.

Be curious about your family. Get to know how your family functioned without you—watch, listen and learn. Talk to your loved ones about changes that are better or worse.

Reconnect & Rebuild

Learn the family's new strengths. New roles had to be assumed while you were deployed. Thank your loved ones for coping while you were gone and support them on the healthy changes they made.

Don't leave disagreements unresolved. You might not agree with some of the changes made while you were away, but ask questions so you can understand why they were made.

Learn to Share

Have you said these things to yourself?

“They’ll no longer love me if they knew what I did over there.”

“Once I start talking, I’ll start crying and won’t be able to stop.”

“They won’t believe me or they’ll get angry.”

“I’ll look weak and needy.”

Sharing your war experiences can be helpful, both to you and your family and friends. The more you share with people you trust, the stronger your relationships with them will grow.

Other important reasons include:

Sharing helps your loved ones understand why you do some of the things you do.

Sharing increases support and it allows you to tell your loved ones the best way to support you at this important transition time.

Sharing helps remove the weight of shame, secrecy and guilt.

Some pointers to help you start sharing:

Choose who you want to share with. You want someone who you can trust and with whom you feel safe—a supportive person who is not judgmental.

Choose the time. It’s okay to say, “Now is not a good time,” or “Let’s talk about this when there aren’t any distractions.”

Let people know how you want them to respond. Tell people if you just want them to listen. If you need to, set physical boundaries, such as, “This is hard for me so I’d appreciate it if you don’t hug me while I’m talking.”

Don’t feel you have to share everything. You do not want to overwhelm people with details. Share just enough to provide insight into what you went through in the war and how you are coping.

Talk about things related to your experience. Share photos, memorabilia and facts about the culture and the people of the countries where you served. Not everything needs to be about the traumatic experience of war.



Talk about reactions to your experience. It’s okay to say you feel different, have trouble sleeping, feel edgy or similar things. Again, no one needs to know all details.

Discuss how you are coping. Tell people what skills you’re developing to deal with stress. Be open to suggestions from others.

Dumb Questions

“So how was it?”

“Did you kill anyone?”

“Are you like one of those crazy Vietnam vets?”

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Tips to deal with these situations:

Practice. Expect bad or ignorant questions and practice for them. Run potential answers by your spouse or a close friend to get a second opinion.

Use your sense of humor. Mention how you loved the camel spiders or how you liked cleaning yourself with baby wipes for a month. You can think of ways to deflect a thoughtless question.

Ignore it. You don’t have to answer a question. Walk away or say, “I really don’t feel like talking about it now.”

Building Intimacy

Intimacy is more than sex relations. It brings you closer to your loved ones-- building deeper understanding of each other and creating more empathy for each other.

Important guidelines for intimacy include:

Remember the only behavior you can control is your own.

Family and close friends are your team. Successful teams do not tear each other apart—they build each other out.

Know details about your partner and close friends. What type of music do they like? What are their favorite foods? What beliefs do they hold important?

Apologize when you're wrong.

Give compliments.



Sex Relations

During deployment, you probably spent a lot of time thinking and fantasizing about sex. Once back from deployment, the reality might not live up to expectations.

To reduce disappointment and avoid hurt feelings:

Don't be surprised if it feels "strange" to be together again as a couple.

Realize you might have temporary performance problems.

Make intimacy—not just sex—your goal.

