

A Health Campaign of Uniformed Services University, www.usuhs.edu, and the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress, Bethesda, Maryland, www.CSTSonline.org

SAFETY, HEALTH, AND PREPAREDNESS: *A 9/11 Anniversary Message for Military Families*

Each fall, our nation observes the anniversary of 9/11, the anthrax attacks, and the War on Terror. Service members and their families have played a vital role in our nation's security and health. Although it has not been easy, military families should be proud of the sacrifice and contributions they have made to keep this nation safe.

During the past five years, we have met the challenges of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, as well as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita where our troops have played an important role in responding to disaster and aiding in recovery. All of these events have heightened our nation's awareness of the value of preparedness.

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family's health and safety.

This *Courage to Care* fact sheet offers some preparedness reminders to help service members, and their spouses/partners, protect the health and safety of their families in the months ahead.

THE DEPLOYMENT CYCLE

Deployments

Families experiencing a first time deployment should take advantage of deployment preparedness education and support offered by their community. There is evidence that social support contributes to family health and safety. Families facing multiple deployments have gained experience and wisdom, which they can share with families new to this process. Remember that stress can also be accompanied by growth as family members master difficult tasks and additional responsibilities. These strengths, including those gained through loss and suffering, should be recognized this fall as the nation remembers and reflects upon the past five years.

Reunions

A homecoming combines the excitement of being a family again and an urgency to make up for time lost. Reunions can be difficult for couples and military children.

- Remind each other and your children that you will need time to readjust to the homecoming of the deployed parent. Young children often act shy; older children may feel and act angry because of their parent's absence.

For Family Health and Safety, Exercise Caution:

- **Driving.** When people have not operated a conventional motor vehicle in a long time, driving can be hazardous. In the first few days, have someone accompany the returning soldier as they transition back to driving.
- **Drinking alcoholic beverages.** Since exposure to alcoholic beverages has been limited during deployment, it is important not to over indulge. Excessive use of alcohol can be a warning sign of distress, increase the risk of accidents, and decrease the opportunity to reestablish connection with one's spouse/partner and family.

Reintegration

It may be helpful to view this transition as a time for building a shared sense of purpose.

- Your returning spouse/partner must transform their sense of purpose created during deployment, an intense time, into the routines and safety of everyday life.
- You and your children have established new routines during the deployment that are now comfortable.

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- Respect where each other is coming from and communicate. Service members often prefer to discuss war stories with military buddies to protect spouses and family from traumatic memories. Spouses/partners should not be offended.
- Communication can occur by taking walks, working out together, or engaging in a sport. These activities can enhance family communication and health, and help build relationships with one's children.

ROUTINE HEALTH

As a new or single parent during deployment, you have many new responsibilities including the health of your child or children. Ask your doctor or healthcare provider to assist you with routine health care tips, such as flu shots.

- Schedule your flu shots this fall for yourself and your children.

FAMILY PREPAREDNESS FOR DISASTER

Your family needs to be prepared, especially around its health needs, in the face of natural disasters and terrorism.

Special Health Needs

- At home, have an extra supply of medications available.
- In the event of separation, you should provide instructions and training (if possible) to the primary care providers outside of the home (e.g., daycare and school teachers). This would be especially important if a family member has specific medical needs.
- Make sure adult children away from home, such as college students, and elderly family members, are prepared.

Evacuation Plan

Having a prepared plan for evacuation can save valuable time.

- Have a 'ready to go' kit. Essential items include extra water, food, batteries, first aid kit, a flashlight, wind up radio, contact numbers, and medications.
- Plan ahead for family pets by contacting area shelters and have provisions stored for self-care if possible.

- Determine a planned evacuation destination. This includes knowing the location or numbers to call to get such information, having maps, and knowing alternate routes.
- Have at least a half tank of gas in your vehicles at all times. This can be a time saver and help families leave immediately.
- Turn off the gas and water to your home, if possible, prior to evacuating. Remember to call the gas company to turn back on the gas once your family returns.

Family Communication Plan

- Establish a primary contact and number (preferably a relative or friend in another part of the region or out of state) who family members can call in case of emergencies.
- Every member of the family should know this number.
- In the event that family members are separated, it is also important that daycare, work, school, and neighbors know this number.
- Prepare a list of phone numbers where each family member can be reached during the day. Include a list of relatives, friends, and business associates that would or should know your whereabouts in case of emergency.
- During disasters, phone communications may be disrupted. Provide an alternative means for making calls, such as a special 'emergency' calling card or cell phone. Other vehicles of communication are important such as the Internet, e-mail communication, and HAM radio. The Red Cross is also a resource to help contact loved ones.
- Leave a note at your residence to let others know where you are and how you can be contacted.

To access previous issues of Courage to Care addressing Reunions, Reintegration, issues around helping children cope during deployment, go to:

<https://www.cstsonline.org/education-and-training/health-campaigns/courage-to-care-health-campaign>



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