



# How to Help Military & Veteran Families

Before, During and After Deployment

FOR EXTENDED FAMILIES, FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

Military personnel and their families are rooted in the heart of communities across the country. Every day, these men and women answer the call to serve our country and support whatever mission they are assigned. Military families can face intense challenges under normal circumstances. Additional stressors come along with separation, such as concerns for the safety of a deployed loved one and the well-being of those left behind.<sup>1</sup> When service members return from deployment, the challenges don't end. Families may encounter mixed feelings, and these emotions can make reunions both joyful and trying. Whether service members are single, living alone or with parents, married, with or without children, they rely on support networks to help ease the anxieties involved. Assistance from extended family, friends and neighbors is critical and can have a lasting impact on service members and those closest to them.



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### Did you know?

- » Since 2001, nearly 2.5 million service members of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard and related National Guard and Reserve Component units have been deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq, according to Department of Defense data.<sup>2</sup> Combat deployments have exposed troops to extreme physical and psychological stressors, while families deal with their own deployment-related experiences.<sup>3</sup>
- » Research shows 70 percent of military families live in civilian communities—not on military installations.<sup>4</sup>
- » Studies have linked better mental health outcomes with increased levels of social support, which includes relationships with extended families, friends, neighbors and others.<sup>5</sup>
- » According to the National Military Family Association, communication among service members, families and family support providers is essential in dealing with both the separation of a deployment, and preparation for the reunion with the service member.<sup>5</sup>
- » After experiencing a deployment, service members are faced with the reality of family life and the need to fit into new family roles and routines; family members can be both eager and reluctant to get things “back to normal.”<sup>6</sup>
- » In a 2012 survey, 41 percent of military families felt their community did not embrace opportunities to help military children.<sup>7</sup>

## Practical Applications

### BEFORE DEPLOYMENT

- Tell the soon-to-be deployed service member and family how and when you can help them during the deployment.
- Offer a specific type of assistance, such as offering to watch the children once a month or change the oil in the family's vehicles. These small gestures bring a sense of security and allow the family to minimize any potential crisis situations through pre-planning.
- Research shows that maintaining a child's normal routine helps with coping, so offer to help with children's transportation to school and extra-curricular activities.<sup>8</sup>



### DURING DEPLOYMENT

- Send a care package or letter to the deployed military member.
- Be sensitive when discussing personal views on war or the military. Service members deploy as part of their commitment, regardless of the political landscape.
- Deployments can be long and family members will go through many highs and lows during this time. Reach out to the service member's family periodically during the deployment just as you did when the deployment began and follow through with any assistance offered.

### AFTER DEPLOYMENT

- Understand that reintegration is a process, and is different for each service member and family.
- Allow the family some time to be alone and get reacquainted. Competing for attention can be counterproductive and stressful.
- Large events with many people may be stressful for some returning service members. Make sure they are comfortable with any celebration plans and be understanding if they choose to leave early. The transition back to civilian life takes time and patience.
- Do not push service members to discuss what happened during their deployment. This discussion should occur only when and if they are ready and initiate the conversation.
- Tell the military member and family you appreciate their service and sacrifice, and would like to offer assistance and support.

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### Additional Resources

The commitment and support by families, friends and neighbors is critical to keeping military families strong. Building a support system bridges the gap between military families and those they can turn to for help. Sometimes, knowing assistance is a phone call away is enough to help ease stress and create a sense of empowerment and self-confidence. Families, friends and neighbors also help smooth the transition when the military member returns home and begins to reconnect with family and readjust to life at home.



If you do not have a military member in your neighborhood or family, you can still help military families. Volunteer with an organization that provides support for military families or connect with Veteran Service Organizations within your community.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

- » *American Red Cross*, [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)
- » *Blue Star Families*, [www.bluestarfam.org](http://www.bluestarfam.org)
- » *Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness*, [www.militaryfamilies.psu.edu](http://www.militaryfamilies.psu.edu)
- » *Defense Centers of Excellence Outreach*, [www.dcoe.health.mil/24-7help.aspx](http://www.dcoe.health.mil/24-7help.aspx) or call 866-966-1020
- » *Families OverComing Under Stress*, [www.focusproject.org](http://www.focusproject.org)
- » *Joining Forces Initiative*, [www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces](http://www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces)
- » *Military Child Education Coalition*, [www.militarychild.org](http://www.militarychild.org)
- » *Military OneSource*, [www.militaryonesource.mil](http://www.militaryonesource.mil)
- » *National Military Family Association*, [www.militaryfamily.org](http://www.militaryfamily.org)
- » *National Resource Directory*, [www.nationalresourcedirectory.gov](http://www.nationalresourcedirectory.gov)
- » *Operation Homefront*, [www.operationhomefront.net](http://www.operationhomefront.net)
- » *United Services Organizations*, [www.uso.org](http://www.uso.org)
- » *USA Cares*, [www.usacares.org](http://www.usacares.org)

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## About MFRI

The goal of the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University is to create meaningful relationships that bring organizations together in support of military families. Working with researchers and practitioners from both the military and civilian communities, MFRI strives to develop outreach and research programs grounded in scientific evidence.



## About the *How to Help* Series

The *How to Help* series equips communities to better serve service members, veterans and their families. The series offers effective, evidence-based guidance on how best to help military and veteran families given the unique challenges they face. Each *How to Help* addresses a different segment of that community, such as extended family, friends and neighbors; teachers; early childhood educators; faith-based groups; and professional service providers. We hope that by increasing understanding of the unique stresses, obstacles and opportunities that often accompany military service; we can strengthen communities by building their capacity to better support the military families within them.

Developed by THE MILITARY FAMILY RESEARCH INSTITUTE at Purdue University  
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United States Department of Agriculture  
National Institute of Food and Agriculture



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### RESEARCH REFERENCES

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