

Take Charge of Your Own Family Support

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The goodbyes have been said, the first (of many) tears shed as you watched that bus, plane or ship move away, and there you are, wondering what you'll do for the time your servicemember is activated or deployed. The responsibility for the family is on your shoulders, whether that family consists of you alone or you and your children or other family members who may live with you.

The time to plan for how you will carry on during this separation is before your servicemember leaves. Family support begins in the family. You need to outfit yourself with the tools that you will need. The Guard and Reserve Family Readiness Toolkit is essential (<http://www.defenselink.mil/ra/family/toolkit>). Print out a copy and keep it handy. The servicemember should have filled out the deployment checklist (section B) and you should have a copy. Hopefully, you helped fill it out but if not, familiarize yourself with it. How many times have you said you just needed to get organized to have your life run more smoothly? The deployment checklist and the family readiness checklist in section C should capture a picture of your life at this moment. Take time and actually *read* the toolkit. It may save time or a panicked phone call to the unit commander in the future. If you have financial misgivings or need to brush up on your budgeting skills, use the Military Families - Money and Mobility Workbook (www.nmfa.org/nefe/).

You can't always rely on the military structure for everything. How have you established your own circle of family support? Have you alerted family and friends about your situation? Do you have their phone numbers handy? Don't be afraid to ask friends for help. Set up a regular time to meet with them for dinner or a movie or just a chat and a cup of tea. If you have children include them in your outings when possible but don't forget that you will need some adult time just for you. Let your boss know that you will be a single parent for a while and may need some flexibility in your schedule but don't take advantage of it. Don't attempt to take on more than you can manage. While it may appear to be the perfect time to go back to school, repaint the house *and* finish that novel you always wanted to write – try one project at a time. Do take care of your health – the first person in the family support chain is you and if you miss meals, lose sleep or become more of a couch potato than usual, your health will suffer. Maybe now is the time to start that walking routine you always wanted to begin. Find a walking partner – always a great person to vent to; or time it for after school and take the kids with you! You can find articles about how to cope during deployments on www.lifelines2000.org or www.afcrossroads.com.

Have you established a communication routine with your deployed love one? Set a time aside each day or each week to write – be it handwritten letters or email. Collect copies for yourself. Down the road it will be interesting to have a collection of all your letters, another snapshot of your life at this time. Who knows – you might have the makings of a future best seller! Phone calls are always a good communication tool. Don't add to your stress level, however by running up a phone bill that you can't handle. Have your servicemember take advantage of programs like Operation Uplink (www.operationuplink.org), a program of the VFW and the VFW Ladies Auxiliary that offers free phone cards to deployed service members.

Sometimes everyday chores can be overwhelming – mowing the lawn, cleaning the gutters, changing the oil. Many community organizations are offering free services in these areas as well as financial planning and legal services. These organizations include: the American Legion, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, BPO Elks of the USA, Camp Fire USA, National 4H, National Fraternal Congress of America, The Salvation Army, the US Chamber of Commerce, Veterans of Foreign Wars and YMCA of the USA. These organizations would also welcome volunteers.

Children, of course, will need extra support during this time. Tell your child's school and teacher that a parent is deployed. Make sure that all emergency numbers are updated. Does the school offer special counseling or resources for military children? If not, perhaps you could work to get a program established. The Department of Defense Education Activity has an excellent site (www.dodea.edu) with a crisis management toolkit that can be helpful to parents and teachers alike. Also helpful - Working with Military Children - A Primer for School Personnel (www.nmfa.org/working%20with%20Military%20Children.pdf), and the Healthy Parenting Site (www.mfrc.calib.com/healthyparenting).

This may be a time to reconnect with your faith-based community. Many churches have support groups or services for family members of deployed service members. Local American Red Cross chapters also have special resources for families including meeting rooms and snacks for family support groups and mental health counseling. More information can be found at www.redcross.org/services/afes/.

Once you have your nuclear “family support” group established, you can be a stronger member of your unit's family readiness group (FRG). The group is most effective when each member takes responsibility for the group's success. Don't expect the FRG leader to do all the work! Their family member is deployed as well and he or she is going through the same daily crises as you are. Don't listen to the naysayers complaining that “the leaders are on a power trip” or “the group is just a clique”. If you have problems with the FRG, work to make changes for the positive. There are many, many tools out there for you to use. The National Military Family Association is a great source for family support information and has compiled a list of website resources at their website www.nmfa.org. Knowledge is power – empower yourself and learn all you can to make this time of deployment a positive, learning experience for both your servicemember and the family left behind.