

# Navigating the New Normal: **Reintegration after Deployment**

Dr. Leanne Knobloch  
University of Illinois



*After my husband returned from deployment,  
there was some difficulty in adjusting  
to living with each other again ...  
the few months after his return were certainly  
the most trying time in our relationship.*

**– at-home National Guard wife, 28 years old**

*It was kind of like Rick got home, but not dad.*

**– Megan, 12 years old**

# Military Families and Deployment

- + More than 2.7 million service members have deployed to warzones since 9/11
- + More than half of service members have deployed more than once
- + More than 2 million children have a parent who has served in Iraq or Afghanistan



# Benefits of Deployment for Military Families

- + more appreciation
- + closer family ties
- + personal growth
- + financial gain
- + stronger religious faith
- + opportunity to serve others





# Toll of Deployment on Military Families

- + *service members*: higher rates of depression, PTSD, and alcohol misuse**
- + *at-home partners*: more parental distress, more frequent use of mental health services**
- + *children*: more behavior problems, less academic achievement, worse mental health**

Chandra et al., 2010; Engel et al., 2010; Hoge et al., 2004;  
Lester et al., 2010; Mansfield et al., 2010; Seal et al., 2009

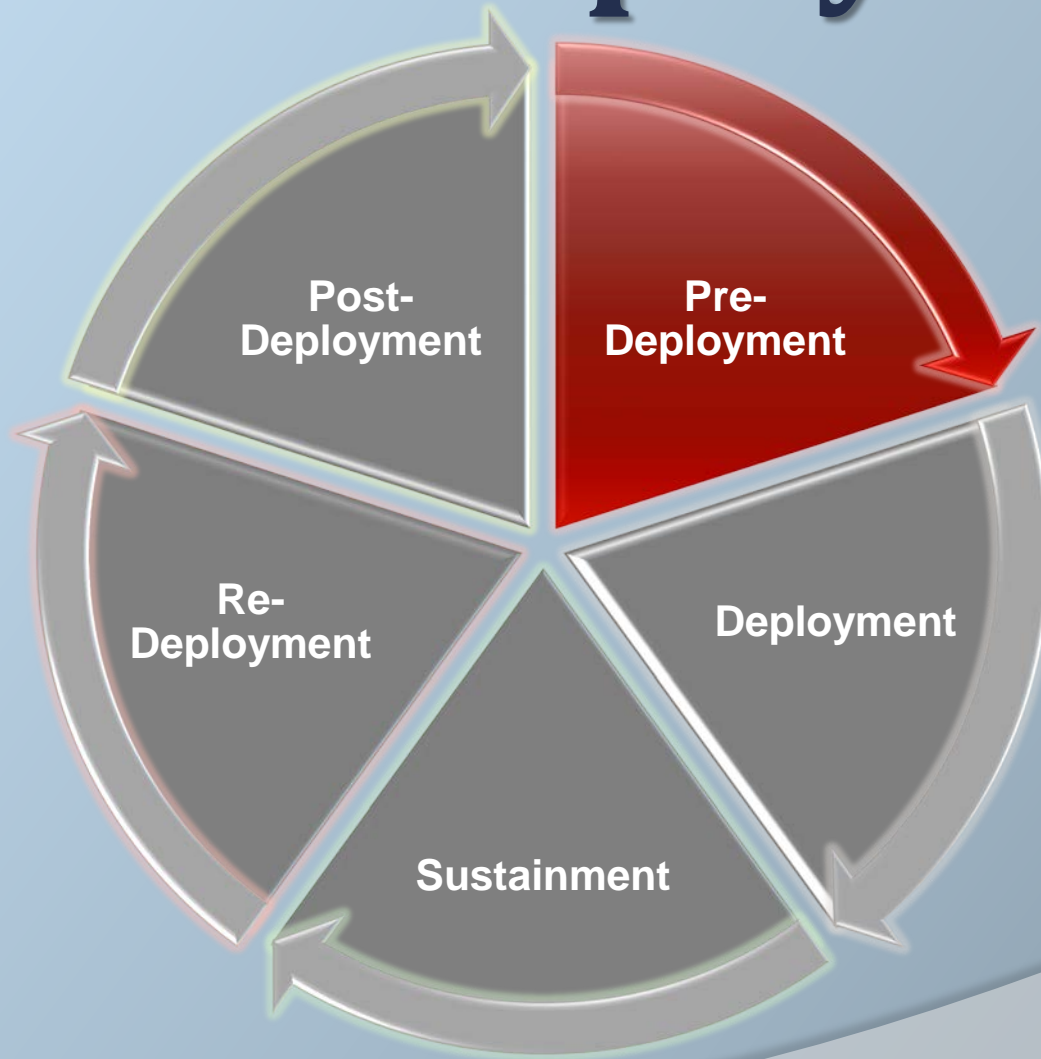


# Cycle of Deployment



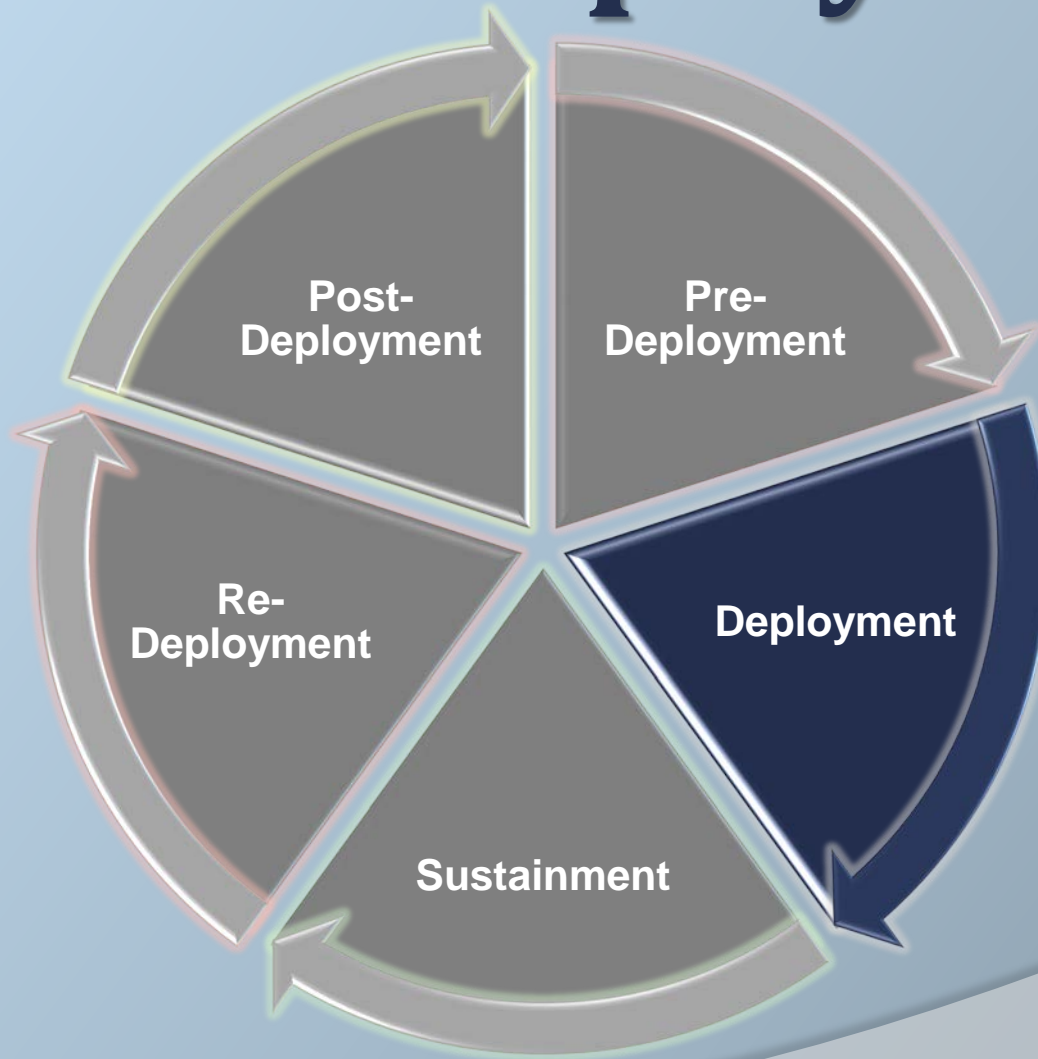
Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001

# Cycle of Deployment



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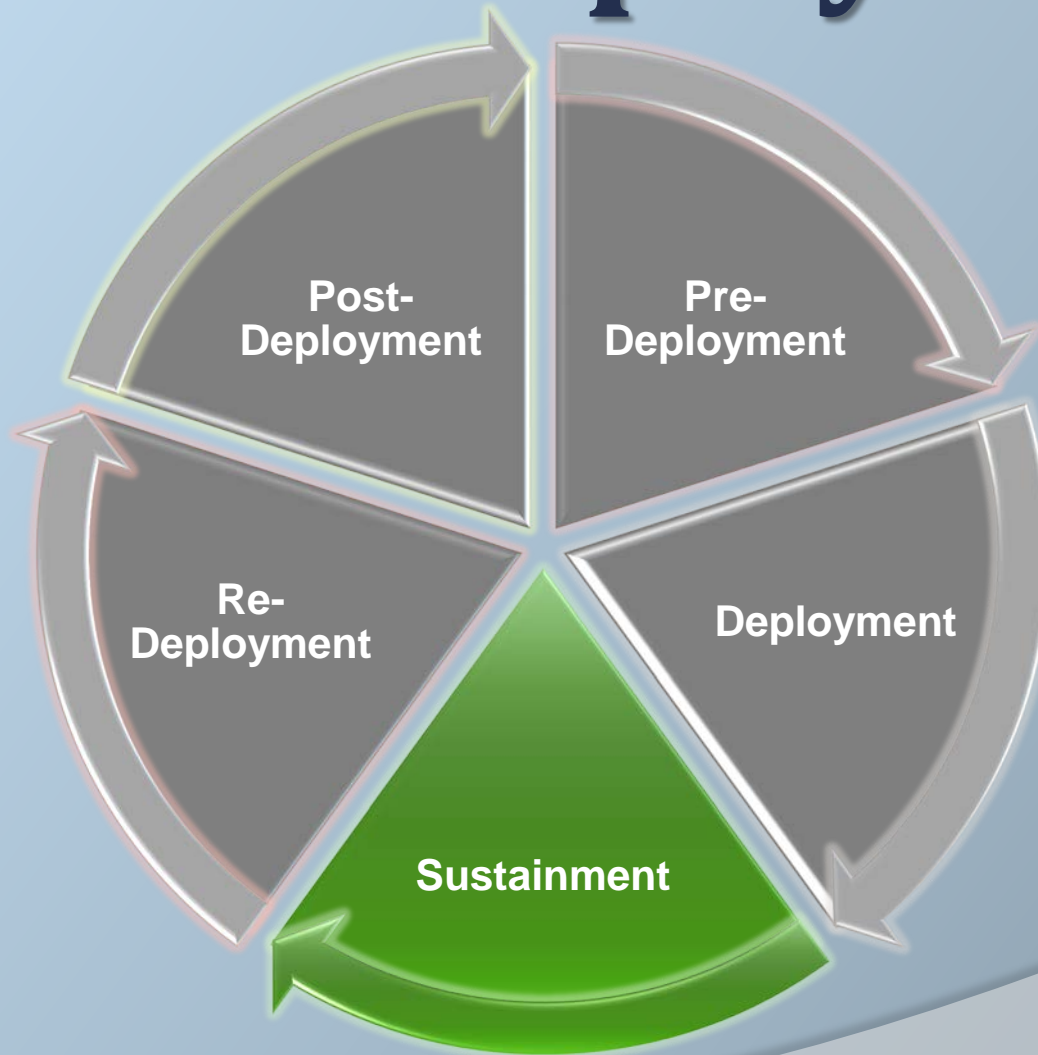
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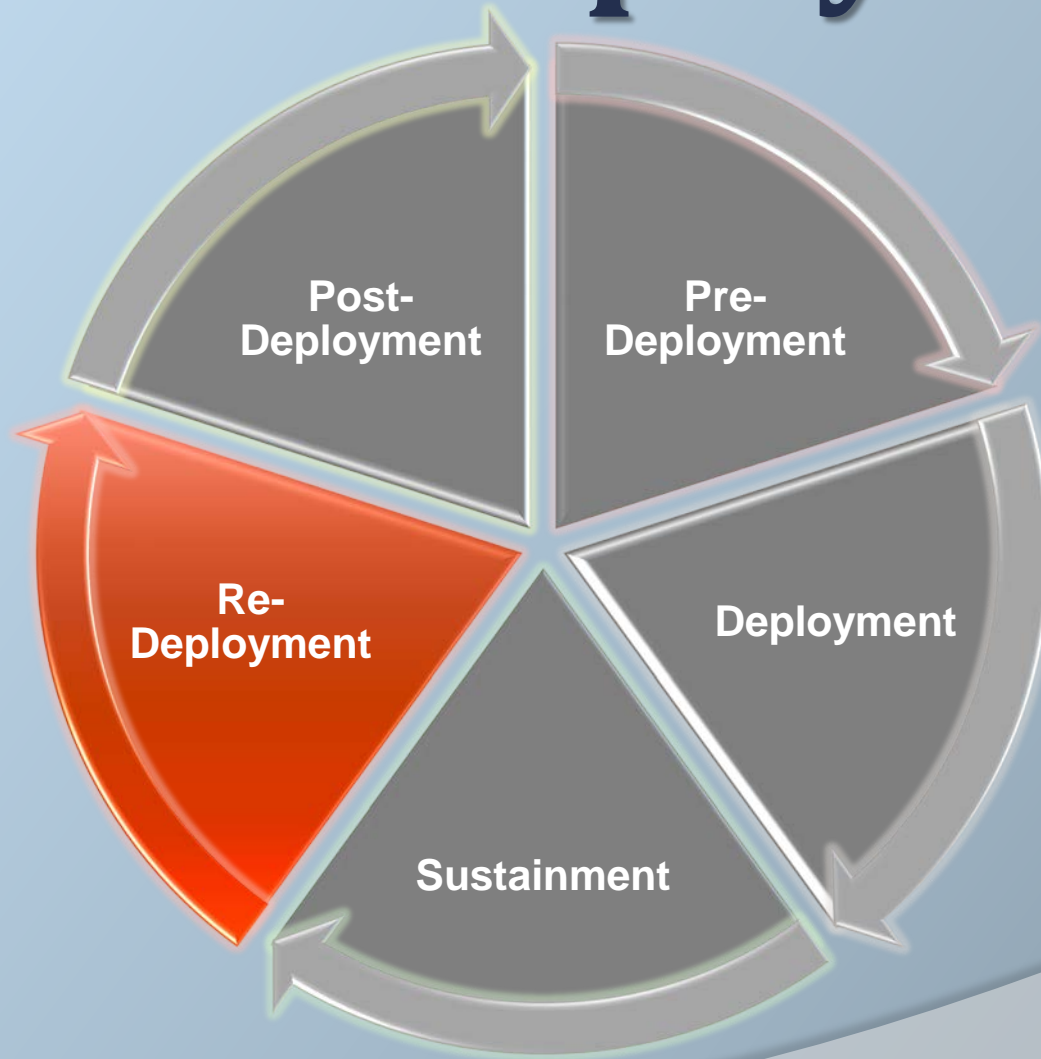


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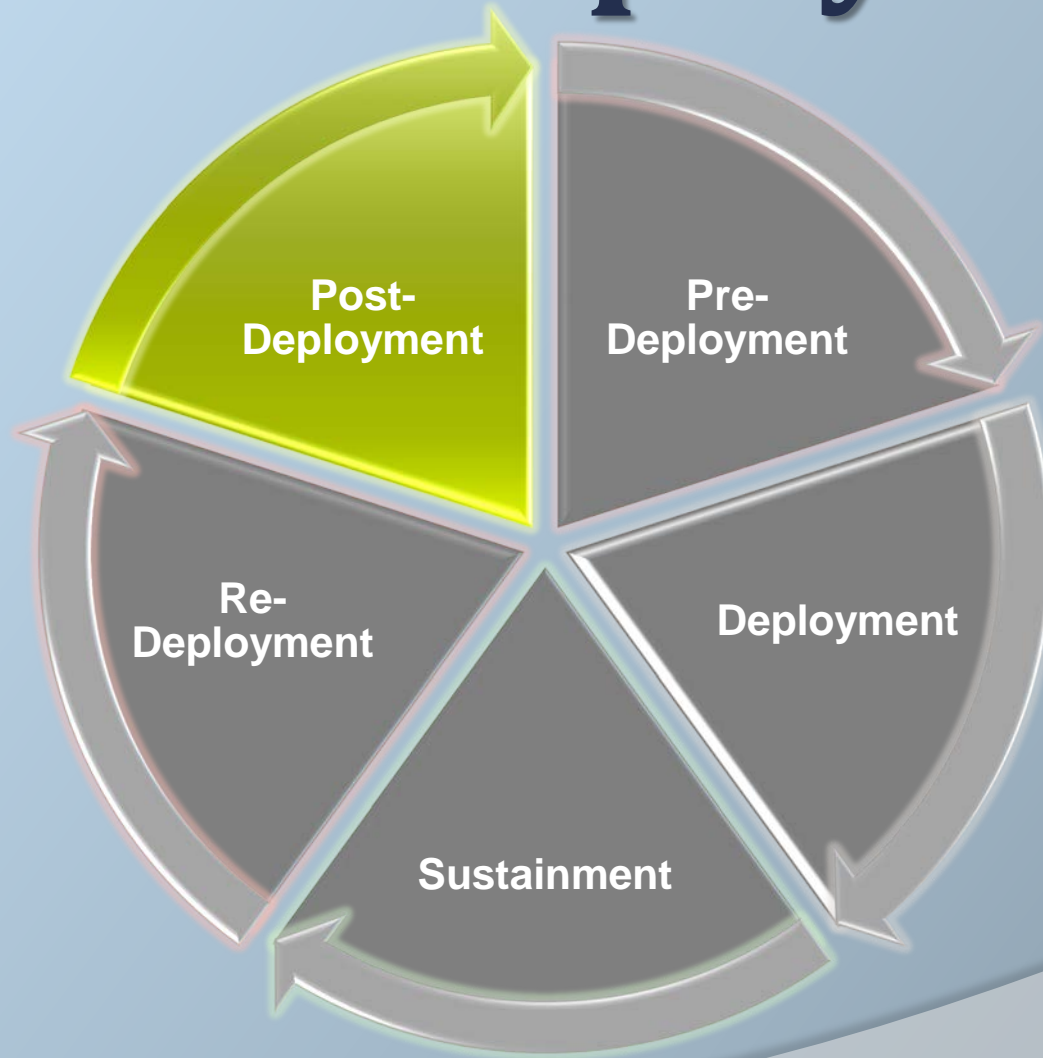
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# Cycle of Deployment



**Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001**

# Cycle of Deployment



Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001



# **Reintegration after Deployment**

- + Military couples are at risk for anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress, and relationship problems**
- + Children are vulnerable to maltreatment**
- + Some research concludes that reunion is more stressful than deployment itself**

**Hisle-Gorman et al., 2015; McNulty, 2005; Mmari et al., 2009;  
Nelson Goff et al., 2007; Renshaw et al., 2008**





**What changes to their relationship  
do military couples  
report experiencing upon reunion?**



# Experiences of U.S. military couples during the post-deployment transition: Applying the relational turbulence model

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Personal Relationships

1-28

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## Abstract

Although many military couples eagerly await reunion after deployment, the reentry of service members into family life can be challenging. This study employed the relational turbulence model to identify the issues facing military couples during the post-deployment transition. Individuals who had been reunited with their romantic partner during the past six months ( $N = 259$ ; 137 service members, 122 partners) completed an online questionnaire. Content analytic results indicated that people encounter diverse changes to their relationship ( $RQ1$ ), issues of relational uncertainty ( $RQ2$ ), and interference in their daily routines ( $RQ3$ ). Women, at-home partners, and reservist couples appear especially likely to encounter upheaval ( $RQ4$ ). The relational turbulence model may have utility for illuminating the experiences of military couples upon reintegration.

## Keywords

interference from partners, military deployment, relational turbulence, relational uncertainty

# Changes



# Changes

## 1. Relationship is Stronger

*After being apart for so long, [our relationship] is stronger than ever. We truly appreciate each other and realize the sacrifices we both make for us and our daughter.*

**- at-home Army wife, 21 years old**

# Changes

## 2. Value the Relationship More

*I have a greater appreciation for my husband.*

*I respect him for what he does. [...]*

*Although deployments are hard, they allow us to see exactly what our relationship is made of.*

**- at-home National Guard wife, 42 years old**



# Changes

## 3. Problems Reconnecting

*Become more distant from children and wife.*

*Sometimes they are scared of me, sometimes they hate me.*

*I am unaware of any changes other than that.*

*But my family says I am different.*

**- deployed National Guard husband, 30 years old**

# Changes

## 4. Difficulty Communicating

*We both had no idea how to comfort or console or even talk about what happened.*

**- at-home National Guard wife, 30 years old**

*Forgets that I am home now and need to have more information regarding what is going on.*

**- deployed National Guard husband, 39 years old**

# Changes





**How do military adolescents describe their experiences during reunion?**



# Communicative Experiences of Military Youth During a Parent's Return Home from Deployment

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The return home of a service member from tour of duty can be stressful for military families (Bowling & Sherman, 2008), but surprisingly little is known about how military youth communicatively experience a parent's homecoming (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010). This study draws on the *emotional cycle of deployment model* (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001) to examine the reunion period in military youth's own words. Individual interviews were conducted with 31 military youth (age range = 10 to 13 years old). Participants identified four changes to family life (*RQI*), includ-



## Changes

- More time together
- Emotional tranquility
- Returning to prior patterns
- Difficulty reintegrating

## Expectations

- Matched expectations
- Fell short of expectations
- Didn't expect so much tiredness or irritability

## Questions

- Deployment activities
- Reasons for joining and deploying
- Family life
- Future deployments

## Changes

- More time together
- Emotional tranquility
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*We went to Chuck E. Cheese's. We usually don't go there – we went there and had a lot of fun.*

**- Paul, 13 years old**

*Things were the same inside, family-wise. We never broke our beliefs and stuff like that.*

**- Jason, 11 years old**

*Our rules have gotten stricter, we have an even earlier time we have to be inside and get to bed. It's very stricter when he's here.*

**- Anna, 11 years old**

## Expectations

- Matched expectations
- Fell short of expectations
- Didn't expect so much tiredness or irritability

*It was the way I expected it. Because I thought he'd be a little bit the same when he came back.*

- **Miranda, 10 years old**

*I thought it was going to be like the movies, like, they go swimming and have so much fun. My dad did a bunch of paperwork and stuff, so that was it.*

- **Kevin, 10 years old**

*I expected him to, I dunno, be a bit nicer, but he's been a grouch and everything.*

- **Ella, 11 years old**

## Questions

- Deployment activities
- Reasons for joining and deploying
- Family life
- Future deployments

*How safe is he every day? Like – does he go out and search buildings, or does he sit around and order people around?*

- **Evan, 13 years old**

*Why did you want to go to Iraq? Why did you pick this job if you knew you had to go to Iraq?*

- **Jason, 11 years old**

*How to have more fun time with family.*

- **Hudson, 12 years old**

*I would ask, “Are you gonna leave again?”*

- **Ryan, 11 years old**

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**What challenges do military couples report experiencing upon reunion?**



## Communication of Military Couples During Deployment and Reunion: Changes, Challenges, Benefits, and Advice

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### ABSTRACT

The *emotional cycle of deployment model* proposes that military couples face both obstacles and opportunities across the trajectory of deployment. Guided by the model, we seek to address gaps in the literature by investigating how 236 recently reunited service members and at-home partners ( $N = 118$  couples) describe their experiences during deployment and reunion. Results of content analyses revealed a variety of changes to communication during deployment (RQ1), challenges of reunion (RQ2), benefits of deployment (RQ3), and advice for reintegration (RQ4). These findings bolster and extend the emotional cycle of deployment model; they also have practical utility for helping military couples navigate deployment and reunion.

Deployment can have profound consequences for military couples throughout each stage of the process. During deployment, service members need to execute the responsibilities of their mission while also staying connected with family members (McCarroll, Hoffman, Grieger, & Holloway, 2005; McNulty, 2005). At-home partners need to establish new routines, run the household and/or care for children independently, and maintain their relationship with the service member (Lapp et al., 2010;

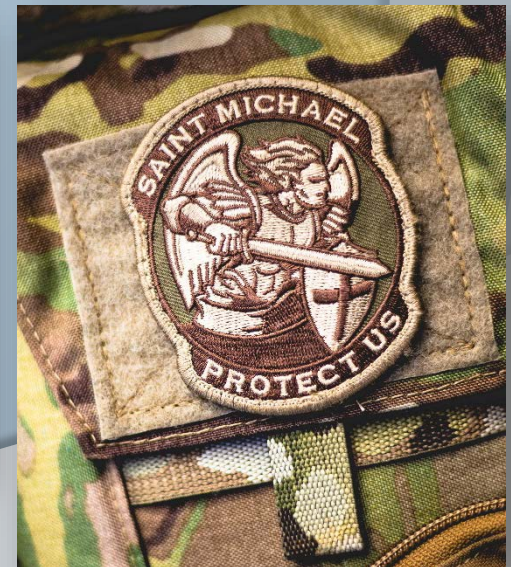
# Challenges

<b>Parenting Problems (28%)</b>	<i>Re-learning how to handle things with the kids. Children react differently than soldiers when being corrected.</i> - deployed Army Husband
<b>Reintegrating Routines (17%)</b>	<i>The kids and I are used to having a set routine, and now we're adjusting to adding Dad back into the routine.</i> - at home Army wife
<b>Revising Roles (16%)</b>	<i>Some of the house rules changed while he was gone, and getting him used to the new ones has been a challenge.</i> - at-home National Guard wife
<b>Work and Finances (8%)</b>	<i>My upcoming retirement and inability to get a job.</i> - deployed Air Force husband
<b>Communication Problems (8%)</b>	<i>He forgets we are family and talks to us like we are one of his soldiers at times.</i> - at-home Army wife





# What is the trajectory of the post-deployment transition?



# RESILIENCE AFTER DEPLOYMENT

*Investigating the transition from deployment to reunion*

*The return home of a service member after deployment can be challenging. Researchers at the University of Illinois and Marquette University conducted a study to better understand the experiences of military couples during the transition.*

## ABOUT THE STUDY



### ONLINE SURVEY

*555 military couples  
(1,110 individuals)  
participated in  
the study*



### PARTICIPANTS

*Active duty, reserve  
component, and  
National Guard couples  
from all branches*

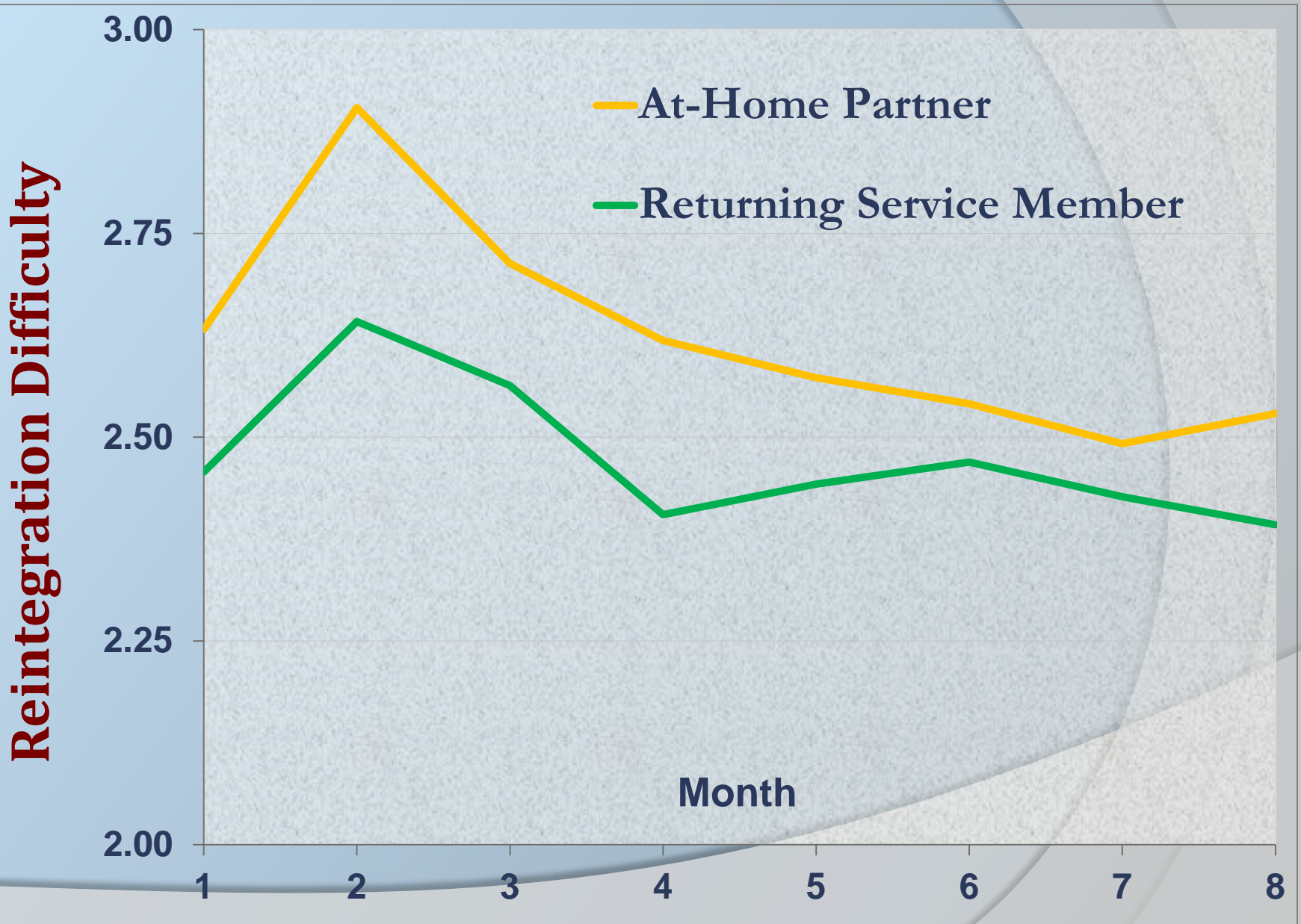


### TIMING

*Reported once  
per month for 8  
consecutive months  
after homecoming*



# Reintegration Difficulty Over Time



## FOUR MAJOR FINDINGS



### COMMUNICATION IS KEY

**Constructive** (not **destructive**) communication during deployment was helpful during reunion.



### SUPPORT SPOUSES

**At-home partners** reported more reintegration difficulty than returning service members.



### TIMING MATTERS

Reintegration difficulty was highest **4 to 8 weeks** after homecoming.



### RECOMMENDATIONS

**Mental health treatment** and **relationship support** may help military couples upon reunion.

This research was supported by the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs through the Military Operational Medicine Research Program (Award W81XWH-14-2-0131). Conclusions are those of the authors.

DR. LEANNE KNOBLOCH, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS; DR. LYNNE KNOBLOCH-FEDDERS, MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY



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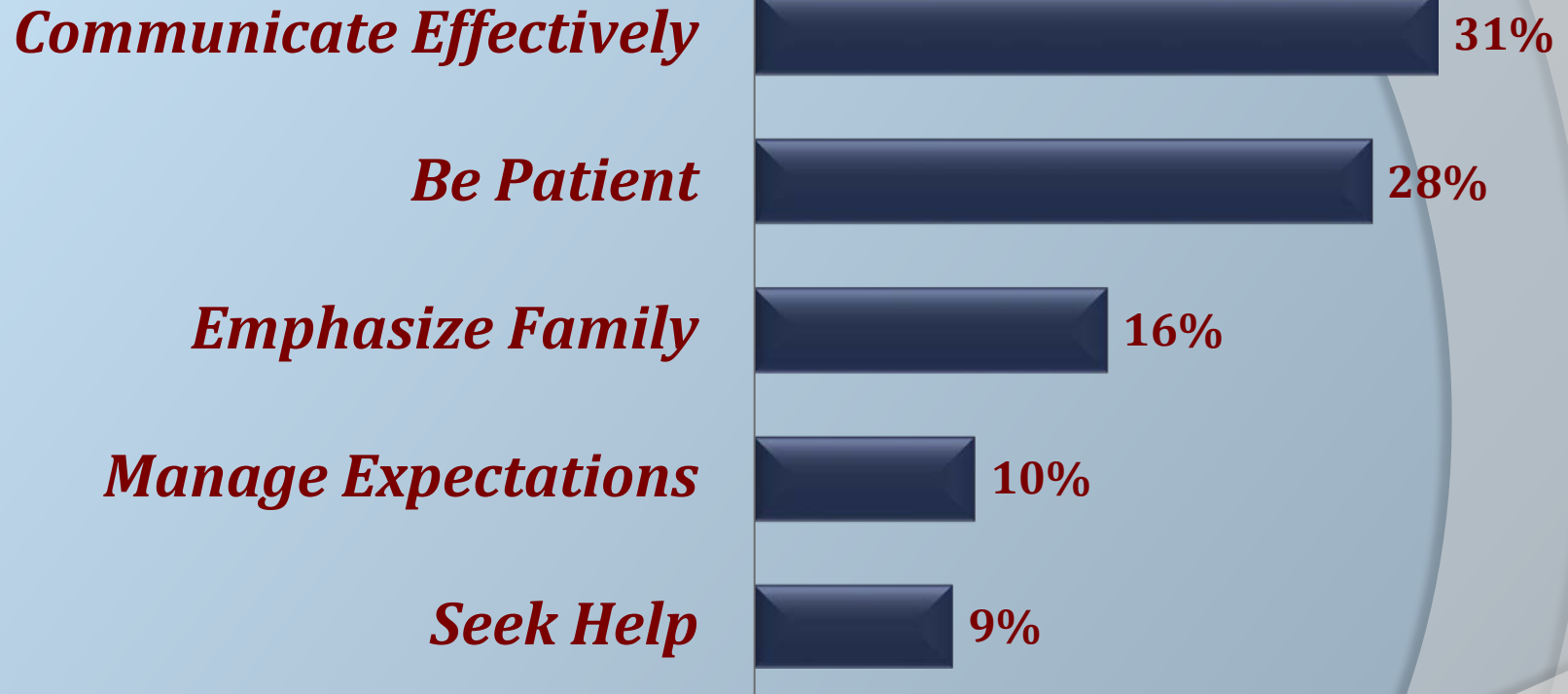


**What pieces of advice  
do military couples give  
for transitioning effectively?**





# Advice for Reintegration



# Advice for Reintegration

## 1. Communicate Effectively

*Communicate, communicate, and communicate.*

*You aren't mind readers.*

*Good, bad, or indifferent, you have to understand how your spouse and children feel about everything.*

**- deployed Army husband, 29 years old**

*Be open about as much as possible so you both understand what the other expects.*

**- at-home Army wife, 28 years old**



# Advice for Reintegration

## 2. Be Patient

*Ease back in.*

**- deployed Air National Guard husband, 36 years old**

*Take your time, don't rush anything, take it step by step.*

*If he needs space in the beginning, give him the space.*

*When he is ready he will come to you.*

**- at-home Army wife, 32 years old**

# Advice for Reintegration

## 3. Emphasize Family

*Fight for good family and spouse time, no matter what it takes.*

*Don't fall victim to other priorities.*

**- deployed Air National Guard husband, 42 years old**

*Make sure to leave time to spend together  
to get to know each other again.*

*One-on-one time will help a lot.*

**- deployed Army husband, 30 years old**

# Advice for Reintegration

## 4. Manage Expectations

*Don't come back expecting  
everything and everyone to be the same.*

**- deployed Army husband, 41 years old**

*No one is perfect,  
so don't expect it from yourself or the ones you love.*

**- deployed Army National Guard husband, 42 years old**

# Advice for Reintegration

## 5. Seek Help

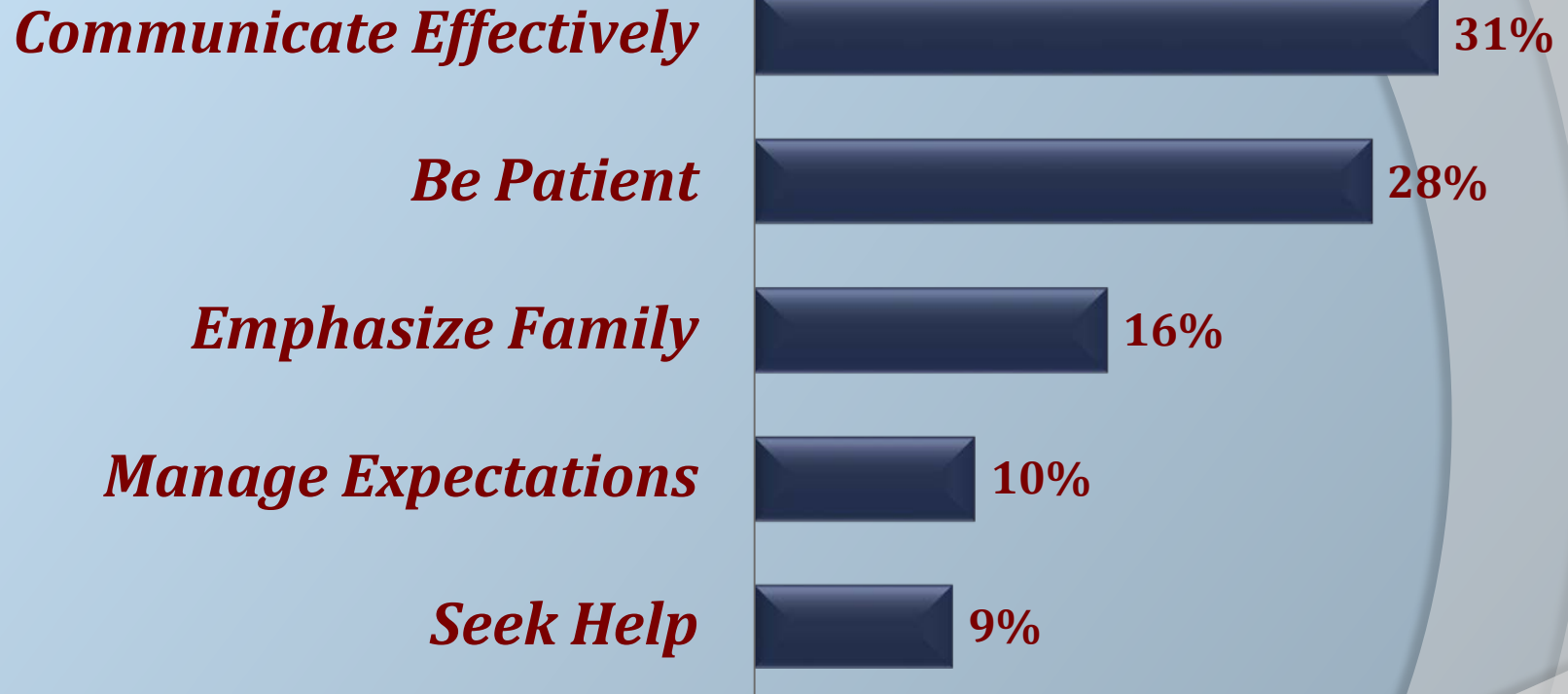
*Don't be afraid to ask for help.*

**- at-home Army National Guard wife, 28 years old**

*If your partner isn't willing to go to counseling to figure out what is wrong, go without them and help yourself. It will help the relationship out before it ruins it.*

**- deployed Army National Guard husband, 31 years old**

# Advice for Reintegration





# Reunion Resources for Young Children

## Sesame Street for Military Families

**Bilingual website with multimedia resources on deployment and homecoming for preschool children.**

## ZERO TO THREE

**Nonprofit organization providing tools, videos, and resources for military parents and professionals.**

# Reunion Resources for Older Children

## **Military Kids Connect**

**Online community for military children ages 6 to 17 who are dealing with the challenges of military life.**

## **Military Youth Coping with Separation**

**Video program available on the Military OneSource website.**

## **Our Military Kids**

**Nonprofit organization that provides activity grants to youth from National Guard and reserve families.**

# Reunion Resources for Parents

## Military OneSource

**DoD website clearinghouse with resources on all aspects of military life, including reunion after deployment.**

## Welcome Back Parenting

**Website with age-appropriate information for parenting after deployment hosted by the University of Michigan.**

## Real Warriors

**DoD-sponsored clearinghouse with mental health and parenting resources for military families.**

# **Reunion Resources for Parents**

## **Building Resiliency Skills during Deployments & Transitions**

**Workshop offered by MCEC Parent-to-Parent group.**

## **After Deployment: Adaptive Parenting Tools**

**In-person and online parenting skills program offered by the University of Minnesota.**

## **Families Overcoming Under Stress**

**Online and face-to-face resiliency training for military children and families.**



# Reunion Resources for Couples

## Strong Bonds for Couples

**Army chaplain-led program to build relationship skills for couples. Open to all military branches.**

## Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program

**DoD-sponsored events and activities for National Guard and Reserve service members and their families.**

## REBOOT Combat Recovery

**Faith-based 12-week course for service members and spouses impacted by combat trauma.**

# Reunion Resources for Mental Health

## Give an Hour

**Nonprofit organization that provides free mental health care for returning service members and their families.**

## Coaching into Care

**VA program that offers callers free and confidential coaching to help motivate a service member to seek care.**

## [AfterDeployment.dcoe.mil](https://AfterDeployment.dcoe.mil)

**Behavioral health resource supporting military families with common post-deployment challenges.**

# **Reunion Resources for Educators**

## **The Journey from “Welcome Home” to Now**

**Continuing education credit course offered by MCEC in online and face-to-face versions.**

## **Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness**

**Database of interventions, webinars, videos, and resources provided by Pennsylvania State University.**

## **Military REACH**

**Professional development resources, research, and outreach sponsored by the University of Minnesota.**

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