



FIELD PROBLEMS

Providing Real Answers to Issues of Today's Military Families

A Syndicated Question & Answer Column by
Tara Crooks & Starlett Henderson



Field Problem – Marital Stress

My husband is an Army Reservist and has been home from his 14-month deployment to Iraq for more than a year. Over this period of time, he has become increasingly distant and critical. He refuses to participate in the routines of family life without my constant appeal. He has no one here with whom he shared his Iraq experience to talk to, and he certainly has no desire to talk to me. Our family life is in constant chaos.

Truly, at this point, the only reason I am staying is so that I can continue to be home with my son. I am torn between the choice of holding on here for just a little bit longer and moving on, hoping that something will move my husband to some state of compassion for his family and spur him to begin the process of working toward a better family life. I never imagined I would end up not having more children with this man, contemplating divorce, and facing a reality of divided custody with our son.

Thank you for listening. Can you provide any suggestions?

Kelly, VA, Army Reserve Spouse, 7 years

Dear Kelly:

We are sorry to hear of your situation. You both are in the company of countless other veterans and their families that have really taken blows to their esteem and emotions. Marital issues are more prominent hence there are more resources becoming available in response to these problems. The best advice we can offer is to be informed about all available options and to continue to press communication with your husband. It would be sad, if he is in a stupor, for him to wake up one day and not find you there and honestly say that he didn't know.

But, how do you communicate with someone who does not want to talk? For instance men — and soldiers especially — are typically resistant to talk therapy or counseling because of the stigma, image issues, etc. However, that resistance brings about many of the symptoms you mentioned: frustration, irritability, isolation, criticalness. Those symptoms point to deeply rooted issues that need to be expressed or talked about. Is there a battle buddy, clergy, or family member that can broach the subject of counseling with him? Or could they just plain make it known that he is different, in a "not so good" way. These comments may not be considered as negative when they are not coming from you. Try suggesting the local veterans' office which is a good place to start and may offer individual or group counseling, for soldiers and families.

Veterans are also invited to participate in the Phoenix Project. This Project was begun by the Military Veteran and Family Assistance organization and involves week-long marriage retreats focused on repairing combat affected relationships (check out www.mvfa.org). The Army has had its own success with its marital education program. It is a training program with a culminating retreat known as Strong Bonds (www.strongbonds.org). You may not be able to register for their marriage retreat, but you can view some of the articles and teaching tools. More detailed information on the curriculum used for these types of events can be found at the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) website

(www.prepinc.com).

A retreat may entice your husband more than a counseling session because it has a beginning and an end and there is safety in numbers. Both retreats that we mentioned would have other military members that are going through similar things, so that could be a draw as well.

Also, there are some books that you and he can read together. We suggest “*Surviving Deployment*,” “*Courage After Fire*,” “*The 5 Love Languages*,” and “*The Secrets of Happily Married Men*.” This practice called bibliotherapy has numerous benefits. (Keep in mind that it’s most effective when used in conjunction with a counseling plan.) Reading the books and talking about them with you or in other groups provides for shared experiences, which may break the feelings of isolation. The stories themselves (or non-fiction texts) provide insight into how other individuals managed — in this case — redeployment, reintegration, or marital problems. At the very least, the process may be able to stimulate discussion and give you both a framework for talking about your issues. In this age of the Internet, most books are accompanied by a website that has additional materials and perhaps even a touring schedule of the author. Consider all of these avenues of getting your hands on this helpful information.

You must address the marital stress but also do a mental health assessment to identify whether or not there are additional issues that must be addressed, such as PTSD or substance abuse. Don’t delay in dealing with this issue. It is important to be rational — but direct and indignant — especially if you have hopes to work towards amends. Irrational behavior and categorically judging your husband’s behavior may only cause hurtful feelings from which your husband may not recover. That is not to say that you do not have every reason to be upset and irrational; just consider enlisting some emotional, professional, informed support through this trying time.

This website: <http://guardfamily.org/Public/Application/ResourceFinderSearch.aspx> may also be of some assistance in finding other resources in your area. We are hopeful that moving forward with one of these resources helps you move towards a happy and healthy marriage.

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