

CRFM Région de Montréal MFRC Montreal Region

Coping with absence TOGETHER

A guide for military spouses



Booklet coordination and design	Published by
Sabrina Lemaire, Specialized Education Technician (SET)	Montreal region MFRC

Inspired by the work of Valcartier and Trenton MFRC

BEFORE WE START

Absence due to military service is a reality that can disrupt daily life, relationships, and personal balance. This booklet was designed to support you through this period by offering guidance, explanations, and practical tools tailored to this unique experience.

The goal of this booklet is not to tell you what to do, nor to suggest an ideal way to cope with the separation, but rather to support you in understanding what you're going through, to normalize certain reactions, and to offer suggestions to help you navigate this period at your own pace.

Every separation is different. Every couple, every person, deals with their own experiences, challenges, and reality. It is therefore perfectly normal that some sections will resonate with you more than others. You are encouraged to use this booklet flexibly: return to it as needed, annotate certain passages, or simply keep what is useful to you right now.

Think of this document as a reference tool, a resource you can consult over time, depending on what you're going through and what you need.

Finally, it's important to remember that you don't have to go through this experience alone. Military Family Resource Centres (MFRC) offer various support services tailored to the realities of families and spouses.

Don't hesitate to reach out to **your local MFRC** if you feel the need for support, whether it's for a one-time need or on an ongoing basis.



SECTION 1

Essential information

When a service member is away, we often refer to it as a deployment. Sometimes deployment dates change, communication can be more difficult, and the level of risk may vary. On the other hand, many families may experience absences that are not due to a deployment. These absences can be frequent, close together, and sometimes unpredictable depending on the needs of the chain of command, which have similar impacts on loved ones as a deployment. Regardless of the reason for the absence, the effects are very real.

BASIC MILITARY VOCABULARY

- **Briefing**

A briefing is an informational meeting held before a task or mission.

Roles, expectations, instructions, and safety measures are explained during the briefing.

- **Chain of command**

The chain of command is a structure that outlines who supervises whom. It is used to convey information, ensure safety, coordinate responsibilities, and make important decisions.

- **HLTA (Home Leave Travel Assistance)**

HLTA is a scheduled break during a deployment that allows service members to return home for a few days or rest at an approved location. Dates are never guaranteed, as they depend on the mission's operational and personnel needs.

- **Mission**

A mission is the primary task assigned to a service member or a team. It can take place within Canada or abroad. This includes: assisting, supporting, training, protecting, or coordinating.

- **Build-up**

Build-up refers to the period of operational preparation that every member must undergo before leaving for a deployment. During this time, members receive information about the mission, take courses and training, and participate in exercises to meet the requirements expected during the operation.

- **UN (United Nations)**

The UN is an international organization comprising most of the world's countries. The UN works to maintain peace, protect human rights, provide aid in times of crisis, and promote cooperation among nations. In certain missions, Canadian military personnel collaborate with the UN to support stability and security in various regions of the world.

- **Operation**

An operation is an official mission organized by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). It has a name, a clear objective, and a specific scope.

Examples: humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, support for allies.

- **NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)**

An alliance of several countries, including Canada, that are committed to working together to ensure their collective security. The armed forces of these countries collaborate on joint operations, training exercises, and missions aimed at maintaining peace and responding to international crises.

- **Position/Assignment**

The military service member's job or role within their unit. Examples: mechanic, driver, medic, analyst, etc.

- **Rotation**

A rotation is a shift change. Each group takes turns to maintain continuous mission operations. Rotations affect each member's schedule, communications, and rest periods.

- **Support specialists**

Support specialists are members of the Forces who possess specific skills (medical, logistical, technical, or spiritual) and who support service members to ensure their safety, well-being, and the smooth execution of the mission. Examples: Chaplain, etc.

ABSENCE

An absence is any period during which a service member is away from home for professional reasons, without being officially deployed.

These absences may include:

- Training exercises (ranging from a few days to several weeks),

- Courses or professional development,
- Temporary assignments (event support, local operations),
- Temporary assignments,
- Travel or preparation exercises prior to a future deployment (ramp-up).

These absences may sometimes be less visible to the wider community, but they have real impacts on the spouse and the immediate family.

Even if it's not an overseas deployment, the effects are similar:

- You miss your spouse's presence.
- You worry about their safety and well-being.
- You must learn to communicate differently depending on their assignment.

It is important to remember that your emotions do not depend on the nature of the assignment, but on the bond you share with your spouse. Whether your spouse is in training, on a mission, or on an operation, the challenges associated with their absence are real.

There is no scale to measure the validity of what you experience during an absence; everyone experiences it differently. Even if these absences are sometimes less well-known to the public, they remain just as emotionally demanding.

DEPLOYMENT

Deployment is a period during which a service member is sent on a specific mission outside their usual place of residence, often abroad. This mission can last several weeks or several months, depending on the assigned mandate. During deployment, the service member carries out their duties and represents the CAF, all of which involves a prolonged separation from their family and loved ones.

During a deployment:

- Communication is limited and may be interrupted without notice.
- Certain information (location, activities) is confidential for security reasons.
- Start and return dates may change depending on operational requirements.

A deployment does not mean constant danger. Risks vary greatly depending on the mission and the service member's role.

THE MILITARY STRUCTURE

In the CAF, your spouse is never alone. Every member is part of a chain of command, which is a clear hierarchical structure responsible for the supervision, safety, and well-being of its personnel.

Within the chain of command:

- The commander makes strategic decisions and ensures the mission proceeds safely.

- Immediate supervisors support service members daily, address their needs, oversee tasks, and ensure team cohesion.
 - Service members always work in groups, surrounded by colleagues and supported by support specialists (communications, logistics, medical, etc.)
 - Camaraderie is an integral part of military culture; members support and look out for one another, creating a safe environment.
-

OPERATIONAL SECURITY

Often referred to as OPSEC, operational security is an essential rule in all military operations. It aims to protect service members and their teams.

In practice, this means that your spouse:

- Cannot always say exactly where they are;
- Cannot share information about daily activities;
- Cannot provide details about schedules, travel, or future plans;
- May remain silent for certain periods for security reasons.

Why this is important:

If your spouse does not respond, or responds very little, it is not a lack of willingness; it is a necessary measure for everyone's safety. Additionally, it is essential to avoid sharing details about your spouse's mission, location, or work on social media to protect their safety and that of their team.

TYPES OF OPÉRATIONS

Not all military missions are the same. Canada participates in several types of operations, each with a different context and objective.

Here are the general categories:

- Humanitarian support: assistance during natural disasters, humanitarian crises, epidemics, fires, floods, etc. These are aid-focused operations, often highly supervised, and generally in regions where the role is clear and structured.
- Peacekeeping operations: working with forces from other countries to improve security and cooperation (stabilizing regions after a conflict, protecting civilian populations, supporting local governments, etc.). These missions are highly structured, involve many international partners, and take place within strict diplomatic frameworks.
- Training and international partnership: contributing to stability in fragile regions (technical training, sharing expertise, practical exercises, supporting the modernization of local forces). These missions have an educational and cooperative objective and often take place in controlled environments or at established bases.

- Allied support operations: participation in joint missions with international partners. (Presence in a region to support stability, surveillance or deterrence activities, logistical or technical support). Although this type of operation may take place in more sensitive areas, military personnel are surrounded by allies, supported by significant resources, and guided by strict procedures.
- Domestic operations (in Canada): These operations occur when the CAF is called upon to provide support within the country (floods, wildfires, storms, community support, search and rescue operations, support during national events). Service members remain in Canada, within a regulated domestic context.

Since Canada is involved in many non-combat missions, knowing that not all of them take place in conflict zones can help reduce anxiety.

THE DAILY RHYTHM OF A MISSION

Even while on a mission or deployment, a service member's life follows a structured routine:

- Days are organized with periods of work, but also periods of rest.
- Service members have time set aside for sleep, meals, and sometimes lighter activities (sports, reading, music).
- Teams operate on rotating schedules, which means not everyone is on duty at the same time.

Why this matters:

Many military spouses imagine their partners as “always on the go,” sometimes in risky situations. In reality, their schedule also include calm, routine, and structured moments, which contribute to their safety and well-being.

INTEGRATED SUPPORT

During a mission, service members have access to various types of support:

- Medical support: healthcare teams, first aid, access to professionals depending on the mission.
- Psychological and moral support: counselors, chaplains, peer support.
- Safety: strict procedures, risk assessments, constant supervision.
- Daily supervision: Superiors ensure safety, morale, and monitoring of personnel needs.

Why it matters:

These services exist so that service members can take care of themselves, physically and emotionally, even when far from home. Families are often unaware that there is an entire support network directly integrated into missions and processes in place to report if a service member is struggling.

TECHNICAL DETAILS

- The announcement:

Service members typically receive deployment orders an average of 6–8 weeks before departure for most units. This timeframe accounts for mandatory steps: administrative formalities, family preparation, vaccinations, operational briefings, etc. For those in highly deployable units, these timelines can be much shorter depending on the destination, the operation, and the tasks to be performed.

- Duration:

On average, a deployment lasts up to 6 months, depending entirely on the member's role and operational requirements. A member may be offered the option to extend their assignment, which would lengthen the duration of their deployment. This information will be shared directly with you by the member themselves, as the CRFM has no direct contact with them during their mission and is therefore unaware of any changes that may occur.

- Location:

Each member participating in an operation receives different guidelines regarding the sharing of information about it. Some are authorized to share their destination and/or mission, while for others, everything must remain confidential. Again, this information will be shared with you by the member themselves before their departure.

COMMUNICATION

During a deployment, communication with family is not always regular and can be very limited. Operational constraints, location, and security may reduce the frequency and duration of contact, which means that periods without news are sometimes to be expected. These limitations can be difficult to cope with, especially when you are worried, but your expectations must remain realistic.

Why is communication limited?

- Security: Certain information (location, activities) cannot be shared to protect the service member and their team.
- Mission conditions: Your spouse may be in an area where internet or phone access is limited or difficult.
- Operational priorities: Your spouse must focus on the mission, which may limit the time available for communication.
- Frequent unforeseen events: Schedules change, and connections may be cut off without warning.

What this means for you:

- No news doesn't mean there's a problem: not hearing from them for several days may be normal depending on their assignment.
- No sensitive details: even if you ask, your spouse won't be able to tell you everything.
- Changes are frequent: an announced return date may be modified; the HLTA may be postponed or even canceled depending on the situation and operational needs.

Real-life examples:

- Situation: “My spouse texted me twice this week, then nothing.”
Reality: He or she may be on the move or in an area with no cell service.
- Situation: “He isn’t answering my questions.”
Reality: Certain answers are prohibited for security reasons.

How to handle these moments

- Prepare before departure: agree on a simple code (e.g., an emoji or a short sentence) to say “Everything’s fine” when it's possible.
- Set realistic expectations: discuss together how often you’ll likely be able to message each other (e.g., “I’ll text you when I can, but sometimes it’ll be harder”).
- Create a ritual to reassure yourself: write a message in a notebook or on a note, even if you can’t send it right away.
- Avoid over-monitoring: limit compulsive checking of news or social media.

It’s normal for silences or limited responses to make you feel anxious, frustrated, or even angry. These emotions aren’t exaggerated, and they don’t make you an overly anxious partner. They reflect your attachment and love for your partner.

You have the right to experience these emotions and to look for ways to ease them. In the following sections, we’ll explore practical strategies for getting through these moments without burning out, while remaining a stable source of support for your partner.

WHERE TO FIND RELIABLE INFORMATION ABOUT MISSION

If you’d like to better understand the context in which your partner works, there’s an easily accessible official resource. The Government of Canada provides a page listing current operations:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/list.html>

This page lists all active missions and provides a clear description of:

- The objective of each operation;
- The general role of military personnel on the ground;
- The mission context (reason, partners, region);
- Previous missions;
- For some operations, a photo gallery.

This is a safe and reliable way to gain a general understanding of what your spouse is helping to accomplish.

Important: Even though this resource is comprehensive, some details may not be available for security reasons. This doesn’t mean there’s a problem—it’s a standard measure to protect service members and their teams.

By better understanding how missions work, you can feel more prepared and better equipped to navigate the different phases of separation. In the following sections, we'll explore practical ways to support you during this time.



SECTION 2

Preparing for the absence

The period leading up to the deployment is often emotionally charged. Between administrative tasks, relationship adjustments, and conflicting emotions, this phase can be unsettling, even before the actual departure.

Preparing for the absence doesn't mean anticipating or controlling everything. Rather, it's about preparing emotionally, clarifying certain reference points, and establishing anchors to help you navigate this period with a little more stability.

REACTION TO THE ANNOUNCEMENT

The announcement of an absence due to military service often marks a turning point for the couple and the family. No matter when the news arrives, it can cause an internal shock—sometimes subtle, sometimes more obvious. Some people feel an immediate upheaval, while others seem to handle it well at first, only to be overwhelmed by emotions later. There is no ideal or expected reaction. It simply means that you are beginning to grasp what this absence will entail, both practically and emotionally, even before the absence begins.

THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF ABSENCE

Absence due to military service can trigger a wide range of emotions that often follow a cycle, even though each partner goes through it at their own pace and with varying intensity.

This emotional cycle is not linear. It is not a series of fixed stages: it is possible to go back, skip a phase, or experience several at the same time. Understanding this cycle does not make the emotions disappear, but it can help make sense of them, reduce guilt, and better understand certain reactions in yourself and your partner.

The emotional cycle of separation is briefly outlined here to provide you with a general overview. It will be discussed in more concrete terms in the section on couples during separation, where its effects on the relationship are explored in greater detail.

Anticipation of the separation

(2 to 6 weeks before departure)

Upon hearing the news of the separation, it is common for partners to begin preparing themselves mentally for the upcoming separation. This first stage corresponds to the moment when the separation begins to feel real. Even before departure, the mind and body begin a process of adaptation. Thoughts turn increasingly toward what is to come, and a form of emotional preparation, whether conscious or not, sets in.

Detachment and withdrawal

(1 to 3 weeks before departure)

As the departure draws nearer, it is common for some people to unconsciously create emotional distance from the partner who is leaving. This avoidance is a protective mechanism: it's as if the brain is trying to lessen the impact of the upcoming separation by creating a deliberate emotional distance, in the hope that the pain will be less intense. This phase can give the impression of a certain withdrawal or a change in the way the relationship is conducted.

Emotional disruption

(Weeks following departure)

Once the absence becomes a reality, a sense of imbalance may set in. Reference points shift, and adjusting to the new daily routine requires energy. This stage corresponds to a phase of complete reorganization, where one seeks a new balance without having found it yet.

Recovery and stabilization

(During the remainder of the absence)

Over time, a new form of stability sets in. Reference points become clearer, and emotional reactions tend to even out. The absence remains present, but it gradually integrates into daily life in a more sustainable way.

Anticipating the return

(2 to 4 weeks before the return)

As the return approaches, attention turns to the upcoming reunion. This period marks a transition: we begin to move away from “absence” mode and look ahead to a new chapter, without always knowing

exactly what it will be like.

Renegotiation and stabilization of the relationship

(Weeks following the return)

Returning home does not mean an immediate return to the way things were before. This stage involves the necessary adjustments to redefine routines, roles, and relationship dynamics, considering the changes experienced by both parties during the time apart.

CLARIFYING ONE'S ROLE AS A PARTNER

During the absence, the spouse's primary role is neither operational nor logistical. It is primarily emotional and relational.

This may include:

- Providing a reassuring presence;
- Maintaining the connection, even in a minimal way;
- Providing support without overwhelming;
- Taking care of their own emotional stability.

It's normal to support your partner as they prepare for their absence, but it's important to remember that this is an integral part of their job. You don't have to understand everything, anticipate everything, or manage everything. Your presence and consistency are already meaningful.

CLARIFYING EXPECTATIONS BEFORE DEPARTURE

Before departure, a brief and realistic discussion can help reduce misunderstandings and anxiety that may arise during the absence.

Possible questions:

- "When you can, how do you prefer to communicate?"
- "How often do you think is realistic?"
- "If you can't respond, is there a simple way to let me know you're okay?"
- "Are there any topics you'd rather avoid?"

Having this conversation early on often allows:

- The partner who is leaving to be more emotionally available
 - The partner staying behind to feel more secure about what comes next
-

EMOTIONAL PREPARATION

Emotional preparation often begins even before the departure. While many practical details need to be organized, emotions can intensify or become mixed as the time of separation approaches.

Taking the time to acknowledge what you're feeling inside helps you better prepare for what's ahead, without trying to control or downplay your emotional reactions. This approach is primarily intended to support your adjustment and maintain your balance during the absence.

This may include:

- Naming your emotions, even when they are contradictory
- Distinguishing between what is within your control and what is not
- Developing a personal support plan

Preparing your support plan:

- Identifying support people
- Choose a few calming strategies
- Set protective boundaries (e.g., limit your exposure to the news)

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICTING EMOTIONS

It is common, while preparing for a separation, to feel a range of conflicting emotions at the same time. For some, it's possible to feel excited about the departure while remaining worried about the challenges ahead. It's also possible to feel happy for your partner, even though the temporary separation will still be a hurdle to overcome. This coexistence can be confusing and trigger feelings of guilt, leading you to wonder if you're reacting appropriately

These contradictions are, however, normal. They overlap several realities: attachment to the person who is leaving, recognition of the importance of their mission and, at the same time, the very real impact of the upcoming absence on you and your family. The brain and emotions are trying to process all these elements simultaneously.

These emotions may also shift rapidly: feeling calm and confident one moment, then anxious or irritable shortly afterward. This fluctuation does not signify instability or fragility. It simply reflects an ongoing adaptation process in a demanding situation.

Embracing these conflicting emotions, rather than trying to eliminate one in favor of the other, often helps reduce guilt and confusion. It is possible to feel proud and worried at the same time, strong and tired, committed to the relationship while finding the separation difficult to bear.

MEDIA, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND SAFETY

During deployments, excessive consumption of news or unofficial content can unnecessarily increase anxiety. The media may tend to sensationalize sociopolitical conflicts, which will then have a direct impact on your state of mind. It is therefore recommended to consume this type of information with caution throughout the period of separation.

Helpful tips:

- Limit the time spent on the news
 - Prioritize official sources
 - Avoid jumping to conclusions
-

WHEN TO SEEK SUPPORT

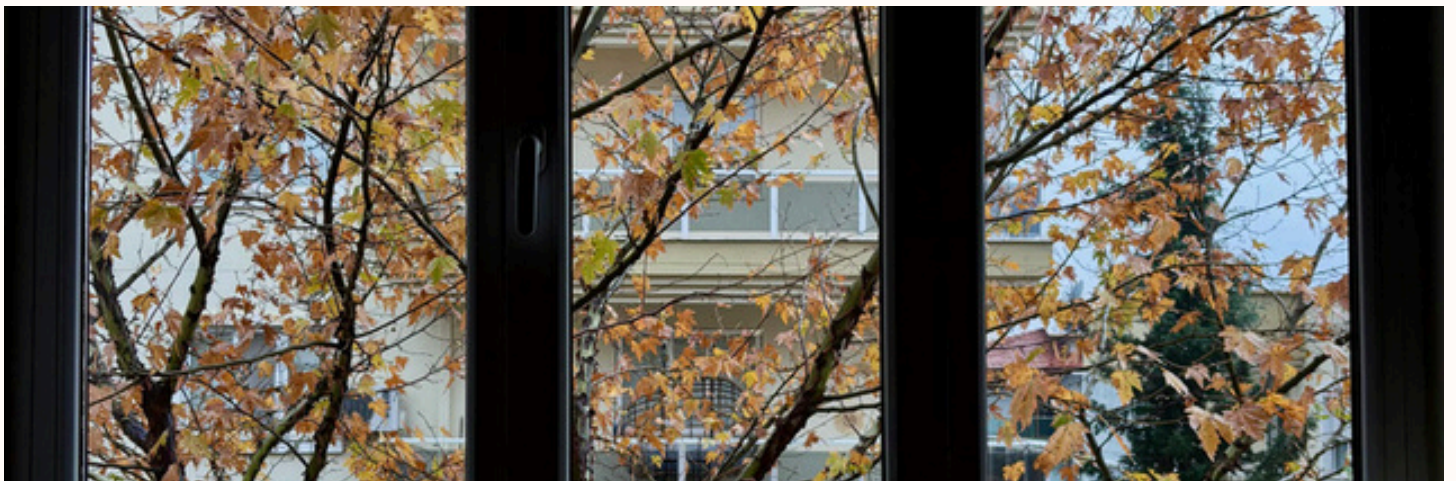
Even with good preparation, certain periods may become more than you can handle on your own.

Support may be helpful if:

- Anxiety becomes persistent;
- Your sleep has been disrupted for several weeks;
- Your emotions regularly feel overwhelming;
- Daily functioning becomes difficult.

Preparing for the absence isn't about eliminating worry or grief, but about establishing guidelines, clarifying expectations, and giving yourself the tools to protect yourself emotionally.

In the next section, we'll discuss how to cope with absence daily maintain your balance and get through the toughest moments.



SECTION 3

Coping with absence

The absence of a partner due to military service requires significant emotional and organizational adjustment. It affects daily life, inner balance, and how you navigate your role in the relationship. This section offers concrete and realistic strategies for getting through this period, preserving your energy, and taking care of yourself during the absence.

It's not about succeeding at everything or managing everything perfectly, but about finding points of reference that support you, at your own pace, in this context.

EXPRESSING AND MANAGING YOUR EMOTIONS

Separation can trigger a wide range of emotions: worry, sadness, irritation, emotional exhaustion, ambivalence, or feelings of loneliness. These reactions are normal and can fluctuate from day to day, sometimes for no apparent reason.

Expressing and managing your emotions doesn't mean controlling them or making them disappear but allowing them to flow without letting them take over.

What can help:

- Name what you're feeling, without judgment;
- Write (free-form journaling, a few lines a day, keywords);
- Take a moment to slow your breathing or refocus;
- Engage in a meaningful or soothing activity.

Some days will be harder than others, even when you have tools to help. This doesn't mean you're falling behind or handling the loss poorly. It simply means you're human and connected to someone who matters to you.

STAYING ON TRACK: ROUTINES, PRIORITIES, AND SMALL ANCHORS

When the loss begins, daily life may feel disorganized, even if responsibilities remain the same. Establishing flexible, adaptable routines can help stabilize your bearings, create a sense of consistency, and reduce the emotional burden. Routines, however, are not obligations but anchors.

Helpful guidelines:

- Routines tailored to your energy level
- Simple rituals (having coffee outside, walking, stretching, reading)
- Realistic weekly micro-goals
- Prioritizing the essentials, especially during more demanding periods

Some weeks, doing the bare minimum is more than enough. Adjusting your expectations and intentionally lightening your schedule can be a way to protect yourself, not a failure.

TOOLS FOR MANAGING MENTAL LOAD

During an absence, mental load can increase without being immediately apparent at first. Organization and structure can become allies in preserving your energy, provided they remain simple and helpful. The goal is not to optimize daily life, but to reduce the number of decisions to make and to externalize information.

Possible tools:

- Shared calendar (with the absent partner or loved ones, depending on the situation)
- Visible lists or simple checklists
- Automatic reminders for payments or deadlines
- Gathering important information in one place

When a tool becomes a source of stress or excessive control, it's best to simplify it or set it aside temporarily. Organization is a support, not a requirement.

GETTING THROUGH THE TOUGHEST TIMES

Even with guidelines in place, some moments will be harder to get through. These periods are an integral part of the experience of absence. Giving yourself permission not to perform at your best during these moments is a form of self-care. Imposing standards based on a previous “normality” can become counterproductive, since that reality is no longer yours during the absence.

Common signs:

- Unusual impatience
- Physical tension
- Rumination
- Marked fatigue or sudden discouragement

Helpful strategies:

- Recognize and name the emotion you're feeling
 - Take a break, even a brief one
 - Temporarily lower your expectations
 - Turn to a calming activity or a loved one
-

MANAGE ANXIETY RELATED TO MOMENTS OF SILENCE

Silence is often one of the most difficult aspects of absence. When information is limited, the brain naturally tries to fill in the gaps, often with anxiety-inducing scenarios, and draws its own conclusions.

These coping mechanisms are meant to protect but can significantly increase distress.

To ease these moments:

- Remind yourself that a lack of news does not necessarily mean there is a problem
- Rely on the reference points established before departure
- Limit exposure to the media or to excessive speculation
- Return to a concrete, immediate activity

Anxiety related to silence is common and understandable. It says nothing about your ability to cope with the absence.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF DURING THE ABSENCE

Your well-being doesn't go on hold while your partner is away. Taking care of yourself helps you stay resilient over time and maintain balance in a situation that demands a lot of emotional energy. Giving yourself attention and care isn't a selfish act: it's a way to stay more available, stable, and grounded in the face of the demands of separation.

Taking care of yourself might mean:

- Continuing certain activities or hobbies
- Allowing yourself to experience pleasure
- Listening to your limits
- Getting out of the house

It's common for enjoyable moments to be followed by feelings of guilt. Feeling good doesn't diminish love or attachment. Putting your life completely on hold can make the absence even harder to bear.

MAINTAINING THE CONNECTION

Even when direct communication is limited, it's possible to nurture the connection in symbolic and independent ways.

Examples of rituals:

- Keeping a meaningful object;
- Writing down thoughts or messages to be given upon return;
- Listening to a shared playlist;
- Doing an activity associated with the absent partner.

These gestures help you feel connected without relying on external factors.

WHAT'S NORMAL DURING AN ABSENCE

During an absence related to military service, certain reactions may be surprising or cause concern. However, they are an integral part of the adjustment process and are frequently reported by partners.

It is normal to:

- Experience emotional ups and downs. Some days may feel lighter, while others are heavier, without there necessarily being a specific trigger;
- Feel the absence less on certain days. At times, daily life takes over and the absence seems to fade into the background. The brain learns to adapt and focus on other aspects of life;
- Noticing increased irritability, which can sometimes be hard to explain. This sensitivity may be linked to emotional fatigue, mental load, or accumulated stress, rather than a specific relationship issue;

- Feeling frustration or anger toward the situation. These emotions are not directed at the partner, but at the constraints imposed by the absence, distance, or uncertainty;
- Feeling a need for social withdrawal: having less energy for interactions, wanting to refocus, or spending more time alone.

None of these reactions call into question the bond, commitment, or love within the couple. Rather, they reflect the effort to adapt that a period of prolonged absence requires.

PREPARING FOR EMOTIONAL UPSETS

Emotional stability is not linear. Certain moments can be more difficult: sensitive dates, bad news, accumulated fatigue. Creating an emotional support kit can serve as a guide and anchor to help you get through these times.

Examples:

- Three soothing activities
- A support person
- Continue an activity you used to do together
- A journal to jot down your thoughts

Coping with absence requires flexibility, patience, and a great deal of self-compassion. It's not about getting through this period without difficulty, but about using the resources available to maintain your balance and energy.

In the next section, we'll take a more concrete look at the couple, the challenges, and practical strategies to support this important transition.



SECTION 4

Our relationship during the absence

Absence doesn't just affect the person who leaves or the one who stays. It shapes the couple: in how they communicate, support each other, make decisions, and often understand one another.

Even in strong relationships, separation creates a temporary imbalance. Roles shift, reference points change, and emotions can become more intense or more volatile. This roller coaster ride doesn't mean your relationship is in trouble; it simply means it's adapting.

During an absence due to military service, partners don't experience the situation in the same way, since they're living in distinct realities, with different constraints and reference points.

One partner navigates the separation as part of daily life, taking on more responsibilities, adapting to the unexpected, and carrying a mental burden that builds up over time. The other, meanwhile, experiences it within a structured, often demanding operational framework, where rules, priorities, and constraints largely determine availability, communication, and access to information.

This disconnect can sometimes lead to misunderstandings, even when there is plenty of love and goodwill.

THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE IN A RELATIONSHIP

Since you received the news that you will be facing separation, you may have already recognized certain elements of the emotional cycle, such as anticipation, adaptation, discouragement, and so on. Within a couple, these cycles do not always unfold at the same pace and may not be symmetrical for both partners.

It is common for one partner to be in a more active phase of organizing or planning while the other is going through a phase of worry or withdrawal—or vice versa.

What does it look like when your rhythms don't align?

- One may feel a greater need to talk, while the other withdraws to cope.
- One may downplay the situation, while the other experiences it more intensely.
- One may already be thinking about returning, while the other is still very much rooted in the sense of loss.
- One may be looking for solutions, while the other mainly needs to be listened to.

This can lead to frustration, a sense of distance, or the feeling that you're no longer on the same page. Understanding these differences often helps you shift your perspective on the situation and meet the other person where they are.

In practical terms, these emotional adjustments can manifest in different ways throughout the separation.

Anticipation of the separation

(2 to 6 weeks before departure)

- More frequent discussions about planning for the coming months
- Increased need for closeness or to be alone
- Denial, anger, or confusion regarding the departure

Examples:

- One partner wants to talk often about the departure and deployment, while the other changes the subject or acts as if the situation is the same as usual.
- For the one left behind, irritability may arise at the thought of soon having to shoulder all the responsibilities of daily life alone. For the other, irritability may be directly linked to apprehension about the tasks and the upcoming mission.

Detachment and withdrawal

(1 to 3 weeks before departure)

- Fewer deep conversations
- A feeling of running out of time
- The feeling of emotional distance, even when physically together

Examples:

- Minor, everyday disagreements can quickly take on disproportionate importance—such as who will pick up the kids, the cancellation of an activity, or a simple misunderstanding.
- One partner may, consciously or unconsciously, push the other away to protect themselves emotionally from the impending separation.

Emotional disruption

(2 to 6 weeks after departure)

- A feeling of emptiness or imbalance
- More intense emotions during the first calls
- Emotional or physical exhaustion

Examples:

- Everyday moments (evenings, weekends, family events) bring the absence and loneliness into sharper focus.
- Difficulty getting back into a daily routine, with the feeling that days are longer or more difficult than before.

Recovery and stabilization

(during the remainder of the absence)

- Finding a more stable communication rhythm
- Adjusting expectations
- Develop strategies to stay connected

Examples:

- Together, you develop a daily communication routine that meets your needs
 - The partner who stays behind is better able to plan and pace themselves, while the other feels more at ease knowing that things are running smoothly
-

There is no normal or ideal way to cope with separation. Every couple navigates this experience based on their own reference points, resources, and challenges. The stages of separation are not set in stone: they evolve, change, and can be experienced differently depending on the moment.

Better understanding these stages can help make sense of certain reactions, but it doesn't automatically lighten the emotional burden. Separation remains a difficult experience, even when it's better understood.

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARTNERS DURING THE ABSENCE

Communication during separation doesn't always go as we might have imagined. Constraints, fatigue, and unexpected events influence how we interact and often require adjustments to our expectations and the ways we stay connected.

1. Adjusting expectations

During the absence, communication methods often need to be revised. What we imagine is possible or desirable does not always match what can be experienced.

It can be helpful to remember that:

- The frequency of communication may vary;
- Emotional availability is not constant;
- The unexpected is part of military life.

Personal expectations can sometimes lead to disappointment. Identifying, adjusting, or revisiting them can help protect the relationship.

2. Empathetic Communication

During your partner's absence, communicating with empathy can be challenging due to your different daily contexts and realities. The emotions you experience often require greater flexibility, understanding, and compassion toward one another.

This may mean:

- Expressing how you feel without blame (*"I'm finding this difficult right now"*)
- Recognizing the other person's limits
- Accepting that the other person doesn't always have the energy to take everything in

Communication is not:

- Trying to solve everything
- Analyzing everything

- Or carrying everything alone

3. **Managing concerns within the couple**

When a couple is separated for a period, absence and longing can quickly give way to imagination. When information is scarce, the mind tends to easily fill in the gaps.

It can be helpful to distinguish facts from assumptions:

- What I know
- What I imagine
- What I fear

These distinctions often help reduce rumination and anxiety.

When anxiety affects a relationship, it can manifest itself in the following ways:

- Negative interpretations of silence
- An increased need for reassurance
- Emotional tension at a distance

It is not anxiety itself that weakens the couple, but rather the act of dealing with it alone. Acknowledging it without overreacting, asking for guidance rather than constant reassurance, or relying on reliable sources when available can help ease the tension in the relationship.

4. **Sharing without bearing the whole burden**

During a separation, the need to share what we're experiencing remains legitimate and important. At the same time, it may become necessary to reflect together on how this information is shared.

Choosing what to share doesn't mean cutting each other off, but rather:

- Identifying what the other person absolutely wants or needs to know
- Recognizing that some details can wait for a more appropriate time
- Considering each person's emotional and practical limits

Continuing to share aspects of daily life, even simple or ordinary ones, helps maintain the connection and preserve each person's place within the relationship. This can help the absent partner stay engaged, involved, and feel that they are an active part of your shared life, even when they cannot act directly or provide an immediate solution.

Several factors can influence communication during the absence: physical or emotional fatigue, operational constraints, jet lag, etc. These can reduce availability, without this necessarily indicating a lack of interest or love.

The quality of the bond does not depend on the depth or duration of interactions. Even small connections can be highly valuable and maintain a sense of closeness for both partners. A quick message, a voice note, or a photo of daily life can make a big difference during a separation. When time and energy are limited, acknowledging this can ease the sense of emotional distance experienced by both partners.

Building and maintaining bridges may seem difficult, especially when the distance is great, but despite this, it is still possible to nurture the “us.”

Suggestions for simple shared projects:

- Watch a TV series together
- Share a music playlist
- Plan an activity for when you return
- Set small, symbolic goals

Suggestions for habits that strengthen your bond:

- A message at a key moment during the week
- A shared symbolic gesture
- A way to mark the passage of time

These habits support the bond, even when distance is a factor. Simplicity remains an asset because it reduces pressure and fosters continuity in the relationship.

WHEN TO SEEK SUPPORT

It may sometimes seem difficult, or even pointless, to seek support for the couple when one partner is away due to military obligations. However, services exist that consider the specific context of the separation and can support the couple even when the two partners are not physically together.

It may be appropriate to seek support if:

- Tensions become constant
- Communication breaks down
- Feelings of loneliness intensify
- The emotional bond seems to be fading

Seeking support while your partner is absent is an ideal way to protect the relationship, not a sign of failure.

In the next section, we will discuss preparing for the return and the adjustments involved in reintegration in order to support this important transition for the couple.



SECTION 5

Reintegration

The return marks the end of physical separation, but it does not automatically mean the end of adjustments. For most couples, this period represents a new transition—sometimes eagerly anticipated, sometimes more complex than imagined.

It is normal to view the return as a moment of relief. However, resuming life as a couple after a period of separation often requires time, flexibility, and a certain ability to accept that things will not immediately return to the way they were.

THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE UPON RETURN

Tout comme pendant l'absence, le retour s'accompagne souvent de mouvements émotionnels changeants. Ces cycles ne sont pas les mêmes pour tous, et ils ne se déroulent pas selon un ordre précis.

Anticipation of the return

(2 to 4 weeks before the return)

- Excitement mixed with apprehension
- High expectations or fear of being disappointed
- Questions about how to reconnect

Examples:

- For the partner who stayed behind, positive emotions may be accompanied by concerns about the service member's physical or psychological state at the time of reintegration
- One partner may be looking forward to the reunion, while the other worries about not being up to the moment.

Renegotiation of the relationship

(Weeks following the return)

- Need to adjust to each other's roles
- Difficulty adapting to the rhythm of daily life
- Need for time to integrate new routines

Example:

- The returning partner may feel as though they have lost their place in the face of your newfound independence.
- The couple may experience tension related to their respective experiences during the absence.

Reintegration and stabilization

(A few weeks after the return)

- Finding a more stable balance
- Gaining a better understanding of what each person experienced during the separation
- Strengthening the relationship based on lessons learned during the separation

Examples:

- The couple develops new guidelines and clearer ways of communicating.
- Certain topics become easier to discuss, with greater respect for each other's boundaries.

REINTEGRATING INTO DAILY LIFE

Reorganization of roles:

- During the absence, the partner who stayed behind has often developed a high degree of independence: decision-making, managing daily life, and well-established routines.
- For their part, the service member returns from a structured, sometimes very intense environment that bears no resemblance to daily life at home.
- Reintegration often requires a redistribution of roles, which can lead to some tension or misunderstandings. It is important to consider the reality the other person experienced during the absence and to give yourselves time to find a shared rhythm again.

It is normal that:

- The military spouse needs time to give the other person space, since she feels in control of the workload
- The service member seeks to find their place within the family unit without always knowing how. The environment remains the same but has changed significantly since their departure.

Refining routines :

- The routines established during the absence often helped everyone cope. Some worked well and are worth keeping; others will need to be adjusted.

- It is not necessary to change or adjust everything immediately. Moving forward gradually often helps reduce pressure and better respect everyone's pace.

It's normal that:

- The partner who stayed behind is eager for a reduction in daily workload, responsibilities, or simply a break.
 - The person returning may feel the need to take a break before getting back into the daily routine
 - You may not immediately be on the same page regarding reintegration into daily life; understanding and compassion for what the other person experienced during the absence are essential.
-

Reconnecting as a couple, gradually :

- Emotional and relational reconnection takes time. Even when the bond is strong, the long-distance connection does not automatically translate into intimacy upon return
 - Needs may differ:
 - One partner may want to talk a lot, while the other may want to talk less
 - One may seek immediate closeness, while the other may feel a need for space
 - These differences do not mean that you love each other any less or that you are rejecting the other person. They often reflect distinct ways of readjusting.
 - Getting back together doesn't mean picking up where you left off, but rather creating a new continuity based on your new reality.
-

Returning is not a one-time event, but a process. Adjustments often take several weeks, sometimes a few months.

Comparing your experience to that of other families or couples, to a previous return, or to an idealized image can increase the pressure. Every reintegration following an absence is unique, even within the same relationship.

SIGNS TO WATCH AFTER RETURNING

The period following the return requires adjustments for both partners. It is normal for certain reactions to emerge in the person returning, without this necessarily indicating a persistent difficulty. However, certain signs may warrant special attention if they persist or intensify over time.

You may want to pay attention if your partner:

- Seems constantly withdrawn or distant;
- Constantly avoids conversations or certain everyday situations;
- Displays marked irritability or disproportionate reactions;
- Has trouble resting or getting back into a regular routine;
- Often seems on edge or tense;
- Shows little emotion or, conversely, seems overwhelmed more frequently;
- Has lost interest in activities they usually enjoy;

These signs are not necessarily cause for concern in and of themselves, especially if they are temporary. They may be part of the adjustment process following the return. However, when they persist, intensify, or affect the relationship or daily functioning, it may be helpful to seek support. Despite these signs, **it remains each person's personal responsibility to ask for support if they feel the need.**

The return marks a significant transition for the couple. It does not require perfect or immediate adaptation, but rather patience, kindness, and openness.

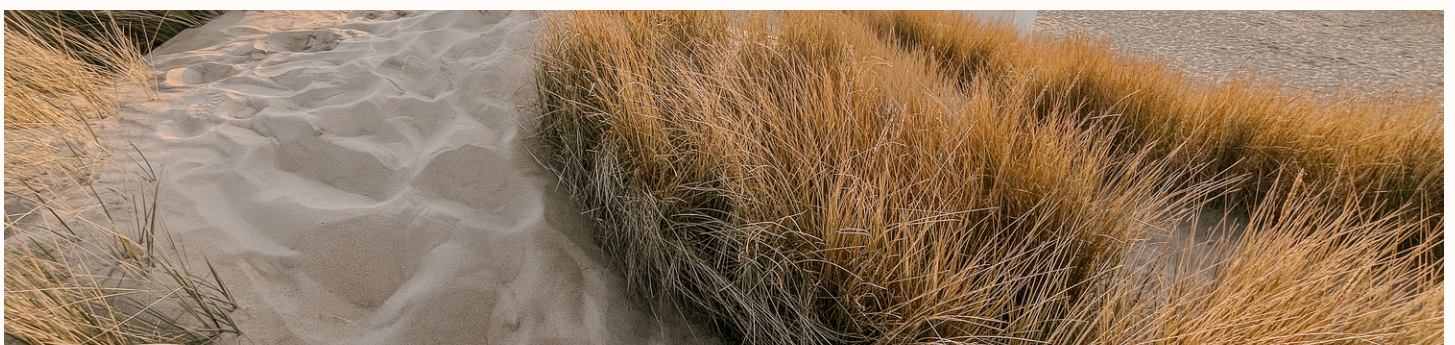
Even when it is challenging, the reintegration process can become an opportunity to better understand one's own needs, those of the other person, and to strengthen the bond based on a new shared reality.



Navigating a separation due to military service takes time, adaptation, and a great deal of flexibility. There is no perfect way to go through this experience, only different ways to adjust to it, depending on your resources and your journey.

This booklet is not intended to explain or solve everything, but to offer guidance to support you through what you are going through. You can return to it throughout the separation, taking what resonates with you and leaving behind what doesn't.

Remember that you are not alone in facing this reality. Support is available, and you can always reach out for it, at your own pace.



Thank you for taking a few moments to complete this short survey, your responses help us meaningfully improve this booklet so it can better support families experiencing an absence:

<https://interceptum.com/si/fr/10133297>

Reference

Canadian Forces Mental Health and Well-being Services (CFMHWS).

Emotional Cycle of Deployment.

<https://sbmfc.ca/services-de-soutien/deploiement/cycle-emotionnel-du-deploiement>

Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services (CFMWS).

Support for Military Families.

<https://sbmfc.ca/services-de-soutien/familles>

Canadian Armed Forces – Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services (CFMWS).

Managing Deployments – Road to Mental Readiness (R2MR) for Families.

https://r2mrfamily.ca/fr/section_content/managing-deployments/

Guérin, E., & Richer, I. (2024).

Piloting the home ship: Understanding the deployment experience of Canadian Special Operations Forces Command spouses. *Military Psychology*, 36(2), 168–183.

Bouthillette, M. (2018).

The experiences of military spouses during military deployments.

Master's thesis, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi.

Adou, G. E. (2023).

The realities faced by spouses of Canadian veterans and their coping strategies during military deployments.

Master's thesis, Saint Paul University.

Zwiczewicz, J. (2019).

Improving family support in the Canadian Armed Forces: A qualitative study.

Canadian Military Journal, 19(1), 52–60.

Boudreault, G. (2020).

The effect of emotion-focused couples therapy on marital satisfaction among military couples.

Doctoral dissertation, Université du Québec en Outaouais.

Government of Canada – Department of National Defence. (2025).

DAOD 5044-0 – Family Services to Support Members of the Canadian Armed Forces.

Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC).

Absence and Deployment Services.

Valcartier Military Family Resource Centre. (2025).

Guide for Parents of Service Members Experiencing Absence.

Office of the Canadian Veterans Ombudsman. (2020).

Spouses of Canadian Armed Forces Veterans During the Transition to Civilian Life.

