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The Effects of Frequent Combat Tours on Military Personnel and their Families: How Counselors Can Help

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Introduction

Attention Professional Counselors: Uncle Sam Needs You!

You are not needed to take up arms in defense of the United States. However, Professional Counselors are needed, to provide counseling services to those military warriors and their families who have served in the Global War on Terrorism in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other combat zones throughout the world.

On September 11, 2001, the United States was attacked by radical Muslim Terrorists. Since that day, the United States military (active duty and Reserve Components) has been deployed in ways not experienced since World War II. The Global War on Terrorism has been waged for over six years placing tremendous stress on combat personnel and their families. Professional Counselors are needed now, more than ever, to provide services to our nation's warriors and their family members.

The purpose of this paper is to provide the reader with information concerning the stressors experienced by our nation's warriors and their families. We will present the *Deployment Cycle*, a conceptual model describing the developmental phases experienced by military families as they prepare for the inevitable separation and reunion. In our discussion of the *Deployment Cycle* the important role of the school counselor in responding to the needs of military children will be presented. We will describe the military as a distinct culture and explain how the *Cross Cultural Counseling Competencies* developed by the American Counseling Association (ACA, 1992) are effective guidelines for use by counselors when providing services to military personnel and their family members. We will discuss specific difficulties experienced by combat veterans and strategies for counseling members of the warrior culture and their families.

Magnitude of the Problem

United States military personnel are deployed throughout the Middle East and other regions of the world to combat terrorism. As of September 27, 2007, there are approximately 154,000 troops deployed to Iraq and Kuwait; 26,000 troops deployed to Afghanistan; 15,000 troops deployed to Kosovo; 1,700 troops deployed to the Horn of Africa; 600 troops in the Sinai and 1,700 troops at Guantanamo Bay. Each of these 185,000 warriors has family members and other loved ones at home who are also experiencing the psychological effects of these deployments.

The families of deployed active duty personnel are usually located near military installations that provide support services to the families. This includes referral to counseling services. However, Reserve and National Guard, the Reserve Component (RC), families are frequently located considerable distances from military installations and cannot access the military support system. Professional Counselors in communities with mobilized Reserve and National Guard units are particularly important in providing support for the families of these deployed warriors and should make their services known to community service agencies when the mobilization of local units is announced (Fenell, 2005).

Deployment to a combat zone is a stressful event. The deployment for Reserve and National Guard warriors is doubly stressful. The Reserve Component (RC) warrior has been mobilized to active duty and must relinquish his or her civilian job. Upon completion of post-mobilization training, many of the mobilized RC personnel are deployed to the combat zone creating more stress for the warrior and family. Thus, families of RC personnel encounter a "double whammy" experiencing both the shock and loss associated with mobilization and later the shock and loss associated with deployment to combat (Fenell & Fenell, 2003, 2004, 2005).

An important counseling resource that is available for active duty, Reserve and National Guard families is *Military OneSource.* This telephonic referral resource is available seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day and will identify referrals for a military family member for up to six free counseling sessions. Professional Counselors with appropriate background and training in working with military personnel can apply to become Military OneSource service providers (contact information: militaryonesource.com; call, 800-342-9647).

The Deployment Cycle

Fenell and Fenell (2003, 2004, 2005) have described the stages of the deployment cycle. This model is composed of three stages: (1) Preparation for Separation, (2) Separation and (3) Reunion. There are several key elements in each of these developmental stages described below. While this paper focuses on the married warrior with children, we recognize that not all deployed personnel fit this category. Some warriors are unmarried. They are the children of concerned parents and other loving relatives who may experience the reactions to the deployment described below.

Preparation for Separation

This stage begins with the "warning order" for the deployment. The warrior is told that he or she will deploy to combat and given a date for the deployment. During the early stages of the War on Terrorism the order to prepare to deploy came as a shock to many families. While the surprise and shock value is still there for many mobilized reserve units, active duty units are now on a fixed rotation and know in advance when their units will deploy. Thus, families are able to prepare for each deployment well in advance.

During the Preparation stage family members want to spend as much time together as possible. Unfortunately, the required training that the warrior must complete before deployment is arduous, tiring and time consuming. Therefore, the family must identify times when togetherness is possible and ensure these times are used effectively. Conflict between spouses can emerge during this stage because the time together is so limited. The non-deploying spouse feels anger and resentment because the warrior is occupied with training for combat when the family neeeds more time together. As children experience the tension between their parents, insecurity may develop and grades and behavior at school suffer. Parents must consider each child's developmental stage and

understanding of what is taking place when explaining the deployment. Too much or too little information can create fear and uncertainty in the child (Fenell & Fenell, 2003). School Counselors must know which students have parents in the deployment cycle and provide appropriate support interventions for these children.

Couples may use the services of a Professional Counselor during the Preparation for Separation Stage of the deployment cycle if conflict becomes significant or if children are having difficulty with the deployment.

Separation

Separation is the most difficult stage in the cycle. The warrior has departed for combat and the spouse and children are trying to adapt to the changes. Deployments last from 90 days for air force units to 15 months for army units. During the deployment the warrior, spouse and children gradually move in to a routine that will sustain them through their time apart. The easiest adjustment is for the warrior. Once in the combat zone, the routine begins. This routine keeps the warrior focused and does not provide much time for worry about what is going on at home. The focuses is on the mission and the warrior does not have to respond to usual family responsibilities. So in significant ways, the warrior's work becomes more predictable, although potentially life-threatening, with few family issues to deal with. On the other hand, the spouse at home performs all normal responsibilities and must add the responsibilities of the deployed warrior. This doubling of responsibilities can be overwhelming at first and may cause the non-deployed spouse to question whether all duties can be completed. Eventually, the non-deployed spouse identifies the *must do* tasks that keep the home running and eliminates the *nice to do* responsibilities that would be accomplished with both partners present.

Children often detect the anxiety of the non-deployed spouse. With this awareness, coupled with their own fears, children may develop school problems and acting out behaviors. The school counselor and other key school personnel must be aware of the children who have deployed parents and develop programs to support these children. Moreover, frequent and candid consultation between the non-deployed parent and the school counselor can minimize the problems children may experience during the deployment. If the non-deployed spouse is handling the deployment well, the likelihood of the children having difficulties is lessened. If the non-deployed spouse is overwhelmed, the children are more prone to academic and social problems (Fenell & Fenell, 2003, Fenell, Fenell & Williams, 2005).

As the deployment wears on, the non-deployed spouse becomes more comfortable and confident. New procedures and rules are established that are more functional for the family. The spouse may enjoy aspects of the new roles including increased leadership, decision-making autonomy and freedom of action. If these are roles were previously taken by the deployed warrior, the couple will need to renegotiate these roles and responsibilities when the warrior returns.

Modern communication systems have made it possible for spouses to stay in regular contact during the deployment. E-mail and telephonic communication is often available. This degree of communication is a benefit to families as the warrior and family members are able to remain connected and keep current Modern communication is wonderful when the relationships are good. However, when relationships are strained, e-mail and phone calls may not solve the problems and may create issues that must wait for the end of the deployment to be resolved. These issues may be best resolved with the help of a Professional Counselor.

One of the major concerns during the Separation Stage for deployed warriors who are in recent or difficult marriages is the possibility of the non-deployed spouse having an affair. When an affair is acknowledged during the deployment it can render the warrior combat ineffective. The pain of the betrayal must be worked through before a return to duty is possible. If an affair has occurred during the Separation Stage, the couple may decide they want to try to work out the problems with the assistance of a counselor upon the warrior's return home.

The Reunion

The reunion is that moment in the deployment that all family members anticipate with joy and hopefulness. On the home front families are making plans to welcome home the returning warrior. In the combat zone the warrior is packing equipment for the return home while not becoming complacent and becoming a last-minute combat casualty.

The initial phase of the reunion is like a second honeymoon for the couple and issues that existed prior to the deployment are put on hold. Seeing the loved one return from combat in a healthy and happy condition is a tremendous relief for the family and the joy felt at the reunion supersedes feelings related to past problems. When the honeymoon period comes to an end, the tough job of reconstituting the family begins.

There are several universal issues that the family must address during the Reunion Stage. The first is how the returning spouse will be reintegrated into the family. Over the course of the deployment the non-deployed spouse has assumed all of the parental roles. How will the warrior be reengaged in a meaningful way as a parent and equal in the parental dyad of the family (Minuchin, 1974)? Often the returning spouse is surprised and angered by the fact that he or she cannot simply step back in the old roles held before the deployment. If the reintegration is particularly difficult, the services of a family counselor can be useful for the couple and children.

A second common issue for the returning warrior is reconnecting with children. Very young children may not recognize the returning parent after the deployment. While this can be painful for the parent, it is not uncommon. The returning parent and spouse should be prepared for this possibility. The parent must be patient and allow the child to reconnect at his or her own pace. In addition the non-deployed spouse should model affection to the warrior, demonstrating that the returning parent is approachable and

lovable. Reconnecting with teen–aged children can be difficult as well, especially when the adoring pre-deployment child turns in to the rebellious post-deployment teen. Again patience and understanding is important in order to reestablish the relationship with the teen. If the reconnection does not occur within a month or two, family counseling can be helpful (Fenell & Fenell, 2003, 2004).

The ultimate event of the Reunion Stage is the stabilization of the family and the return to the pre-deployment homeostasis (Minuchin, 1974). Unfortunately, stabilization cannot occur for many military families. The reason for this is that as soon as the warriors returns from combat, they and their families enjoy a brief period of closeness and happiness. However, the next deployment has already been scheduled. Thus, the family does not dare return to the normal status quo because they know that there will be another separation soon. Consequently the family reconstitutes as best it can given the knowledge that more deployments are approaching and that the Preparation for Separation stage will begin again. The military services are aware of this redeployment-reunion paradox and are considering ways to stabilize warriors for longer periods of time after combat tours. Unfortunately, a solution has not yet been presented.

The Military as a Culture

The military service is a culturally diverse organization. The military is composed of all races and a myriad of different belief systems. However, while an incredibly diverse organization, the military views itself as a distinct culture, a band of brothers and sisters. The marines and the army view themselves as “all green”, not African-American, Hispanic, Asian or Anglo. Likewise, the navy, coast guard and air force are “all blue”. Professional counselors who want to work with military families need to understand this quality and the culture and values of military service.

The Cross-Cultural Competencies developed by the American Counseling Association (ACA, 1992) are useful guidelines in assisting counselors in relating to the culture of military warriors and their families. The first competency that counselors must develop is the ability to be aware of one’s own cultural values and biases, especially those that may be unfavorable to the military culture. Some counselors view military services as a refuge for those who cannot make it in the civilian world. Others view military personnel as overly controlling and aggressive. Still others view military members as robots who follow orders without thinking or considering their consequences. An awareness of these or other stereotypes of military personnel is important to successful counseling. It is also important that the counselor be clear with military clients concerning the counselor’s views concerning the War on Terrorism. The main point here is for the counselor to be aware of his or her own values and perceptions so that they do not interfere with the counseling (Fenell & Weinhold, 2003; Fenell, 2005). When service members seek counseling they do not care what the counselor’s political views are, so long as the counselor is competent and treats the military client with the respect due any member of a diverse culture. The successful counselor will be able to enter the military client’s world

without judging or trying to alter the core values that shape that world. This can be difficult for some counselors given the highly politicized nature of the War on Terrorism and the liberal perspective of many counselors (Fenell & Fenell, 200).

The second important cross-cultural competency for counselors working with military personnel is to have a basic knowledge and understanding of the military culture. It is crucial to the therapeutic relationship for counselors to understand that all military personnel swear an oath to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. The ability of the counselor to recognize and communicate respect for the self-sacrifice made by military personnel, especially during the last several years of global terrorism, is critical if a therapeutic relationship is to be established and maintained.

The third important cross cultural competency needed by counselors working with the military is developing the intervention strategies that are therapeutic while respectful of the military client's core values. Effective counselors are able to use the core counseling skills and intervention strategies taught in most graduate programs, adapting these skills and interventions in ways that respect the core values, beliefs and traditions of military personnel and their families (Fenell & Weinhold, 2003).

Conclusion

In this paper we have provided basic information that will help counselors work effectively with military personnel and their families. We presented statistics supporting the growing need to provide counseling services to military personnel and their families. We presented the Deployment Cycle to provide counselors with an understanding of the developmental nature of deployments and the most common stressors that occur during deployments. Finally we described the military as a culture and described how counselors may employ Cross Cultural Competencies in their work with military families.

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