

IN THE LORD'S SERVICE



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Dealing With Separations In Military Life

In military life separation from family and friends is almost inevitable. In Jacksonville, Florida, where I minister to Navy personnel at the two Naval Air Stations, prolonged separations are a way of life. Deployments can last from six to nine months. While these husbands and fathers are on aircraft carriers and the escort ships in the Mediterranean Sea or the Indian Ocean, their wives and children remain here at home.

How does a Christian deal with such separations? First of all, such prolonged separations are not conducive to normal family living. There is no easy way around it - this type of separation is not good for anyone involved. It is hard to be apart for that long. I had trouble being separated from my family for only two weeks last year.

I can offer no easy "how to's" on dealing with separation, nor am I an "expert" on counseling individuals on dealing with separation. But I have worked with some families going through these prolonged separations and together we have developed a few "tools" that seem to help or at least develop an awareness for dealing with separations.

If at all possible, anticipate these separations and prepare for them well in advance. The Navy gives ample notice to its personnel concerning deployments. There are a few months of "work-ups" before the deployment begins. These work-ups consist of separations from a few days to a month at one time. We use this time to prepare and "equip" the couples for the separation. (The type of separation and length of separation may vary with your individual branch of the service. But I am reasonably sure that regardless of your branch of the service there will be separations involved. The following then is offered as a suggestion and advice for dealing with them.)

One tool we have found to be helpful is called the MARRIAGE INVENTORY. It is a simple form we have developed to use with couples in counseling them before separations. On the next page is a copy of the MARRIAGE INVENTORY.

Library Address

MARRIAGE INVENTORY



1. I am here for: _____ my sake
 _____ my spouse's sake
 _____ my marriage's sake
 _____ my family's sake
 _____ our sake

2. I expect these counseling sessions to:

- _____ help our troubled marriage
 _____ make our good marriage even better
 _____ increase our communication as husband and wife
 _____ help my spouse with his or her problem(s)
 _____ prepare for coping with future situations

3. I consider my marriage to be:

RELATIONSHIP

EMOTIONAL

PROBLEMS

SEXUALLY

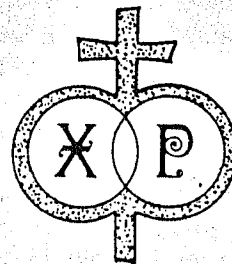
- | | | | |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|
| _____ one -sided | _____ happy | _____ none | _____ satisfying |
| _____ mutual | _____ lukewarm | _____ average | _____ demanding |
| _____ power struggle | _____ unhappy | _____ too many | _____ unfulfilled |

4. When we are apart what I fear most on the part of my spouse is:

- _____ unfaithfulness
 _____ chance of other being hurt or killed
 _____ other's inability to cope (depression)
 _____ other's inability to handle difficulties

5. What I like most about being apart is:

- _____ no hassles
 _____ independence
 _____ enjoyment of what I do (work, etc.)
 _____ chance to be alone



6. The problems I foresee in our separation:

- _____ financial
 _____ inability of other to cope
 _____ my inability to cope
 _____ lack of understanding by other

The Marriage Inventory is intended to help determine which areas of the marriage and family life need attention, discussion, strengthening, etc. The marriage inventory shows us how we need to proceed in the counseling sessions.

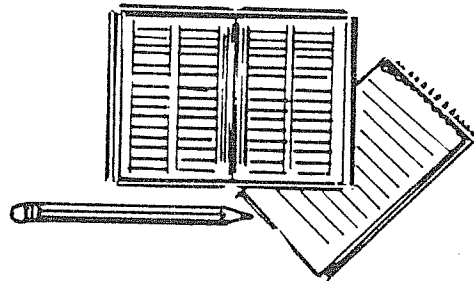
The numbering of counseling sessions depends on the needs of the individuals. In our congregation all of our military are married. Therefore, the counseling is done with both husbands and wives. Depending on the age of the children, sometimes, they, too, may be included in one or two of the counseling sessions. The separation is very difficult on the children, even though they may never express their opinions on it.

One area I spend considerable time on is communications. How well do the husband and wife communicate when they are together? If they do not communicate well together across the kitchen table, they usually cannot communicate well across miles and miles of ocean water. Often, I find that letter writing creates problems for both husbands and wives. "What should I write?" "How much should I tell her about what I am doing aboard ship?" "Should I tell him the problems I'm having with the kids or the house?" These questions are typical of the ones most asked by couples.

I encourage couples to write as they would talk if they were sitting across the kitchen table from one another. Just because a person is thousands of miles away and there is not anything they can really do to help does not mean they do not want to hear about what is happening to you. Do not be afraid to share feelings, fears, problems, etc.. You are already separated on so many levels, why add to it by not sharing what you are feeling? Share everything that is happening to you just as you would if you were together. If possible, when you are in port, call home. It is well worth the expense.

The most valuable tool we have for dealing with separation is God's Word - the Bible. There are many passages that can be applied to times of separation, of loneliness, of depression, etc.. I encourage couples to read and study these passages together before the separation and take notes on these discussions. These notes can be used after they are separated. The Lord has much to say about the problems and difficulties that arise during separation. The Bible is full of examples of Christians separated from loved ones just like you. Use them, apply them to your heart, and the Holy Spirit will comfort you and aid you through these difficult times. We have compiled a list of the ones we most often use:

Genesis 28:15
Joshua 1:8-9
Psalm 23
Psalm 31:1-3
Psalm 32:1-8
Psalm 37:5-7
Psalm 69:1-3, 13-17
Psalm 119:75-77
Matthew 11:28-30
Matthew 28:20
Romans 8:16-39



I Corinthians 10:13
2 Corinthians 1:3-5
2 Corinthians 4:8-18
2 Corinthians 12:9-10
Ephesians 3:13-21
Hebrews 4:15-16
Hebrews 12:3-4
James 1:13-18
I Peter 1:3-9
I Peter 5:10-11
I John 3:1-3, 19-20

Another valuable tool is prayer - personal and intimate conversation with God. Go to the throne of grace with all of your problems, trials and troubles. The Lord hears all of our prayers. He has promised: "Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear." (Isaiah 65:24) You need never fear that you have no one to talk to. The Lord is always with you. (Joshua 1:8-9). Our Northwestern Publishing House has some fine prayer books available to aid you in this. There is one designated especially for the military - MAY GOD BE WITH YOU - which we give to all our members before the separations. MY PRAYER BOOK and THE LUTHERAN BOOK OF PRAYER also have prayers in them "For Someone In The Military", "For My Family While I Am In The Service Away From Home", "When Away From Home", "In Loneliness", "For Patient Endurance", etc..

Separation is never easy. It is not natural for a man and a wife to be separated for long periods of time. It is not good for a father to be absent from his children. Even Christians miss one another. Even Christians can become depressed. But we have a God who is willing and able to help us through even these troubled times.

While you are separated from family, friends, and your home church, do not let your worship life decrease. You may not always be able to find a church or fellow Christians to worship with, especially if you are out to sea, but you can still worship the Lord. Take out your Bible and read it, study what God has to say to you, make use of your MEDITATIONS which the Special Ministries Board of our Synod provides for you, and pray to the Lord your God. We may not be able to end these separations, but we do have "tools" which the Lord has provided for us to make it through these difficult times.

Rev. Edward P. Schuppe