

Guidelines: What Do Partners/Relatives Say & Do After The Vet Returns From Deployment?¹

raymond.scurfield@usm.edu 228.867-8766

Raymond M Scurfield, DSW, LCSW

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There is no adequate “cookbook recipe” of do’s and don’ts that all families of all veterans returned from deployment should do and not do. This is for a very simple reason: no one can package a bottle that contains “the appropriate response to suffering.”² And words intended for everyone will almost prove worthless.

*For one individual person, if you go to the sufferers themselves and ask for helpful words, you may find discord. Some recall a friend who cheerily helped distract them from the illness, while others think such an approach insulting. Some want honest, straightforward confrontation; others find such discussion unbearably depressing.*³

Thus, the following are offered in the spirit of a general set of principles or precepts. You must consider how any of the following guidelines may fit or not and is relevant or not for you and your family and for the military partner/veteran returned from deployment.

“I am here for you.” Never underestimate the power, even if it is not immediately noticeable, of simply communicating with your veteran partner through words and actions that you are available, you are here for him/her. This is a most powerful gift to offer to your military or veteran spouse, in that:

*People who are suffering oftentimes feel an oppressive sense of aloneness. They feel abandoned, by God and also by others, because they must bear that pain alone and no one else quite understands. Loneliness increases the fear, which in turn increases the pain, and downward the spiral goes*⁴

What a crisis brings out. The development of stresses and strains following the veteran’s return from deployment, even the most severe problems that are war-related, will not necessarily result in disaster or a splintering apart of the relationship and the family. Nor will it necessarily result in the family pulling together and becoming closer and stronger.

*When a couple presents a crisis, it magnifies what’s already present in their relationship . . . the crisis of the illness merely brought to the surface and intensified feelings already present.*⁵

“It’s all because of the war.” In my clinical work with hundreds of veterans of all wars over the past three decades, I have noticed how many vets and family members strongly over-endorse the source of any post-war problems to be the war and the transition back home, period. “I’m this way because of the war,” or “It’s because of the war.” What typically is missing from many veteran’s and families’ thinking and beliefs is to also consider the important role that their life *before* the war may have played *and* how there may be very significant experiences post-war that help to shape current issues and dynamics.⁶

¹ Scurfield, R.M. (2006). *War Trauma: Lessons Unlearned From Vietnam to Iraq. Vol. 3 of a Vietnam Trilogy* [New York: Algora Publishing]

² I am indebted to the writing of Philip Yancey for the important general principles that I emphasize before getting into the specifics of relating to veterans who have returned from war-zone deployment. See: *Where is God When It Hurts? A comforting healing guide for coping with hard times*. Grand raids, MI: Zondevan, 1990.

³ Ibid, p. 168.

⁴ Ibid, p. 173.

⁵ Ibid, p. 164.

⁶ I have used the “blank tablet metaphor” to get this critically important point across:

Pre-deployment factors become inextricably mixed together with the remarkable highs and depths of the experiences of war. And all that, together, comes home with the veteran and into the family. Such long-standing issues and problems will require their own attention and must not be ignored or subsumed by focusing entirely onto the veteran's war-related problems as "the" problem.

The partner back home, the children, significant extended family members all also have their unique combinations of pre-war characteristics, strengths and problems. These inevitably become intermingled with their life experiences while the veteran has been deployed. And, similar to the veteran, their combination of pre-deployment and life experiences and characteristics and patterns during the partner's absence while on deployment now come face-to-face with the returned veteran who has been extraordinarily impacted by war.

What are your reactions to the veteran being home?

To be of optimal help to your veteran partner, you first must understand what *your* primary needs and wants are right now, as you and the family are readjusting to the veteran being back and adjusting to someone who has been profoundly touched by war.

- Are you resentful, relieved, entrenched in daily habits developed while your veteran partner was deployed, resistant or very ambivalent that your veteran partner has disturbed whatever homeostasis you had achieved in his/her absence?
- Do you want to just drop all the responsibilities onto your veteran partner, because you are exhausted and angry and needy and want your own space that was impossible to have while your partner was deployed?
- Are you so happy to have him/her back that you choose to bury or deflect all or most of your or the family's pent-up feelings and issues and defer to your veteran partner's needs and wants?
- Do you have really mixed feelings about your military spouse being back now? Perhaps you are missing the freedom, that life was perhaps actually simpler in some or many ways, with fewer hassles and explaining to do, when your spouse was not around. [Sometimes my wife tells me, when I might hover around her too closely in the kitchen or in the bedroom when she wants her personal time, that "I am taking her oxygen." ☺] *And*, you are *very glad* that he or she is back. Yes, for some, absence does make the heart grow fonder.
- On the other hand, there are military personnel and their spouses who realize they at least partly actually *prefer* that they are separated by periodic deployment. And indeed, for some, their relationship and their lives work as well as they do precisely because there are periodic deployments—and both partners (or only one) prefers it this way.

*Let's be very clear. No one went to war as a "blank tablet." No one. We all went as some-one, as some-body. We all had personalities, strengths and shortcomings, values, beliefs, prejudices, relationships, successes, problems, issues and dreams. And you, this some-body, entered the military and went to war. And you brought inside of you to the war all of those personality characteristics, strengths and shortcomings, values, beliefs, prejudices, relationships, successes, problems, issues and dreams with you---we all did. And what we brought with us to the war somehow interacted with what each of us experienced during the war, resulting in unique combinations arising out of who were before the war and during war. And so, there is no way to begin to understand the possible impact of war unless you have a clear sense of your personality before, during and following exposure to war trauma---both those aspects that changed and just as importantly, those aspects that remained the same or seemed to go underground during the war but reappeared later. See R.M. Scurfield, "Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Vietnam Veterans," in J.P. Wilson & B. Raphael (Eds.), *International Handbook of Traumatic Stress Syndromes* (879-888). New York: Plenum Press, 1993; and R.M. Scurfield, "War-related trauma: An integrative experiential, cognitive and spiritual approach," in M.B. Williams & J.F. Sommer (Eds.), *Handbook of Post-Traumatic Therapy* (179-204), Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1994.*

What is going on with your veteran returned from deployment?

Of course, you also must pay close attention to what is going on with your veteran partner recently returned from deployment overseas.

- The vast majority of veterans who are recently returned from war appear to be all right, do not want to dwell on what has happened to them while they were in the war, don't want to spend much time talking about it, thinking about it, or feeling about it. Rather, they want to put it aside, deflect it or bury it and get their lives back. This is normal and expectable.
- There is a substantial sub-group of returned veterans who remain totally or partially preoccupied with the war and what happened, are obviously impacted about what they have experienced, are either sorely troubled and/or become quite isolated. Ironically, most of this group, similar to the first group, also does not want to dwell on it, don't want to talk about it, think about it, or feel about it. They too want to put it aside, deflect it, bury it, as a way to get their lives back to normal.
 - There is a third sub-group who revel in/savor the war, miss it, yearn for it, talk or think about it a lot—to the point that it interferes with living in the here-and-now with you. This group is probably very resistant to changing anything about themselves, may not really like much about normal civilian life, and make it very difficult for you to connect with them in a meaningful way. Or, they feel stuck and don't know how to ask for help.

The Balancing Act

A smooth and successful readjustment may require a remarkable balancing act by both the returned service member and the family.

- The veteran is responsible to be aware of when he or she is struggling with deployment-related issues and problems, and doing something about it. However, the service member may be in denial about this.
- And so, the family may have to decide if it is necessary to confront the service member about his/her denial and/or do a balancing or juggling act to some degree between and amongst the array of competing needs and wants of the veteran, partner, any children and any involved extended family members.
- The family may have to decide if you are willing to do what you have to do to stay---or get---skilled at balancing patience and persistence, diplomacy and assertiveness, and giving to your veteran partner while also being vigilant to taking care of your and your family's needs and wants. This is not an easy row to hoe, and why getting assistance and support for you may be very advisable.

What to say or do now that the veteran has returned home? 21 Do's & Do Not's

Just what is the family to say and do in regard to a veteran who has recently returned from deployment and who appears to be quite different, appears to have been significantly impacted by the war? Should the partner and family remain silent and just avoid talking with the returned active duty about these noticeable changes (that are negative) in the hope that he/she eventually will revert back to how he/she was before being deployed? Also, there could be *positive* changes (discussed later).

The Do Not's

- *Do not say*, “I understand,” or “I know you feel.” No, you don’t. If you were not in war, you don’t understand. Period.⁷ However, you may well understand from your own life experience how it feels to not want to talk to anyone, or how it is to feel that no one will be able to understand about something you have experienced, or how you may have hoped if you could just ignore something festering inside you that it would eventually go away.
- *Do not push or insist* that your vet talk about the war if he/she does not want to. It is too sacred a subject to attempt to pry the details out of someone---you are trampling on hallowed ground.
- *Do not say*, “Did you kill anybody?” Or, “How did it feel to kill someone?” If the vet wants to share this, the vet will share it. Otherwise, this is received as an invasive and unwanted demand for the most extremely personal of information.
- *Don’t take it personally* when your veteran does not want to talk about it. That you are not a combat veteran is important; your veteran partner will probably be, by far, most comfortable talking about the war experiences in any detail with another combat veteran. It is crucial to remember that the vast majority of war veterans feel that *no one but other combat veterans could possibly understand*.

Also, the veteran may be very concerned about “taking the lid off” of all the marked and severe pent-up feelings and memories that have been buried. Because, you see, the fear is, “If I open the lid (of the memories, emotions, trauma) I may not be able to put it back on again.”⁸ This reluctance to want to open the lid because of the preoccupation with *fear that you won’t be able to cover it over again* is why there are a number of other war veterans who just don’t want to talk much to anybody, not even to other vets, about what happened in the war. As one such Vietnam veteran told me:

When I got back from Nam, the only people I could relate to were other Vietnam vets---and they were the last ones I wanted to be around.

- *Don’t make ultimatums or threats* that have severe consequences and deadlines attached to them unless you are absolutely at the end of your willingness to wait, like, “you need to get it together now, it’s been ___ weeks or ___ months of being withdrawn, moping around, etc. If you don’t go see a counselor this week, I’m going to leave you.” Big mistake; most combat vets do not respond very positively to threats. This isn’t a poker game where bluffing and deception go hand-in-hand with winning.
- *Don’t try to lay a guilt trip* on your vet about how it’s time to stop being so self centered or it is a test of your relationship, i.e., “If you really loved me, you would share more with me” or, if you really loved me, you would understand what’s going on inside me.” Your veteran partner already may have guilt about what he/she did or did not do in the war or about the hardships you and the family may have gone through while he/she was deployed.⁹
- *Do not ignore warning or trouble signs in your vet* that there is stuff going on inside or behaviors that indicate potentially serious problems---such as excessive drinking, isolating, a deep-seated rage, mood swings, anxiety and sleep disturbance. You need to point such things out, but not dwell on them, at least for awhile, depending on how severe such problems are.

⁷ The exception being those care providers and others who have spent an inordinate amount of time talking with and relating to various war veterans and who have been allowed into the veteran’s hallowed inner circle.

⁸ This preoccupation with fear is that if you get fully in touch with the underlying emotions and memories about the (war) trauma, you will become so angry that you will hurt someone, or so sad that you will not be able to stop crying, or so full of the memories and thoughts that you will go crazy. This is an extremely important legacy of trauma that the *DSM-IV-TR* does not recognize as a PTSD symptom as I describe in *A Vietnam Trilogy*.

⁹ Understanding and treating guilt and shame issues are the main topics of the following chapter.

- *Do not ignore your own needs and wants.* You are a person who has the right to have at least some of your needs and wants met, no matter how troubled your veteran partner is. And so do your children and perhaps important extended family members such as parents or siblings.
- *Do not ever allow your veteran partner* to treat you meanly, or disrespectfully, or in a threatening way—to include screaming, yelling and threatening behaviors. And absolutely do not ever tolerate your veteran partner hurting you or your family. Violence in war is one thing. But to bring it back into the home is quite another matter; it is *never* excusable. If you can't protect yourself or your family, then immediately go talk to someone who can help you.

The Do's

- *Do remember to reach down deep within and get and stay in touch with the love* that you have for your veteran---even if it is love more for how he or she was before deployment than how he or she is behaving right now.
- *Do remember that it is your relationship* that should be at least as important as the individual needs and wants of each of you; what is best for your relationship right now, not what is best for you or what is best for your veteran partner.¹⁰
- *Do hold hands and look each other in the eyes.* Suggestion: If you and your partner are having a serious argument or harsh words or tempers are rising, both of you stop. Be silent for a moment, compose yourselves, stand in front of each other, hold hands, look in each other's eyes, and start talking to each other while continuing to hold hands and looking in each other's eyes. You almost surely will calm down and *start relating to* each other rather than talking meanly *at* each other.
- *Do be out front by saying:* Do you want to talk a little with me about the war? Are you willing to share with me some of the good times, some of the bad times? If not now, possibly later? And I need to be able to ask you these same questions again at another time, because otherwise you may never come to me first and start talking about it. Tell me the best way to approach you.
- *Do remind your vet partner about the literature you have in the house* describing the warning signs and triggers about post traumatic stress and lingering combat stress reactions and that are reminding you of him or her. If you don't have such literature, get some ASAP from a military family support agency or ombudsman/family support volunteer, a partner support group, a VA Vet Center or a Veteran's Service Organization; become familiar with the contents.¹¹
- *Do recognize that your veteran partner may well be very resistant* to going to talk to anyone, including you, about what is going on. The veteran may not respond positively to your suggestions today or tomorrow or next week, and so you have to be both persistent and diplomatic/gentle in continuing to bring up your concerns.
- *Do say:* I know I can't fully or perhaps at all understand what is going on with you, because I wasn't there in the war.
- *Do say* (if you genuinely mean it). I really do want to better understand, and request that you help me better understand. If you don't tell me anything, then you are shutting me out and it will be impossible for me to ever really understand. Please don't shut me out completely.
- *Do ask your vet:* Are there any books, articles or other readings about war and what happens in war, or any movies/songs/music that are personally meaningful that you could recommend to me that could give me at least a little better understanding of what it was all about, about what was so meaningful for you? And then I would like to talk with you a little about it. [Many vets will be much more comfortable with you learning in this manner, rather than you expecting your veteran partner to talk in great detail and express heavy pent-up emotions.]

¹⁰ See W. Glasser, *Choice Theory*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998.

¹¹ See also the VA National Center *Iraq War Clinician Guide*.

- *Do say:* Please let me know when it feels like I'm trying to pry you open and you feel that I am trying to invade into your most deep and personal feelings and issues. I really want you to tell me that gently, in a respectful way. And that goes both ways. I am going to let you know when you may say something offensive to me, or that hurts me, or when it feels like you're trying to invade my most deep and personal feelings and issues. I want to tell you that gently, in a respectful way.
- *Do say:* I'm here for you. And I want you to be here for me, even if you can't be here for me as much right now as I want you to. Because I am in this for the long haul. [However, if you are having serious doubts that you still committed to this relationship, then that is another matter entirely that requires immediate attention.]
- *And do put on your oxygen mask first.*¹² This is the bottom line do or don't—to first take care of yourself. As we all know, the proper procedure on an airplane when the oxygen masks drop down is to put your oxygen mask on first; otherwise you will be in no position to help anyone else. The same principle applies to you at home. Seek help if you are hurting, whether or not your veteran partner does and whether or not your veteran partner wants you to. This is your right. And one of the most powerful sources of support and understanding will be with and from other military spouses whose spouses who have returned from deployment.

Two Truths

When all is said and done, *perhaps the two most important truths to remember* are that:

- war *always* has a long-standing impact on all combatants and others who serve in a war-zone or are interacting directly with troops evacuated out of the war zone
- this impact is brought home and absolutely will have a significant impact on the veteran, you (the veteran's partner), children and significant extended family members.

No amount of hoping will wish this reality away. And if you and your veteran partner are not able or willing to deal with it today or tomorrow or next week or next month, it almost surely will still be an issue and then even more entrenched and complicated several months from now or next year or next decade---if you are still together at that point.

Some Resources for You

You are encouraged to:

- read some the excellent writings that focus on the dynamics of families of veterans mentioned earlier¹³
- visit some of the web sites established regarding children of veterans¹⁴
- and web sites regarding wives or families of veterans.¹⁵

¹² This is an expression applied by Charles Figley, School of Social Work, Florida State University, to self-care for clinicians who work with trauma survivors. It also is very appropriate for family members of veterans.

¹³ Mason, 1990; Matsakis, 1996, 1998.

¹⁴ See, for example, the web sites "Children of Vietnam Veterans," "Children of Veterans with PTSD," Zero To Three, "Sons and Daughters in Touch" (of a parent who was killed). A Google search on February 12, 2005, under "Veteran's Children" produced 320,000 hits; and a search of "Veterans Children" (no apostrophe in "Veterans") produced 550,000 hits. A Google search for "Veterans Children's Groups" produced 1,550,000 hits.

¹⁵ See, for example, the web sites "National Military Family Association," "Motherspeak," "Occupation Watch," "Veterans & Families," "Vet Wives," "Army Wives," "Navy Wives," "Proud Air Force Wives," "Support4Military Wives," "Soldier's Moms," "Marine Moms," "Home Front Support Web," "Veterans for Peace" and "Raging Grannies." A Google search on 12 February under "Veteran's Wives" produced 16,400 hits that included vet wives e-mail lists, organizations,

It is critically important not to be a “lone ranger.”

- If you are family of a veteran still on active duty, please contact a military family support center or community service center, military base ombudsman or family readiness group, wives support group or military chaplain.
- If you are family of a veteran who is no longer on active duty, contact the local VA Vet Center, VA social work department, VA specialized PTSD program, or county or state veteran’s service officer or veteran’s service organization representative who can refer you for family assistance.

The Possible Positive Impact of War and Deployment

In closing, it is important to note that the preceding discussion emphasizes the potential and actual negative impact, both short and longer-term, of being in war---because this amount of information typically is never given routinely or comprehensively. There is a whole other side---the remarkable positives, the extraordinary valor, strengths, comradeship, heroism, and humanity that can characterize what goes on in wars, and can be brought home and remain a powerful positive within many veterans.

In the words of an Iraq veteran: These two deployments have taught me a degree of patience and tolerance that I never thought possible. I have been forced to live in terribly deprived conditions and with ungodly levels of frustration and uncertainty, far more than in any arena of my life as I knew it before OEF and OIF. I have learned to live without the most basic comforts of life for months on end, without privacy and with restrictions I have never known before . . . I have learned to appreciate why freedom has a tremendously high cost. I am grateful to be among the finest in this struggle to bring democracy to the people of Iraq so that someday they can live as we do in America. ¹⁶

Families may be blessed with discovering, developing or enhancing strengths within themselves and in ways that might not have happened otherwise—such as resilience/personal strength, self-confidence and a very positive identity as a military family or as the family of a veteran, proud of the service their spouse, parent or sibling has given to our country, and the sacrifices made both by the active duty military person or veteran and by the family. Indeed, both the returned veteran and the family may foster a strength, courage, pride, perspective and grace that are profound. They truly know what the price of freedom is, they are doing their part, and it is not free.

In the words of a spouse of an Iraq veteran: I discovered that I really could do it! By and large, I’ve done a darn good job of taking care of myself and our family. I am stronger than I had given myself credit for before. And I’m so glad that my partner is back.

END

veteran wives hotlines, handbooks, veteran’s wives groups, state organizations, etc. See also *Veterans and Families Guides to Recovery from PTSD* (by Stephanie Lanham), Patriot Outreach, Hand2Hand Contact and Zero To Three.

¹⁶ Platoni, 2005.