

Deployment Stress

By Jim Kendall, LCSW

Thousands of loved ones are being called to serve their country. With a war now as a reality, the men and women called to duty as well as their families are subject to anxiety and "deployment stress". Sixty-nine Vanderbilt faculty and staff members are known to be active reservists. As of 3/7/2003, 14 had received the call to report for duty. Fifty-five others were awaiting the word. There isn't a count of the Vanderbilt families (spouses, partners, children, parents, siblings or in-laws) who are affected by deployment, but each of them is significantly impacted.

Uncertainty, ambiguity, anticipation and an "indefinite duration" are terms that emphasize the plight of those deployed. Research shows that lack of control, lack of predictability, and lack of outlets for frustration are major critical factors in determining stress. Stress is the response to a stressor, which in this case includes a major life change of the soldier who is deployed and the family and loved ones left behind. Life as it was known could be on hold regardless of where you are in a budding career, schooling or family relationships. There is a fear of the unknown and potential of facing death, injury or disability. The real possibility of chemical agents and biological warfare adds an extra set of unknowns. In contrast, there can also be the exhilaration and adrenaline rush of deployment and patriotism of defending one's country.

The stress of war can leave us with unanticipated symptoms. Sleep disturbance, an inability to concentrate, preoccupation with the news, rapid heart beat, a sense of dread, anxiety and other powerful emotions. Talking about your fears and stress can often be helpful. Exercise, involvement in activities and talking control of the things you can (limiting the time you focus on the news) can be useful techniques to manage your stress.

For those left behind, changes in family roles have been forced upon them. This is stressful! For some, this will represent a trigger factor for the development of a clinical depression. For others who were impacted by the Gulf War deployment in 1990-91, there can be thoughts and feelings that are triggered by the 2003 events.

There are practical things that have been effective for those who are dealing with the stress and anxiety of having a loved one called to arms. Paul Ragan, MD, psychiatrist and former Gulf War participant give the following suggestions:

1. It is important to talk about your feelings, fears and concerns. Talking about the way the deployment impacts you as a family member doesn't make you less patriotic or less strong.
2. Get with others who are in a similar situation. People who share experiences together feel a bond and can often be a source of support. People who are the most isolated are the most at risk for developing persistent anxiety or stress disorders.
3. Writing letters, poems, or journaling can be helpful.

4. Massages, meditation or yoga may help you relax. An active person may need to be out running, dancing or climbing rocks.
5. Trying to do something you think is constructive-such as giving blood, can also give purpose.

While the return of our men and woman will be filled with excitement and anticipation, our soldiers will also experience another source of stress. During the deployment, work and other activities were covered by those left behind. Upon re-entry, the deployed soldier expects to resume life as it was prior to deployment. In the workplace duties will have shifted and in the home roles and responsibilities may have been reassigned. Psychologically, it will be important to recognize these stresses and work through them on the front-end before the stress gives rise to depression or anger.

If you are a Vanderbilt employee and spouses needing someone to talk with about your individual concerns, call the Work/Life Connections-EAP at 936-1327.