

Hearts on the Homefront

Phase #1 of "Turning Your Heart Toward Home" Workbook Course



Art by Norm Bergsma - www.incountryart.com

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Hearts on the Homefront:
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Course Instructions

This course is designed for group settings. However, it can be studied and applied individually. Keep in mind that a large percentage of the benefits of group interaction may be lost.

A facilitator will convene the meetings and the course should take approximately 3-4 hours. If the group chooses to do it in multiple meetings, then it can be done at the pace that is convenient for everyone involved.

At the conclusion of the course you will find an “After Action Form”. By filling this out we will be able to do such things as improve the course, keep participants connected, and update each person on other materials and courses that are available to assist military and veteran families.

Reference suggestions:

The following are some books that we recommend. We believe they will help in the process. Each book has a website from where they can be ordered.

“Down Range: To Iraq and Back” Bridget C. Cantrell, Ph.D. and Chuck Dean www.heartstowardhome.com (Pre-publication orders are available. Release in Spring/summer of 2005).

“When the War is Over: A New One Begins” Chuck Dean and Bette Nordberg www.namvetbook.com

“Heroes at Home: Help and Hope for America’s Military Families” Ellie Kay www.bethanyhouse.com

“Solo Ops: A Survival Guide for Military Wives” Hilary Martin Orders@Xlibris.com

“Surviving Deployment: A Guide for Military Families” Karen Pavlicin www.amazon.com

Publisher’s Note

This is intended solely for educational and informational purposes and not intended as medical advice. Please consult a medical or mental health professional if you have questions about your health.

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Introduction

The purpose of this short informational course is to serve as a preliminary study to the more detailed “Turning Your Heart Toward Home” workbook course by Bridget C. Cantrell, Ph.D. with Chuck Dean. That course is intended to help troops (and loved ones) re-integrate *after* returning from serving in military hazard zones for extended periods of time. However, this preparatory course is designed (and very beneficial) solely for those on the homefront while their loved one is deployed. It is a phase #1 course that should precede the primary workbook course.

In our research we have found it necessary, and of great importance, to help those folks waiting on the homefront become more aware of what to expect upon their serviceperson’s return. Hopefully this material will eliminate the many surprises, misunderstandings, and heartaches that may come along the way.

[We have compiled certain lists of examples, traits, habits and stressors within this course. However, these are not exhaustive lists and most certainly can be added to throughout the journey.]

Each troop *knows*, that they will be challenged in re-adjusting upon their return. The better equipped we are at home to work with them will make all the difference in how well that re-adjustment goes. A case in point is the following excerpt in a recent e-mail from the war zone:

“I sit here today a man at a crossroad. After almost 15 months of military service that took me from the Pacific Northwest halfway around the world to the Middle East, I prepare myself to re-enter the world that I know and truly love. The world I know is marked by the gentle voice of my daughter urging me to come and play with her; my wife holding me when I wake in the morning; and the time I shall soon devote to getting to know my son who just turned 2. It is a transition that troubles me...”

Welcome to the course. We hope the information will be valuable in the home coming you are waiting for.

Section One

How will it be Different?

It is impossible to say exactly how your loved one will be when they return. Everyone has a different resiliency and toleration level to hardships. We can, however, give you a combination of signs along the trail, “red-flag” warnings, and some actual experiences from veterans of earlier wars.

Change: Listed below are some ways that we have seen returnees change because of the exposure to the hardships and dangers of war. (Remember, some of these changes may seem unreal or trite to you, but if your loved one is reacting to them—they are an issue to be recognized and dealt with.) As a group, discuss what possible methods you can plan in order to cope with each change in a productive way. Brainstorming with people who find themselves in similar situations such as yours is an extremely important component to coping and healing.

The service person:

- Is now quiet and over-reflective (almost as if they are not present).
- Is now nervous and jumpy at the slightest provocation.
- Is now overly sensitive to sights, sounds, and situations that are reminders of the war zone.
- Is now short-tempered and becomes easily frustrated or angry over seemingly small matters.
- Cannot tolerate simple mistakes made by those around him or her.
- Cannot remain in crowds or social gatherings for any length of time. Is always looking for a way out.

Quirks/habits: Your loved one may have developed some quirks or habits as a means to physically survive or to take care of themselves emotionally while in the war zone. As a group, discuss what possible methods you can plan in order to cope with this list of possibilities in a productive way.

The service person:

- May have a “defensive “perimeter wire” in place and cannot allow anyone to get too close to them. (This could be a result of subconscious vows not to allow anyone too close because it is too painful when you lose them.)
- Sleeping with the lights on all night.
- Sleeping with weapons.
- Sitting in “strategic” places in public places to detect and be alert for sudden enemy attacks.
- May not want to unpack the clothes they brought back from the war zone. (Too many reminders are in the duffle bag, or they may have the feeling they will be called back and need to have things packed.)

Section Two

What Can I do to Prepare?

The very first thing you need to do is prepare yourself mentally for the changes and differences that will prevail for a while in your relationship. As much as we all want things to go back to the way they were *before* deployment, realize this is an unreal expectation. To think that you and your loved can go back to square one and pick up where you left off is setting yourself up for a loss. Time has passed and lives have changed. Be progressive and stay focused in the here and now. Here are some ways to prepare. Discuss them as a group and list out productive coping methods.

- For marriage partners: Plan to start the dating process all over again. Rekindle the friendship and romantic aspects of your relationship, and sort out the responsibilities afterwards.
- For family members: Plan to view the relationship in the present and avoid trying

- to re-live childhood activities, remembrances, and/or dreams. (After engaging in wartime activities, dreams and innocent notions of life may have been shattered and most likely the furthest thing from their mind. Bringing the memories of their past life can remind them too much of what they have lost.)
- Plan ways to be sensitive to your loved one's idiosyncrasies. For example, it is considerate to ask them where *they* would like to sit in a restaurant. Refrain from demanding that they go shopping in crowded malls. Do what you can to keep the kids from crawling on them too much (remember the "perimeter wire"?). Do not take it personal if your loved one does not hug as much as you would like. If you give them space by understanding and respecting the "wire" principle, hopefully they will draw closer in time.

Section Three

Exactly what is Post-Traumatic Stress?

Since the Vietnam War, a growing body of information has been gathered on the effects trauma. What was previously called "soldier's heart", "shell shock" or "battle fatigue" in previous wars, has been referred to as Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) since the Vietnam War. Some common manifestations are intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, hyper-arousal, anxiety, reactions triggered by loud noises, nightmares, emotionally numb (or over-reactive), unexplained anger/rage, and depression are just some of its major symptoms.

With the terror of September 11, 2001 still fresh in our national psyche, millions have become aware of the reactions to trauma firsthand as their eyes were fixed on the television sets and collectively experienced "9/11". As we have seen by this, PTSD is not limited to combat on the battlefield. These same symptoms are even familiar to many survivors of family abuse — emotional, physical and sexual.

Stress is a normal and personal response that our bodies and minds have in order to meet the demands that different situations present to us. When we contend with these demands and it goes beyond the range of normal human experiences (and war trauma is certainly something beyond that range), then we are likely to become more vulnerable to incurring the severe symptoms of "post" traumatic stress (PTSD).

Is PTSD a Mental Illness?

It is important to note that PTSD is *not* a mental illness. It is a normal reaction to an abnormal set of circumstances. What your loved one endured during war has gone beyond the realm of usual or routine human experiences. PTSD, therefore, is a reaction to the extreme stress people encounter during threats of danger to themselves or others and/or the fear of death. The level of stress resulting from this fear or danger may hinder those who suffer with PTSD in adjusting to civilian (or normal) life after the experience(s).

How long does PTSD last?

This is a common question. The objective with treating PTSD is to develop coping skills and awareness of how a person is triggered (A “trigger” is a reminder in one’s environment which activates: anxiety, fear, flashbacks, anger, nausea, hyper-alertness in addition to other symptoms of PTSD). There is no evidence that PTSD will ever be completely eradicated from a person’s life. However, there is an abundance of information, which supports the importance of positive interventions and treatments for the successful management of the various symptoms associated with PTSD. Once a person has been traumatized to this degree there may be ongoing episodes and manifestations of PTSD throughout their lifetime. The good news is that in many cases it can be managed by simply being aware and knowledgeable of the various symptoms and triggers. Educating those concerned about PTSD, and practicing self-care, are the two key safeguards that will help make the process smoother.

How Can I Help?

For the partner or family member living with a person with PTSD, it is important for them to be supportive. You can actually be a “second set of eyes” by heightening your awareness and increasing your empathy, so that you can understand how your loved one is being affected by the symptoms of PTSD. Being aware of your partner’s triggers is important to building trust and intimacy in the relationship. It is important for a person with PTSD to feel supported and loved. The chances of this happening are better if the partner or family member understands, and is involved with them on their journey towards healing.

As a group, please discuss what possible methods you can plan in order to cope with the following possible PTSD symptoms.

Major PTSD symptoms to become acquainted with:

- Depression
- Cynicism and distrust of government and authority
- Anger
- Alienation
- Isolation
- Sleep disturbances
- Poor concentration
- Tendency to react under stress with survival tactics
- Psychic or emotional numbing
- Negative self-image
- Memory impairment
- Emotional constriction
- Hypersensitivity to justice
- Loss of interest in work and activities
- Problems with intimate relationships
- Survivor guilt
- Difficulty with authority figures
- Hyper-alertness – hyper arousal

- Avoidance of activities that arouse memories of traumas in war zone
- Emotional distance from children, wife, and others
- Self-deceiving and self-punishing patterns of behavior, such as an inability to talk about war experiences, fear of losing others, and a tendency to fits of rage
- Suicidal feelings and thoughts
- Flashbacks to dangers and combat
- Fantasies of retaliation and destruction
- High risk employment/recreation

Section Four

How Can I Prepare My Children?

Children will have understandable fears for the safety of parents sent overseas. Therefore, it is important for you, the parent or family member, to know what to expect in children while their loved one is deployed. You can prepare the child first and foremost by educating yourself on spotting and dealing with their potential reactions to the new experience. It is crucial to provide opportunity for children to discuss their concerns and to help them separate real from imagined fears. It is also important to limit exposure to media coverage of violence.

Parents and relatives at home can help by letting children honestly express feelings and concerns. Frequent telephone calls, letters and/or email are essential in helping children feel connected to, and loved by, absent parents. Because repeated scenes of destruction of lives and property are featured in the daily news media, they may understand that “enemies of the United States” can harm their loved one. We adults need to help children feel encouraged and safe at a time when the world seems to be a more dangerous place. As much as possible we need to carry their share of the worry and pain that war causes. It is our duty.

I was once standing in an art display of very graphic Vietnam War scenes when a young mother came through leading a small boy of perhaps 4 years old. She was curious and wanted to take in what she could without spending a lot of time exposing her son to the impacting scenes. As she hastily dragged the boy along, he suddenly pointed at one of the paintings and asked, “Momma, what is that?” What she said next remains with me as most profound. She wisely answered him, “Someday you’ll know, but for now I’ll carry that load so you won’t have to.” She hurriedly exited the display and went about being a protective mom.

Emotional Responses

Emotional responses vary in nature and severity from child to child. Nonetheless, there are some similarities in how children feel when their lives are impacted by war or the threat of war:

- **Fear:** Fear may be the predominant reaction—fear for the safety of those in the military. When children hear rumors at school and pick up bits of information from television their imaginations may run wild. They may think the worst, however unrealistic it may be.
- **Loss of control:** Military actions are something over which children—and most adults—have no control. Lack of control can be overwhelming and confusing. Children may grasp at any control that they have, including refusing to cooperate, go to school, part with favorite toys, or leave your side.
- **Anger:** Anger is a common reaction and may often be a substitute (or familiar emotion) to express sadness or loss. Unfortunately, anger is often expressed at those to whom children are closest. Children may direct anger toward classmates and neighbors because they cannot express their anger toward those responsible for their parents being sent to war. Some children may show unexpected anger toward parents who are at home or those in the military; even to the extent that they do not want to write letters or draw pictures or send gifts. (This could be the child’s way of developing their own “perimeter wire”.)
- **Loss of stability:** War or military deployment interrupts routines. It is unsettling. Children can feel insecure when their usual schedules and activities are disrupted, which increases their level of stress and need for reassurance. Even the adults are dealing with their own instability, and children are easily influenced by their environment. It is important to use good judgment in your daily behavior.
- **Isolation:** Children who have a family member in the military, but who do not live near a military base, may feel more isolated. Children of reserve members called to active duty may not know others in the same situation. Such children may feel resentment and sadness toward friends whose families are intact (not deployed). They may strike out at signs of normalcy around them. Another group of children who may feel isolated are dependents of military families who have accompanied a remaining parent back to a hometown, or who are staying with relatives while both parents are gone. Not only do these children experience separation from parents, but they also experience the loss of familiar faces and surroundings.
- **Confusion:** This can occur on two levels. First, children may feel confused about the concept of war and what further dangers might arise. Second, children may have trouble understanding the difference between violence as entertainment and the real events taking place on the news. Today’s children live in the world of *Armageddon*, *Independence Day*, *Air Force One*, and cartoon Super Heroes. Some of the modern media violence is unnervingly real. Youngsters may have difficulty separating reality from fantasy, cartoon heroes, and villains, from the government soldiers and real terrorists. Separating the realities of war from media fantasy does require adult help.

What Can Parents Do?

Everyone, including adults, feels stressed during times of crisis and uncertainty. If your children seem to need help beyond what is normally available at home or school, seek mental health services in your community. Psychologists, counselors and social

workers can identify appropriate services and help with the referral process. For most children, adults can provide adequate support by the following actions:

Acknowledge children's feelings:

- Knowing what to say is often difficult. When no other words come to mind, a hug and saying "This is really hard for you/us" will help, but giving them an avenue of positive re-direction by engaging them in a stimulating activity will do wonders.
- Try to recognize the feelings underlying children's actions and put them into words. Say something like, "I can see you have feelings about this. Tell me more about them." Be careful not tell your children how *they* are feeling, instead let them tell you. A very good technique to express emotion is through art, music, and acting. Invite the child to use these methods to physically demonstrate their feelings. (Younger children may find that using these alternative modes of communication are easier ways to express themselves.)
- Sometimes children may voice concern about what will happen to them if a parent does not return. If this occurs, offer something like this, "You will be well taken care of. You won't be alone. What would this look like to you if this happened? Let me tell you our plan and we can work together."
- At times when your children are most upset, do not deny the seriousness of the situation. Saying to children, "Don't cry, everything will be okay," does not reflect how the child feels and does not make them feel better. Nevertheless, do not forget to express hope and faith that things will be okay; remembering to be truthful with what is appropriate for the age and situation. Determine as to whether or not your own fears are being projected onto your child. It is not appropriate for your child to carry your burden as well as their own.
- Older children, in particular, may require help clarifying what they believe about war and the role of the United States in this current conflict. They may ask some very poignant questions which you need to be prepared to address, such as, "Will my parent kill someone?" and "Are we killing innocent people in other countries?" are issues which may need discussion. It may be a time to speak to a clergy person and discuss the morality of war. Perhaps it is also good to remind the children that we hope our military can do enough to stop the war and help bring peace in other countries.
- Always be honest with children. Share your fears and concerns with discretion, while at the same time reassuring them that responsible adults are in charge.
- If participation in a faith community is part of your family life, talk to your faith leader about how to help your child think about the concepts of death and killing, in age-appropriate terms. This can be very important to calming your fear, as well as those of your children.
- Try to maintain normal routines and schedules to provide a sense of stability and security within the family, school and your community.

Help children maintain a sense of control by taking some action:

- Send letters, cookies or magazines to those in the military.

- Help older children find a family who has a parent on active duty and arrange some volunteer babysitting times for that family or offer to provide meals occasionally. These types of activities and support are vital for feeling a sense of purpose and community that can serve as healthy and productive expressions of compassion.

If a family member is away, make plans for some special activities:

- Gatherings with other families who have a loved one on active duty can help provide support for you as well as for your children.
- Special parent and child times can provide an extra sense of security, which might be needed. Let your child know that you will set aside a particular half hour each day to play. Make the time as pleasant and child-centered as possible. Return phone calls later and make your child the real focus of that special time.
- Organize a consistent pattern, which ensures a child of positive expectations, such as regular meal times. Morning and bedtime rituals (bathing, prayer, reading stories, etc.) can provide a wonderful sense of peace and security for both parent and child.
- Involve children in planning how to cope. Control and ownership are fostered when children help to plan strategies for dealing with a situation. Children often have practical and creative ideas for coping. Be open and willing to adjust your life accordingly. Be flexible without losing a sense of control.

Expect and respond to changes in behavior:

- All children will likely display some signs of stress. Some immature, aggressive, oppositional, as well as regressive, withdrawn and isolative behaviors are reactions to the uncertainty of this situation. We advise that you seek professional help if these behaviors continue. Just by having an objective third party to intervene can make a big difference in the well-being of your child's mental health.
- Even though there is a significant shift the family structure it is important to maintain consistent expectations for behavior. Be sure children understand that the same rules apply that were in place prior to the change.
- It is important that the roles remain intact. You do not want to undermine this principle by imposing a false authority upon a child. For example, one of the most damaging expectations, or "assignments", is to say, "Your dad is gone to war, so now you're the man of the house." This does not work. It confuses the child who may now see this status as an added obligation and burden to uphold.
- Some children whose parents are on active duty may have difficulty at bedtime. Maintain a regular bedtime routine. Be flexible about nightlights, siblings sharing a room, sleeping with special toys, and sitting with your child as they fall asleep. Doing so typically does not cause life-long habits. These are comforting means to provide reassurance to a child.

Extra support, consistency, empathy and patience will help children return to routines and their more usual behavior patterns. If children show extreme reactions (aggression, withdrawal, sleeping problems, etc.), consult with a mental health professional regarding the symptoms of severe stress disorders, and the possible need for a referral to a mental health agency.

Keep adult issues from overwhelming children:

- Do not let your children focus too much of their time and energy on the situation of having a loved one at war. If children are choosing to watch the news for hours each evening, find other activities for them. You may also need to watch the news less intensely and spend more time in alternative family activities.
- Know the facts about developments in the war. Be prepared to answer your children's questions factually, and take time to think about how you want to frame events and your reactions to them.
- Try not to let financial strains be a major concern of children. For National Guard or Reserve families going from a civilian job to active duty in the military may cut family income. Children are not capable of dealing with this issue on an ongoing basis. Telling a child that you need to be more careful with spending is appropriate, but be cautious about placing major burdens on them.
- And finally...self-care. Take time for yourself and try to deal with your own reactions to the situation as fully as possible. This, too, will help your child's well-being.

Section Five

Self-Care

When the oxygen mask drops out of the ceiling on airplanes, adults are instructed to place their masks on themselves before doing the same for any small children near them. It takes no explanation to see why this sequence is vital to survival. Likewise, it is a perfect illustration of why your *self-care* is so important. If you are not taking care of yourself properly, it is unlikely that your family will get the best care from you either. Only when we first help ourselves can we effectively help others. Caring for yourself is one of the most important—and one of the most often forgotten—things you can do as a parent who is carrying the load while a loved one is deployed. When *your* needs are taken care of, the person you care for will benefit as well.

When it comes to surviving the deployment of a loved one, you must do what you can to nurture yourself both physically and emotionally. This can be a difficult task since you are now standing in for both sides of the parenting spectrum, and have many more responsibilities to tend to than before.

In this section we will offer some tips and guidelines for you to focus upon which will help you in this self-care procedure. These are only a few of the things you can do to put special attention on yourself. Use this course time to discuss and share different methods of self-care with the group. You most likely will discover many more useful ideas from the others. Take good notes as the group shares.

Tips for self-care:

- Learn and use stress-reduction techniques. (Relaxation, deep breathing, etc.)
- Attend to your own healthcare needs and implement a vitamin program.
- Get proper rest and nutrition.
- Exercise regularly.
- Take time off without feeling guilty.
- Participate in pleasant, nurturing activities with other grown-ups.
- Seek and accept the support of others. Spend time each day conversing (in person, phone, or e-mail) with another supportive adult who can share your burden.
- Seek supportive counseling when you need it, or talk to a trusted counselor or friend.
- Identify and acknowledge your feelings.
- Change the negative ways you view situations.
- Take up a personal hobby.
- Limit your exposure and use of alcohol and drugs.
- Set goals. (Take baby steps).

Conclusion

We hope that this small course has helped in your journey to survive deployment. It is our hope that you will consider attending our more in-depth course “Turning Your Heart Toward Home”. This subsequent course is conducted jointly with you and your service person upon their return. If you will, please take a moment and indicate your interest in participating in this important course. Please take a moment to fill out this form and pass it on to your course facilitator.

After Action Form	
Name	_____
Partner or family member’s name	_____
Branch of service	_____
Present military unit	_____
Address	_____ Zip _____
Phone	_____
E-mail	_____
Was this course satisfactory to you? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
(If “no” can you explain? _____	

How can it be improved? _____	

Would you recommend it to others? Yes No
(If “no” can you explain? _____

Do you plan to attend the “Turning Your Heart Toward Home” course when your loved one returns from overseas? Yes No

May we send you updates and reminders through the mail? Yes No

Please feel free to contact the authors about any part of this course or questions that you may have regarding deployment or re-integration.

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