



Coming Home

A Guide for Service Personnel
Returning from Active Duty

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Foreword

We cannot control our destiny. However, in the aftermath of traumatic episodes and events, by employing proactive and strong attitudes to those events, we are generally able to shape our destiny to ensure a more positive outcome.

This booklet is aimed at assisting returning Service personnel to successfully deal with pressures and issues that may emerge on their return from active duty.

Acknowledgments:

This booklet has been produced from the information and assistance derived from:

'Courage after Fire', Keith Armstrong,
Suzanne Best and Paula Domenici

'Combat Stress Injury', Judith A Lyons

'Recovering from the War', Patience H C Mason

Introduction

When returning from operations to family and friends we often have the potential to develop high expectations of what life will be like on our return home.

There is nothing wrong with having these feelings; these thoughts and emotions form the comfort blanket that sustains us in tough times whilst in theatre or on task.

Equally for our spouses and families awaiting your arrival, they are by and large confident that their love and affection will overcome any difficulties that you may encounter as you re-establish yourself in the home environment.

Whilst some may make the transition without difficulty, a significant proportion of returning personnel are likely to encounter issues that cause them and others at least some degree of difficulty.

Life does not always easily fall back into place and there will inevitably be occasions when we have to make real efforts to ensure our lives are back on track – homecoming has the potential to be one of those occasions.

The key to dealing with issues that may arise lies primarily in processing and addressing the areas of difficulty, cherishing hope in life and the future and sustaining contact with family, friends and colleagues.

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Returning Home

As outlined in the introduction, it is far more likely than not that you will be eagerly looking forward to your return from operational duties.

However, over the preceding months whilst you have been deployed your mind and body will have become attuned to reacting to a wide range of psychological cues and stimuli.

Your 'fight or flight' responses will have become highly tuned to respond to dangerous situations. Having taught your body to react to these danger signals it will take some time for it to return to more usual state of being. Some responses may include:

- **Hyper vigilance.** Finding it difficult to relax when surrounded by large groups of people.
- **Heightened Startle Response.** Responding to loud bangs or noise.
- **Having flashbacks.** Reliving events and episodes.
- **Panic attacks.** You feel threatened and your body feels it has to go into survival mode.

- **Extreme anger.** Heightened arousal coupled to negative thoughts and emotions.

None of these experiences are unusual for personnel returning from operational duties. Initially you could feel that you are 'losing your grip', that you are isolated from your family and friends, or that you alone are feeling these disturbing reactions whilst your colleagues remain robust and untouched by their experiences.

The short answer is that you are neither going mad nor are you unique in experiencing

these potentially corrosive and unwanted feelings.

The reactions you are trying to deal with are quite normal reactions to an abnormal set of circumstances. It is worthy of mention that you are not the first combat veterans to experience this phenomenon.

The emotions you may be feeling were first journalled by soldiers of the Roman Legions and have been experienced by 'returning warriors' to the present day. So having identified some potential problems what are we going to do about them?

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Driving

When personnel return from operational duties they often find that their attitude towards risk has changed. In particular, there is strong evidence to support the hypothesis that the chance of having a road accident is much higher in the immediate period after returning from operations.

Whilst this may be for many reasons, it is important to take great care when driving. If you feel angry by the way that other road users are acting or feel the need to get to your destination quickly come what may, remember your actions may be less coordinated and less carefully considered than you might imagine.

Take a deep breath, slow down and remember how ill-timed it would be to have returned safely from operations only to injure yourself (or worse) behind the wheel of a car.

Talking About Your Experiences

For many returning Service personnel the immediate action is to erect an emotional firewall and not tell anyone about what you have been doing whilst you were away, particularly avoiding talking about any traumatic situations you have experienced.

Having faced difficult situations many people find it impossible to believe that others, outside your immediate group of colleagues

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will adequately understand what they have been through. The reasons people give for not talking to family and friends can range from:

- **Worry.** That loved ones will react badly to hearing about their operational experiences.
- **Concern.** That discussing their experiences may open up emotional wounds that will hurt them and their family.
- **Unwillingness.** To burden their family, as they already feel guilty about having been away.

Often people do not share experiences with work colleagues, particularly if their colleagues have not carried out duties similar to their own, because they are concerned about:

- Appearing weak and needy.
- Fearing that, if you open up, you may lose control, start crying and be unable to stem your tears.
- Others teasing, humiliating or embarrassing them in the presence of colleagues and co-workers.

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The concerns outlined above are perfectly understandable. Undertaking operational duties can be an emotional, sometimes frenzied experience and talking to family and friends about these events can be seen as a potentially risky venture into new territory.

However, there are many potential advantages from sharing your experience and talking about the many challenges that you will have faced.

Whilst it is understandable that you may not feel able to share everything the first time round, remember, the story will get easier and potential emotional reactions will reduce with each time of telling.

So, What Are The Advantages Of Opening Up?

- **With spouses, partners, family and loved ones.** You can connect with each other more deeply. It helps family and friends to better understand the pressures that you have been under. For some it will help to explain why, since your return, you may seem “different”.
- **With colleagues and friends.** When you speak to colleagues they may be more comfortable sharing the feelings or challenges they themselves experienced during the past deployments or at other

difficult times of their lives. In turn you are both better placed to give each other mutual support.

So, How And When Are We Going To Do This?

- **With spouses, partners, family and loved ones.** Set the stage for experience sharing. Before talking about your experiences ask your spouse/partner what it was like for them whilst you were away. Show genuine concern for what life challenges they had to deal with during your absence. Choose suitable times to talk to loved ones (when

they are not rushed, distracted, tired or pressed for time). Find a time when both of you are emotionally and mentally “available”. If you have children, consider employing a babysitter so you can talk without interruption or distraction. Avoid what is known as “all or nothing thinking”. Do not feel you have to share all your experiences in one sitting. Be flexible, you don’t have to keep everything locked up inside you but nor do you have to tell every detail. Remember not to focus solely on the bad times; ensure you share the good, funny, surprising and interesting aspects of your deployment.

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- **With colleagues and friends.** Be selective in selecting the colleagues and friends with whom you feel you can share your experiences. Choose people you know that you can trust. These may be people you have turned to before. A good tip is to always evaluate how safe and secure you feel in your relationship/friendship prior to sharing your experiences.

How And What Experiences To Share

We cannot overstate the importance and therapeutic value derived from talking to trusted people about your operational experiences. Talking is generally always a good

thing as long as you do so to the right people at the right time.

So our advice is get talking to people you trust and respect. Below are some suggestions about how you might start a discussion when you are not sure how to:

- Share things related to your combat experiences. These may include photographs, memorabilia or a diary. (Choose these items carefully as they may trigger powerful and unwelcome memories.)
- Talk about your reactions to your operational experiences. Explain how

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you feel when you hear a loud or sudden noise. Describe your feelings to returning to a non-operational environment. (For example, you will know it is safe at home but somehow you can't seem to stop being constantly alert to danger).

- Discuss how you are coping with your past experiences. If things are difficult say so and ask people to give you some help, time and space if you feel it to be necessary. Share with them any pamphlets and handouts (including this one) that you have been given to support you in your homecoming and in the aftermath of any traumatic

incident you may have witnessed or been involved in.

- Describe significant comrades and friends who were deployed with you. Explain what they were like and what you learnt from them.
- Talk about how your view of life may have changed post-tour and what you feel the future has to offer since your return.
- If applicable to your circumstances, share what it was like to be immersed in a different culture whilst in theatre and what

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differences you observed on your return to the UK.

Coping Skills

Our coping skills have developed since early childhood. Like a bank account, we keep adding credits to our coping skills account as life teaches us how to react to different experiences.

Our training and military experience adds greatly to our coping skills account. In the same positive way we deployed our coping skills whilst on operations, we should positively engage the same skills in the weeks and months following our return.

Although we cannot make any stress reactions disappear overnight, we hope this section can explain some proven strategies that can be employed to allow you to gain full control of your reactions. Let us look at some areas of difficulty and review some tips that may assist you:

- On your return it is possible that you may encounter upsetting images or memories. They may be fixed on some particular event or series of event that you found disturbing.
- They have the ability to come back into your consciousness when you don't want them to. Because of this, they can

be extremely disturbing and lead to you feeling out of control. In some cases, individuals will employ a number of avoidance tactics (drinking, excessive physical activity, carrying out extra hours of work) in an attempt to get rid of such images and memories. Unfortunately, robustly avoiding these images merely tends to strengthen their hold on you; it's a bit like running away from a bully – unfortunately, the bully just keeps coming back. By avoiding the thoughts you are reinforcing the belief that memories are dangerous when of course, that are not.

- Experience has shown that these feelings will dissipate over time. If faced with a 'flashback' situation, remain calm, take 4 to 5 steady breaths, and remind yourself that you are in a safe and secure environment. Hold onto something if you need to. Reassure yourself that the images will go, along with the disturbing feelings connected to them. Remind yourself that these are only images and that they will dissipate. Actively remind yourself each and every time that these images are not dangerous.

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Dealing With Anger

Most people get angry, particularly after long spells in high risk environments; how you deal with anger can make a big difference to your life. Failure to deal with anger issues can have costly consequences.

Anger can damage or end friendships or relationships, cause financial or disciplinary difficulties and wreak havoc on your health by increasing your chances of developing high blood pressure, heart disease or strokes (and at a lower level by causing headaches or stomach problems).

If you have become angry and, on reflection, realised you handled the situation badly, attempt to learn from your mistakes. Ask

yourself the 5 questions listed below and write down your responses:

- What could I have done to help to decrease my anger (my behaviours and actions)?
- What could I have done to help to decrease my anger (my statements and words)?
- What could I have done to help to decrease my anger (my emotions)?
- What could I have done to help to decrease my anger (my personal thoughts)?

- What could I have done to help to decrease the tension in my body (physical reactions)?

By studying your response you may come to understand that changing your behaviour in any of these areas may have altered the outcome of the situation. Just as these factors can snowball to give you problems, they can also work positively to allow you to find solutions.

So when you are back home and a driver cuts you up at the traffic lights, re-focus, take those 4 deep breaths and don't take the other driver's actions personally.

Remember, his bad driving is a reflection on him, not you! Although refocusing can be initially difficult, the more you do it, the easier it becomes.

Know Your 'Red Flag Moments'

On your return, particular issues or situations may have the ability to quickly upset you. We call these 'red flag moments'. It is a useful strategy to make a list of these moments to enable you to flag them up to take steps to prevent them from kicking in.

Once identified, you can then plan which anger strategy you will employ to deal with

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each potential incident. Listed below are some examples to help you make your own list:

- Driving
- Children crying
- Large crowds
- Long queues
- Feeling ignored and/or disrespected
- Work frustrations
- Experiencing racism or sexism

How To Rule Your Anger

Which strategies are you going to pull out of your coping skills toolbox to avoid anger ruling you and blighting your life?

- Pay attention to your breathing, slow it down and take those essential 4 to 5 deep breaths.
- Notice any tension in your body and try to relax.
- Take 'time out' if you feel you are becoming angry. Often, it may be helpful to withdraw from the situation prior to saying anything destructive. Tell the other person "I need

to leave now, but will be back in a few minutes". During the time away, use strategies to calm down; don't try to justify your anger.

- Be assertive, but not aggressive about what you want. Express yourself directly and firmly whilst always respecting the other person.
- Provide reassuring statements to yourself to assist you in remaining calm and controlling your anger.
- Remind yourself that the issues at hand are not life threatening.

- Buy yourself time when responding (deep breaths again). Delay your response until you have taken control of your anger.
- Write down your thoughts and feelings that you have encountered in an anger situation. Don't just journal the events that went badly, but also recall the times when you handled the situation well.

Combating Post-Operational Alcohol Problems

On returning from theatre, it can be all too easy to become reliant on alcohol and other substances. Freed from any restrictions on

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alcohol consumption it can be an attractive option to over-indulge on a regular basis.

Many Service personnel when interviewed about the reasons for excessive alcohol use will claim: "it helps me sleep", "it blocks out bad memories", "it helps me feel that I fit in", and "it helps me have fun".

Whilst some will think that these are good reasons for excessive drinking (or even substance abuse) there are far better and more valid reasons for reducing your intake or stopping altogether:

- Drug taking is not tolerated by the Armed Forces and, if you are tested and found to

have taken drugs, the consequences are very serious indeed.

- Over indulgence in alcohol/drug taking will, most likely, ruin relationships with spouses, partners, families, friends and colleagues.
- You are letting yourself and your colleagues down.
- You will lose control and at the very least embarrass yourself whilst under the effect of drink/drugs.
- There will be a detrimental impact on your health.

If you find yourself increasingly dependant on alcohol you must do something about it. The Service will continue to support you as long as you seek help and heed the advice given to you.

Combating Feeling Sad

A significant proportion of the general public experience at least one prolonged period of low mood (sometimes called clinical depression) in their lives. If, on returning from operational duties, you are lethargic, are unable to enjoy any aspect of your life and are persistently “down in the dumps”. Then this needs to be sorted.

Although most people feel down sometimes, if these symptoms are present for more than a couple of weeks then you need to do something about it. In this section we offer some tips and hints to increase your activity levels and decrease your feeling of negativity.

To break the shackles of low mood, you should write down an activity list and detail all the activities that you enjoy. Write down a separate list of potential things that you have always wanted to do. So now you have two lists, the next step is to do them.

However, if you are sad or lacking motivation taking this next step is not so simple. Because you may feel as if you just can't find enjoyment anywhere you need to plan

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a way out. This can be done by producing a simple 'activity schedule'.

To achieve this you need to obtain a calendar. In the first month, enter simple tasks from each of your lists with the intention of doing one small enjoyable activity each day.

Keep reviewing your calendar and gradually become more adventurous in your daily achievements.

Even though you are now expending more energy, you will find that you are less lethargic. This is because you are slowly, but surely, breaking the 'cycle of depression'. It is important to take one small step at a time, with every success comes more success and usually enjoyment at the same time.

Along with inactivity, you may also encounter negative thinking. When you are feeling low or unhappy, negative thoughts can beset you. In extreme cases they can make you feel out of control.

These thoughts are known as 'Negative Automatic Thoughts' (NATS). They can make you see others and yourself in a negative light. If this is happening to you then you need to examine your NATS and challenge them. For example:

- What is the evidence for and against this thought or belief?

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- What are the odds that my thoughts and beliefs are accurate (e.g. 100%, 50% 10%)?
- Am I focussing on small details instead of the bigger picture?
- Are my judgements based on feelings instead of facts?

In many cases people tend to be too hard on themselves; instead, challenge your NATs and attempt to move on and get support from family, friends and, if you need to, from your Medical Officer who in turn may refer you to

a mental health professional. Take one step at time.

*'Taken from 'Courage after Fire',
Keith Armstrong, Suzanne Best & Paula Domenici)*

Finally

Remember, you are now back home and safe. Given sufficient time most people find their operational experience to be enriching, professionally rewarding and something to be proud of.

The period of time required to get fully back to normal will vary from person to person, however try to remain positive and optimistic even if at times your homecoming experience

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has not been all that you might have wished for. Like many who have gone before you, the most likely outcome is that you will be a stronger and a more resilient person as a result of your experiences.

You may need to work hard on relationships to ensure they are re-established on your return but as with all the best things in life they need constant attention. Most of you will find that talking to spouses, partners and friends when it feels right to do so will be a positive and rewarding experience for both you and them.

If you are troubled by your experiences on operations remember you are not alone.

Everyone in the Chain of Command, Chaplains and the many other welfare agencies supporting the Armed Forces are able to give assistance and there is no stigma whatsoever attached to making an approach for advice and support.

Within this booklet, we have detailed a number of links or contacts that may be useful to you if you are encountering difficulties.

Welcome back.

Tips For Families And Friends

- **Allowing the returning person to acclimatise at his or her own pace.** You may become impatient with the pace of the returnee's transition. Remain calm, if you become reactive you will not help the situation and may add to the person's stress levels.
- **Attend social functions with your spouse/partner.** Support your partner by joint attendance and be aware that there may be tension in attending large non-military social functions. You can help his/her feelings of comfort or safety by discussing the event in some detail. Be aware that some people may ask your spouse/partner inappropriate questions (e.g. did you kill anyone? Why are you back? etc) be prepared to deflect such questions and support your partner/spouse at this time.
- **Use your own family community connections.** Help your spouse/partner to participate in the local community by using your own family resources and community connections.
- **Take care of yourself.** Make sure you are focussing on your own needs as well as

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those of your returning spouse/partner. Keep up your connections with others (family, friends). These connections will help you maintain your energy and keep your spirits up. If your spouse/partner is encountering difficulties seek help. Do not try to carry the burden on your own.

Tips For Parents Of Returning Service Personnel

- If you are concerned about your son or daughter's behaviour since returning, give them specific examples of areas of your concern. Don't get into arguments and try

to pressure them to seek additional help. Offer to help, but don't push. State your concerns, then back off.

- Become an expert in the area of resources. Your son/daughter may need time to adjust to their life at home and may not be able to tap into available resources and services. They may miss the buddies they deployed with and, after a few days at home, may wish to leave and join up with them. Don't take this personally or as rejection. The fact is, they have been closely bonded together for many months and they may wish to revisit their chums to catch up and compare notes.

- Give your son/daughter the opportunity to talk about their combat experiences. Let him or her know you are willing to listen in an empathetic, non-judgemental way. Don't push, but let them know you are willing to listen. If you have combat or have been involved in other non-military traumatic experiences, you may discover that this is a good opportunity to deepen your connections with your offspring by discussing the issues with them.

Tips For Returning Reservists

As indicated earlier, the return home can trigger a plethora of differing emotions and

feelings. The majority of these feelings are common to all returning troops and we have tried to address these issues in the various chapters of this booklet.

However, for the returning Reservist, he or she may have additional burdens to carry as they re-assimilate into the home and civilian work environment. This section of the booklet looks at the specific challenges that you may have to encounter on your return. Returning to work after deployment can be a stressful experience. Whilst some veterans can take it all in their stride, some can find the reintegration experience difficult.

Your employer has had to adapt to your absence. Like your families, they too have had

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to depend on others to discharge your work tasks. Fitting into your 'new' work environment can be challenging. Here are some tips for an easier integration into the work place:

- **Consider what you are going to say to your Co-Workers.** Before checking into work, think carefully about what information you are prepared to impart. Some questions may be dumb or insulting and you may find yourself becoming angry at their ill-informed opinions. Remember, their questions are a reflection of them, not you.
- **Work out a script that you are comfortable with.** Touch on the culture, the climate, the terrain and the people that you encountered during your deployment. Gently inform your co-workers that you will not discuss the operational aspects of your tour.
- **Find the right person to speak to.** Find someone you know and trust. Learn what has changed in your workplace, Have things changed? Has your job specification changed? Have other people's role and responsibilities changed? Getting the correct work-related intelligence prior to re-commencing work will diminish

any surprise or shocks that you may subsequently encounter.

- **Take positive attitude to your return to work.** It is unhelpful to everyone if you adopt a negative stance on returning to the workplace. Give yourself time to acclimatise to your job. You need time to move from the tempo of your operational duties to your radically different civilian employment. Look for the good in your changed environment.
- **Don't make any quick decisions.** You may feel the urge to say or do things on your return to work. When this occurs, give yourself some time and space before doing something that you may later regret. In more extreme cases you may feel driven to change jobs.
- **In this instance, make a list.** Write down what you believe to be positive and negative factors relating to your work. If you are married or live with a partner, ask for their input to your list. When the list is complete, weigh up the pros and cons prior to making any decisions.
- **If you decide to leave your employment, do not 'knee jerk' and leave abruptly.** Try to have another job waiting in the wings.

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Remember two important points when conducting a job search: it is always easier to get a job when you've got a job and always play to your strengths.

- **Coming Home to No Job.** If you were in employment prior to your departure, your job is generally protected under the 'Safeguard of Employment Act'. However, if you were not in full time employment prior to your departure to theatre, returning home to no work can be a highly unsettling experience. Being rejected in your subsequent job search can intensify the emotional challenges you may be dealing with in the aftermath of your operational

tour. If you don't have the luxury of taking time to look for employment, you may need to find temporary work while you consider your longer term job interests and opportunities. Look for a temporary job that will give you the flexibility to work out what you really want to do.

Conclusion.

The pressures of operations can leave its imprint on us all. Although there is no silver bullet that can undo the effects of separation and war, there are many agencies that can assist the Reservists (these are listed in the back pages of this booklet).

These resources, coupled with the fortitude and strength of the Reservist supported by their family and friends can shape the future and make returning to the civilian environment a more positive and enriching experience.

Tips For Dealing With Children

Showing a clear interest in your children after a long period of separation can go a long way towards restoring a close strong family bond. It is essential to recognize that children will experience the prolonged absence of an adult family member differently to grown-ups.

Factors such as age, the closeness of the relationship and the support they receive from

other family members and friends will play an important role in the re-bonding process.

Expect

- Positive and negative reactions from your children – try to show understanding of their negative reactions.
- The possibility that your children may have changed significantly during your absence.
- To be presented with the challenge of having to ‘win back’ their affection.

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Some General Points

- Spend as much time with your family after return. However, be careful to avoid making any major changes to their routine for several weeks following your return.
- Let your children set the pace of getting to know you again. Take it slowly and be readily available for them with both your time and emotions.
- If you have several children, be careful not to show favouritism to any one individual.
- Encourage them to tell you their story of how life was for them whilst you were away. Validate their achievements (however small they may seem to you) and be wary of giving criticism.

Finally ...

Help your children adjust to the changes that have occurred in their lives since your return. Maintain family routines and show them lots of affection (yes, even teenagers need hugs!). Try to do more family-orientated events and be prepared to temporarily lower your expectations and standards relating to school performance and their bedroom tidiness.

Contact Details:

Forcesline

SSAFA provides a free and confidential helpline providing telephone and email support for Service Personnel and their families.

- **0800 731 4800**
(Operates 1030 - 1930
Monday - Friday)
- **www.ssafa.org.uk**
- **Forcesline, FREEPOST, PO Box 1312,**
Pewsey, Wiltshire, SN9 6NN

RAF Community Support website

Providing useful information, online forums and instant chat facilities for RAF Personnel and families.

- **www.raf.mod.uk/community**

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Useful Local Contacts:

- SSAFA Welfare Assistant:
- Padre:
- SMO:
- OC PMS:
- Station TRiM Administrator/Manager:

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