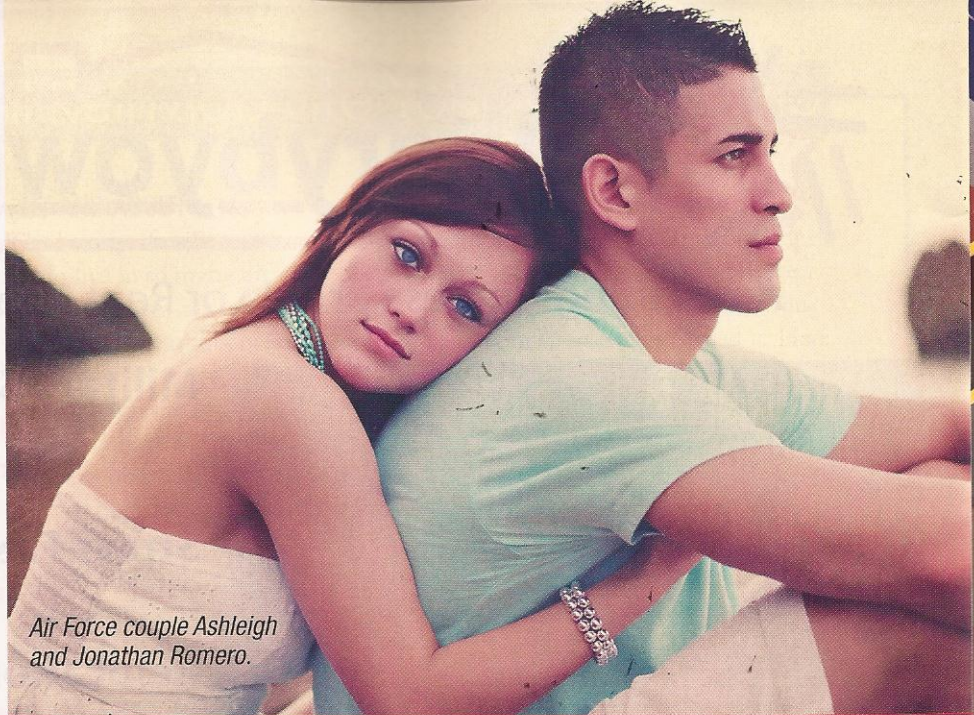


Re-Negotiate Togetherness

Simple rules for reconnecting with your sweetheart after months apart.

by Heidi Smith Luedtke, Air Force spouse

photo by Brynja Sigurdardottir, Air Force spouse



Air Force couple Ashleigh and Jonathan Romero.

TOUCHING BASE

In the weeks after a long deployment has ended, it's wise to revisit some key issues. Discuss them calmly, before conflict arises, to see how things may have changed and how you want to proceed.

Major areas worth covering are:

- How household/marital decisions are made
- How money is spent
- Rules for the children, if you have any
- Who does which household tasks
- Claims to physical space in your home

After a long separation, it's normal to feel both anticipation and anxiety. Will your spouse still find you irresistible? How will he or she fit back into your household? What if the spark is gone?

"Deployment happens to the whole family, it doesn't just happen to the service member," says Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Ph.D., director of the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University. Reintegration will likely bring some surprises for everyone.

Long-term studies show deployment slightly increases rates of divorce, says Benjamin Karney, Ph.D., professor of psychology at UCLA. "It's tough to maintain intimacy with another person for an extended period of time," Karney says, and long geographic separations make it even more complicated. But military marriages also receive lots of support.

Army National Guard spouse Andrea Knotts of St. Louis, Mo., knows redeployment can be disorienting. Frequent phone calls and Skype sessions allowed for open, direct communication with her husband during deployment. But, she says, "the bottom dropped out when my husband came home. He was dealing with his own demons, processing what he had seen over there. And he kind of took it out on me."

THE DANCE OF REDEPLOYMENT

"It's normal for a long separation to be followed by fighting or distance," says

therapist Harriet Lerner, Ph.D., author of "Marriage Rules: A Manual for the Married and Coupled Up." Some couples yo-yo back and forth between the two. The process of reconnecting isn't linear; it's more like a series of slow and quick dance steps.

Service members face changes on every front after deployment: at home, in relationships and on the job. It's hard to predict how these changes might impact your spouse.

Some miss the sense of mission and the adrenaline rush that comes from doing what they're trained to do. "Reservists may lose their sense of connection to the military unit when they transition back to civilian life," Wadsworth says.

During deployment you both relied on friends, family and your own coping

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skills. Post-deployment, "spouses must reorient themselves back toward each other," Wadsworth says. In your attempts to reconnect, you and your partner may take on the roles of distancer and pursuer, says Lerner. One seeks closeness and the other withdraws. To get back in step with your spouse, try following these simple rules: »

» 10 Do's and Don'ts of Reconnecting

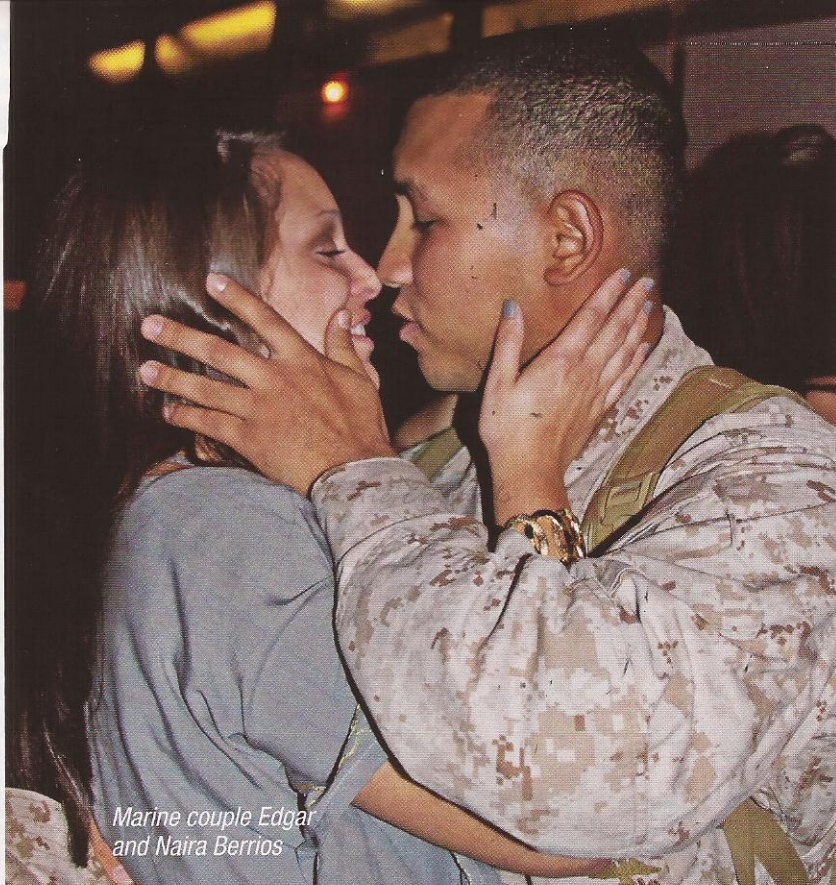
1 Do set reasonable expectations Studies show high expectations are healthy when partners have a tight bond and good communication, says Karney. But problems don't disappear during deployment, and romantic fantasies ("Everything will be great once we're finally together again") may not match reality. If you struggled with commitment or conflict before, more moderate expectations make sense.

2 Don't push for too much, too soon "Under stress, don't press," Lerner advises. "It never helps to pursue a distancer." Pushing your spouse to share deployment stories or to express his feelings will make things worse. People need space and time to feel whatever they're feeling. If and when your spouse is ready, he or she will open up.

3 Do invite interaction Offer opportunities to have fun together. Spend a date night at the movies or learn ballroom dancing. Doing activities together creates new memories and reminds you of good times you shared before this deployment came along.

4 Don't globalize You may feel stuck in a blaming mindset, but "negative statements about your partner or your relationship can become self-fulfilling prophecies," says Lerner. Don't say, "I don't think we're going to make it," or "You always shut me out." Such broad, generalized statements are seldom true.

5 Do be patient "A good marriage requires a long-term view," says Lerner, especially if there are children involved. You aren't just returning to the way things were before; you're finding a new normal. It helps if you know that process may take longer than you'd like.



Marine couple Edgard and Naira Berrios

6 Do be lighthearted "If you can predict there's going to be conflict, aim to be light," Lerner suggests. If you take some deep breaths and approach situations positively, it will make a difference. Set aside time each week to discuss challenges when the waters are calm, so you aren't forced to discuss or fight when the seas run high.

7 Don't take things personally Disagreements or distance don't necessarily mean your spouse doesn't love you. "When we experience conflict, we may think our relationship is in trouble," says Wadsworth. Even if it's difficult, try not to make assumptions about what things mean. Jumping to conclusions causes tensions to flare.

8 Do acknowledge change "My husband had become a different person over there, and I had to learn to do without him," Knotts says. "It was hard for him to feel needed when he came back." In the months after a deployment, couples may fight over insignificant details because one spouse wants to retain control. These power struggles can

produce conflict as you both adjust to the ways you've changed. Discuss these changes directly, instead of fighting over symbolic issues like who takes out the trash.

9 Don't tolerate disrespect "It's never useful to put up with behavior that's at your expense," says Lerner. Tell your partner, "You need to approach me with respect." If your spouse is verbally or physically aggressive, step away. Strong marriages have healthy boundaries and those boundaries must be respected.

10 Do get help At first, Knotts' husband wanted to keep their problems private. When she told him she couldn't imagine being miserable together forever, he agreed to counseling. "We learned to be completely honest with each other, even if it hurts," she remembers. "Sugar-coating and beating around the bush don't work for us. We've learned to be more authentic with each other and ourselves." Headed into another deployment, Knotts acknowledges, "We're a little nervous, but we know that we'll make it through." ★