



Marriage Matters

P.S., I Love You: Dealing with Time Apart

Many couples experience time apart, whether it is frequent short trips, weekly commuting, or extended military deployments or activation. Many feelings surface when faced with the stress of miles between couples, but relationships can survive these separations if effort is centered around keeping the relationship on the right track.

The feelings that arise from these separations range from anger, a sense of abandonment and powerlessness, to loneliness and anxiety. They vary with the length of the separation and the circumstances that surround it. For example, anger is often directed at the company or military branch that has “sent” the spouse away or at the spouse for leaving the family. Loneliness may also be experienced despite the hectic schedules of kids and work. Lack of companionship and intimacy can lead to feelings of pity or emptiness. Anxiety arises from not knowing where the spouse is being sent or the fear of what he or she may be involved with. Also, lack of communication when the spouse is in a remote military location or overseas and is unable to communicate with those at home about daily life details can further increase stress levels.

Realizing that time away is a necessary part of the job and not the fault of the spouse is an important step in coping. Below are other helpful coping strategies. Couples should try different techniques and use the methods that work or help in their individual situation.

- ♥ **Show mutual respect.** Understanding that both partners are essential in contributing to family success is vital. Show and communicate appreciation for the unique and shared contributions each partner makes to the family.
- ♥ **Make the best of your time together.** Spending time together as a family is critical for relationship bonding. Although holidays and visits can be stressful, limited and brief, make the best of your time together as a family, regardless the location. *Where* your family spends its time together is not nearly as important as the togetherness itself. Preparation and planning can help identify and reduce possible stressors. Be open and flexible to change.
- ♥ **Be Creative.** When apart, it can be a challenge finding ways to stay connected. Use technology such as email and social media to keep each other informed and share photos. Identify books to read and movies to watch that you can discuss when you have opportunities to connect by phone or on-line. Keep a journal or scrapbook that documents your thoughts and feelings for each other that you can share when you re-connect.

- ♥ **Redirect energy.** For the partner at home, channeling energy into productive efforts such as volunteering or pursuing further education can be helpful. Giving your time to civic and community services that help others can often make personal problems seem smaller.
- ♥ **Keep children involved.** Children react to the stress of the parent that is at home, so try to continue the children’s routine as much as possible. Find activities that you and your children enjoy doing together to help unite the family during the other parent’s absence.
- ♥ **Find and use support systems.** Outside support is essential. It can come from friends, family, your faith and community organizations that support families. Never be afraid to ask for help, especially from those who have been through similar situations. Decrease isolation by involving family in outside support systems.

Extra effort and improved communication can enable long-distance couples to maintain healthy, caring relationships. Positive attitudes are necessary for the family to stay as one.

ACTIVITY



Next time one spouse is expecting to be away for a while, plan ahead by:

- ♥ Discussing any major decisions that may arise during the time apart
- ♥ Prepare for any situations that might arise
- ♥ Obtain a power of attorney. This is essential if a signature is needed on a document while a spouse is away.

While your spouse is away:

- ♥ Keep a list of items or issues that need to be discussed when communicating with your spouse or when a reunion occurs.
- ♥ Maintain a calendar that highlights milestones, accomplishments and other important events that happened to you, the children, and others you know that can be shared with your spouse.

For more tips and suggestions, see the *Home and Away Series*, a publication from The Ohio State University Extension (<http://ohioline.osu.edu/lines/fami.html#homeaway>).



**This resource supports the following principles of healthy relationships.
For more resources, visit www.gafamilies.org and www.nermen.org.**