Making sense of the Emotional Cycle of Deployment
Deployment can be an emotional experience. Understanding the stages and the feelings involved can help.

The Emotional Cycle of Deployment is a model that was developed for Naval families by Kathleen Vestal Logan in 1987 and published in Proceedings Magazine. While times have moved on and operating patterns have changed, it is still a helpful tool in understanding and explaining changes in feelings and behaviour resulting from deployment. There will be individual differences in how people feel, and each deployment will be different.

Here is a summary of the feelings and behaviours that are common for couples during different stages of the deployment cycle. You might want to show this to your partner, to others in your support network, or to someone you know who is experiencing these changes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>When does it happen?</th>
<th>How you and/or your loved ones may be feeling:</th>
<th>Common behaviours:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1           | Anticipation of loss        | 4-6 weeks before deployment | Increased tension  
Pressure to get stuff done/time slipping away  
Worry  
Unexpressed anger  
Restlessness  
Irritability  
Guilt (partner who is leaving)  
Resentment (partner who is staying) | Being busy  
Cramming in projects  
Increased arguments  
Bickering  
Organising family visits & social events  
Unexpected tears over small things  
Thinking about ways to help children manage the separation |
| 2           | Detachment & withdrawal     | Final days before departure | Sadness  
Fatigue  
Emotional detachment  
Withdrawal  
Ambivalence about sexual intimacy (feeling like you should, but also wanting to keep at a distance)  
Guilt  
Impatience to ‘get on with it’  
Frustration (particularly if departure is delayed) | Partners may stop sharing thoughts & feelings with each other  
Difficulties in communicating  
Focusing on individual tasks  
Having sex because it’s your last chance/avoiding sex altogether |
| 3           | Emotional disorganisation    | Early days after departure | Shock  
Relief (may be followed with guilt at feeling relieved)  
Numbness  
Pain  
Loneliness  
Sense of disruption  
Confusion  
Sense of being overwhelmed | Difficulty sleeping (responsible for ‘security’) or excessive sleeping  
Withdrawal from friends and neighbours  
Self-medicating with alcohol or food  
Doing tasks outside your comfort zone that your partner would normally do |
|   | Recovery & stabilisation | Second month after departure onwards | Increased confidence and independence  
Isolation can still cause sense of vulnerability  
Pride in ability to manage alone  
Feeling a bit asexual – lack of contact with sexual partner | Settling into a routine  
Establishment of new family patterns  
Being more outwardly independent  
Cultivating new friends and sources of support  
Stretching self and abilities  
Finding new skills |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | Anticipation of homecoming | One to two months before return | Joy and excitement  
Apprehension  
Nervousness  
Worries about effect that return will have  
Worries about how you will feel about each other  
Worries about what the other partner will think about decisions and actions that have been taken  
Sense of running out of time to get the ‘deployment list’ completed | Questioning and re-evaluating the relationship  
Preparing by doing household jobs and personal care (uncharacteristically 1950s-style cleaning, waxing!)  
Preparations for the homecoming  
Big decisions may be postponed until the homecoming |
| 6 | Renegotiation of the relationship contract | Early days after homecoming | Adjustment from being ‘single’ to behaving like partners  
Sense of a loss of freedom and independence – having to be answerable to another person  
Resentment  
‘Home-based’ partner feeling out of control  
‘Home-based’ partner feeling protective of children  
Returning partner feeling out of place in their own home  
Sex may initially feel weird – there can be a sense of ‘entitlement’ not matched by feelings of intimacy  
Can be both joyful and difficult | Adjusting priorities and loyalties in relationships – from ‘oppos’ on board/friends/support network to partner/spouse  
Changes to family routines and activities  
Too much togetherness causing friction  
Roles and responsibilities being renegotiated and changing  
Clash of parenting styles, renegotiation of joint approaches  
Talking about issues as they come up, having the first ‘Big Argument’ |
| 7 | Reintegration & stabilisation | 4-6 weeks after homecoming (sometimes longer depending on type of deployment/separation) | Beginning of sense of being back together as a family  
Enjoying more warmth and closeness  
Sense of normality  
Being more relaxed and comfortable with each other  
Back on track emotionally | New routines being established  
Partners talking about ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’ instead of ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘my’  
Planning ahead  
Returning to a more balanced social life including extended family, mutual friends and individual activities |
It is important to say that deployment is not always necessarily a negative experience for either partner. There can be complex feelings involved, but feelings themselves are neither good nor bad, they just are. It is okay to feel whatever you feel – it doesn’t mean that your relationship is doomed or that it is your partner’s fault. There is nothing inherently bad about feeling angry, for example. It is what we do with our anger that can be positive or negative. Sometimes it can galvanise us to talk with our partner and sort out an issue. RN and RM families may be living with challenging situations at times, but this does not mean that they cannot have healthy and positive relationships.

The unique nature of Service life can actually drive some couples to be more consciously aware of their feelings and reactions, and to put greater emphasis on cultivating and nurturing their relationships. Knowing that what you are experiencing is normal and natural can be reassuring and help you to accept and work through challenges. Not every conflict is a sign of a deteriorating relationship – some conflict is inevitable and healthy. Having to negotiate challenges and change can actually strengthen and enhance the bond between partners and family units.

If you are feeling ‘stuck’ or you want to learn more about keeping your relationship strong, you can get free relationship support, funded by RNRMC, from Relate. This can be face-to-face, by telephone, webcam or live chat, even if you are deployed overseas. Contact Relate’s dedicated helpline for the RN and RM community on 01302 380 279 or visit www.relate.org.uk.