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EMOTIONAL CASUALTIES ON THE HOME FRONT

WARTIME SEPARATIONS LINKED TO DEPRESSION

While the major combat phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom may be over, thousands of military couples remain separated as troops work to rebuild and secure Iraq. As weeks have turned to months the struggle for families separated from loved ones becomes increasingly difficult. “It’s really tough to focus while I’m at work because I find myself thinking about Mike all the time,” says Trina, a 28-year-old veterinary assistant married to an Army Reservist. “Mike had never been deployed overseas before September. We were lucky. I knew this could happen but I still wasn’t prepared for the all of the intense emotions.” Loneliness, depression, and anxiety are common reactions to separation says Dr. Gregory Guldner, an expert on long distance relationships who has studied the connection between mental health and separation. “Wartime separations have been relatively well studied compared to civilian couples,” explains Dr. Guldner, “and most of these studies show that loved ones left behind by a deployment have a substantial risk of depression.” So while battlefield casualties are an ever-present threat in Iraq, on the home front families should prepare for emotional wounds.

PROTEST

“The emotional reaction to separation from a loved one follows a predictable pattern,” says Dr. Guldner, who is the director of *The Center for the Study of Long Distance Relationships* and the author of *Long Distance Relationships: The Complete Guide*. “The first reaction is to fight against the separation in various ways. This is called the protest stage. The intensity of the emotions that follow can range from mild sorrow to absolute panic.” Anger is a common component to this stage and may be directed at the military, specific commanders, or the situation as a whole. Some people even feel angry with their partner at this stage says Dr. Guldner. “One couple I worked with were finding that they began to fight with each other as the time to leave approached. Neither could pinpoint why they were irritated at one another, until one of them realized that she was just plain angry at her husband for leaving. She knew he didn’t have a choice and that he needed to go, but she couldn’t

help feeling angry.” Trying to dismiss this anger rather than acknowledging it is a common reaction among military families. “The military community understands their mission and it’s priority. So when someone has to go they can feel guilty about being angry. They’ll push the anger out of their awareness so that they can ‘be strong’ and be a team player.” While this sometimes makes families feel a little better, this advantage is very temporary. “Typically what happens when people dismiss the anger is that they still act angry, but now they don’t understand why. Couples will start arguing with one another more than usual, their frustration tolerance will drop, and they’ll seem irritated with each other.” Dr. Guldner suggests that couples need to understand the source of anger as coming from the separation itself. Then, they can work on accepting the anger and directing it away from loved ones.

DEPRESSION

The second stage of separation has traditionally been called “depression,” says Dr. Guldner, but he uses the term carefully. Clinical psychologists usually use the term to refer to something called major depression. This describes a situation in which someone is significantly depressed, to the point that they have difficulty going to work and doing normal day-to-day tasks. This type of clinical depression may even lead to thoughts of suicide and needs treatment by a mental health care provider. “The term depression as it relates to separation usually means something much more mild than full-blown clinical depression, although that certainly is found among military families dealing with a deployment.” Dr. Guldner examined the link between depression and separation while a graduate student in clinical psychology at Purdue University in Indiana. “We found that mild depression is a common, almost universal, response to separation. We knew this happened in military-related separations but we found it even in civilian long-distance relationships.” Separated couples had difficulty sleeping, felt unusually disinterested in things, had difficulty making decisions, difficulty concentrating, and generally felt “blue.” This emotional response to separation may even be evolutionary says Dr. Guldner. “Separation occurs in nature all the time as the mother leaves her children to go hunting. This is a fairly dangerous activity for the infant animals, but necessary. Protesting by crying or clawing prevents separation unless needed. But once the separation occurs and mom is away, crying and pacing simply wastes energy and may even attract predators. Depression is nature’s way of moving past the protest stage and conserving energy. We see behaviors similar to depression in animals separated from their mothers. They mope about and sleep a lot. This response to separation seems almost like a reflex.”

In his study Dr. Guldner found that no matter how long couples had been separated, they still reported the same amount of mild depression. Couples separated for one month, and couples separated for three years, had roughly the same difficulty with feeling down. A large study conducted by the U.S. Army of almost a thousand separated couples also found that more experience with separations did not seem to make these symptoms any easier. “Like any other reflex, it takes a very long time to change or eliminate the response, if it can be done at all. That is not to say that *dealing* with the emotions doesn’t get easier – it does. It means that couples need to take control of how they plan on coping with loneliness and depression rather than simply waiting for these feelings to go away with time.”

DETACHMENT

The last stage of separation called *detachment* by psychologists sounds unwelcome but represents an important coping mechanism, says Dr. Guldner. “Most people move past the depression phase, or more accurately they temper the depression, by developing some degree of emotional distance. This is a normal and very adaptive response to separation. People who can’t develop

some degree of detachment end up fixated on their absent loved one and they become dysfunctional in their day-to-day activities.” Dr. Guldner is careful to point out that detachment does not mean “breaking up” or losing interest in one’s partner. “Detachment refers to the ability to take thoughts of the relationship and the separation and move them from the front to the back burner, so to speak. These thoughts can’t always be at the center of your world or nothing will get done, but they’ll always be there when you need them or want them.”

A RESOURCE FOR SEPARATED COUPLES

Dr. Guldner discusses each of the emotional responses to separation in his book *Long Distance Relationships*, the first comprehensive research-based resource for military and civilian couples. Thousands of military couples are struggling with an LDRs as they face the unique difficulties these relationships bring. Until now, they have had few reliable resources. *Long Distance Relationships* is the first work to comprehensively review, cite, and synthesize five decades of research on separated relationships. The 22 chapters in this paperback will guide readers through all aspects of LDRs including:

- The advantages of LDRs over traditional relationships
- The emotional stages of separation
- The ten steps to staying emotionally healthy while apart
- Secrets to long distance intimacy
- Making the most of your time on the telephone
- Long distance sexuality
- Preparing for reunion: What to expect
- Dealing with conflicts at a distance

Long Distance Relationships also contains a questionnaire couples can take to help pinpoint areas of their relationship that are vulnerable to separation. An annotated bibliography discusses over 80 books, studies, articles and websites that separated couples can use as an up to date resource. Finally, a comprehensive reference section shows the more than 170 studies discussed in the book. *Long Distance Relationships* is a unique and indispensable reference that will become the “gold standard” of resources for separated couples.

About the Author

The author, Gregory Guldner, MD, MS, is a graduate of Stanford Medical School and Purdue University’s Clinical Psychology Program. He is the leading authority on long distance relationships, the director for *The Center for the Study of Long Distance Relationships*, and the author of the most comprehensive study of long distance relationships ever completed. He has published numerous articles on relationships and sexuality and serves as a peer reviewer for multiple professional journals including *Military Medicine*. He is also an officer in the Army Reserve with knowledge about military related separations. He combines his scientific expertise, interviews with hundreds of couples in long distance relationships and his own personal experience into his comprehensive book.

Ordering Information

Long Distance Relationships: The Complete Guide (ISBN: 0972114807) is available at Atlasbooks.com, Amazon.com, and better bookstores everywhere. It is available to the trade

through Biblio Distributions (a Division of NBN) at 1-800-462-6420, 1-800-338-4550 (fax), or custserv@nbnbooks.com. It is also available from the publisher at www.JFMilne.com or send \$19.99 per copy to:

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