

REINTEGRATION: *Impact on the Workforce*

By Jennifer M. Doran
Contributing Writer

Other than the reunion with family, returning to your “normal” job can ignite bittersweet feelings. On one hand, you are thrilled to be reunited with coworkers and excited to return to the normalcy of a non-combative job. On the other hand, your attitude and work habits have changed. You are anxious about feeling satisfied with your “normal” job. You question what you have in common with “civilians.”

Work provides identity and gratification to a person's life. It is one of the most important components of a successful readjustment into “normal” life. Reintegration is recognized in the military as the re-assimilation of a returning military member back to their “normal” life. The reintegration of the military member into “re-

ality” can impact the well-being of the individual and entire workforce.

“We want our troops who come back from deployment to obtain a sensitization to their new environment and try to gradually become accustomed to new rules, new ways of doing things, new expectations,” said Dr. Thomas Appel-Schumacher, USAF Family Plans and Programs.

Although picking up where you left off in a normal work environment can be intimidating, employers can make the adjustment seamless. According to the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS), the complexity of the Iraq war has contributed to reintegration stresses experienced by service members, their spouses and families. Many service members have encountered confusion and stress due to the variety of missions compounded by extended or open-ended return dates.

The *January 2005 Fact Sheet* from the USUHS suggests that the use of their information guide *Psychological First Aid*, whose primary objective is to create and sustain an environment of *safety, calm, connectedness* to others, *self-efficacy* or empowerment, and *hope*, is the chosen starting point in the employer-employee reintegration process. For one, it promotes *SAFETY*, which reinforces a sense of comfort for the returning military member in an anxiety-free environment. Secondly, it promotes a *CALM*, relaxed setting where the returning employee feels comfortable taking their time. It also promotes *CONNECTEDNESS*, where the employee feels closeness to coworkers and the employer. It promotes *SELF-EFFICACY*, or the empowerment of the employee to seek help without feeling weak

Tips for Service Members

Contact your supervisor:

Before returning, ask for a briefing on how responsibilities were handled during the absence, changes in personnel, new policies, projects.

Ease into your return to work:

Focus on communicating, being patient, anticipating and accepting changes, and using this time to start fresh.

Avoid “taking charge”:

Co-workers may have been forced to take on your responsibilities, they may resent you coming back to take control or criticize. Be supportive of their decisions.

Consult with your commanding officer:

The commander may have advice on transitions or may address concerns or ensure a supportive environment with your employer. Contact a transition assistance program.

Talk about it:

By talking to others going through the same process, you will relieve stress and realize that other people share your feelings. Reach out to trusted relatives, friends, or an employee assistance program.

Take care of your physical health:

Get plenty of rest and exercise, eat well; avoid drugs and excessive drinking to help manage stress more effectively.

Know your rights:

The federal Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Rights Act (USERRA) applies to all employers regardless of size and protects those in the armed forces.

As a permanent employee, you must be reinstated to a comparable position (e.g. seniority, pay and status).

in front of peers. Lastly, the program promotes *HOPE* that they will return to normalcy with time and support from the employer.

Psychological First Aid soothes the assortment of emotions and physical responses experienced by people exposed to a stressful situation, including combinations of confusion, fear, hopelessness, helplessness, sleeplessness, physical pain, anxiety, anger, grief, shock, aggressiveness, mistrustfulness, guilt, shame, shaken religious faith, and loss of confidence. It is important to weigh the new emotional and physical behaviors against Operational Risk Management (ORM):

Identify hazards: Are new reactions/behaviors causing work to change? Are your reactions/behaviors affecting coworkers?

Assess behavioral risks: Are new reactions/behaviors causing physical danger to you or your coworkers?

Analyze control measures: Are you able to control your uncharacteristic reactions/behaviors or do others recognize a change in you?

Make control decisions: Are your reactions and behavioral decisions rational?

Implement risk controls: Are you in need of counseling by a physician or an employee assistance program?

Supervise and review behavior: Is the plan of treatment for your reactions/behaviors acceptable and suitable to your needs?

It is only natural to experience a sense of change after returning from a deployment. Individuals reconnect with their past life and attempt to integrate their experiences of deployment. Coming home represents a return to safety but the routines of home and work are markedly different from regimented life in a war zone. Upon return, service members may miss the focus and intensity of missions during war.

“We push the Wingman concept to have buddies [or coworkers] watch out for each other,” said Dr. Appel-Schumacher. “Not only in drinking behavior, but also to look out for signs of depression, suicide ideation, and risky behavior.”

The *Ameriforce Deployment Guide 2004* suggests that there is always anticipation in returning to one’s family and workplace. The transition back to work is

as important for many as returning to one’s family, and for some even more meaningful. Providing information through thoughtful and supportive communication is important in reducing anxiety and welcoming the returning employee.

One of the biggest tasks for the returning service member is to transform a sense of purpose, created by the intensity of war, into the routines and safety of everyday life. Similarly, coworkers have established a sense of purpose sustaining the work environment

and its routines in the absence of the employee. Helping employers and employees respect each other’s perspective and reestablish a *shared sense of purpose* is a constructive paradigm that addresses standard concepts such as emotional changes, expectations and adjustments, and reframes them into an action-oriented, positive approach for moving forward.

“We have reintegration briefings for the service members and talk about reintegrating

with co-workers,” stated Dr. Appel-Schumacher. “In those briefings, there is a small part devoted to understanding the need to take it easy, go slow, and to look out for signs of stress.”

The service member’s return to work is an employment transition. It often brings new skills of leadership, teamwork and a broadened perspective that can be invaluable to the employer. There are numerous myths about returning Airmen and Soldiers—that they will be changed, unable to adjust or troubled. In preparing for the return of military members, it is important to set a climate of positive expectations for all employees emphasizing productive, supportive and effective work relationships.

As a returning military member, if you feel overwhelmed or are unable to function at work, seek professional help from a mental health professional. Talking with others about your experiences can help and is not a sign of weakness.

Tips for Employers

Create a welcoming environment:

Prior to the employee’s return, meet with his or her colleagues to discuss any concerns they have about the impact on their responsibilities, as well as to promote the importance of being supportive as their colleague readjusts.

Update the employee:

Meet with the employee to update him or her about the status of the workload, policy and personnel changes and any other changes that occurred during the absence.

Give the employee time to readjust:

Be aware that some people may need a little time to get back into the swing of their former routine. Encourage them to ask for the guidance or support they need.

Support employee if transition proves difficult:

If an employee is having significant trouble readjusting to the workplace, discuss changes and expectations in work performance, as well as listen to the employee’s response and concerns. Suggest counseling from employee assistance program or a mental health professional.

Resources:

Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Bethesda, Maryland, www.usuhs.mil

National Mental Health Association, Alexandria, Virginia, www.nmha.org

Ameriforce Deployment Guide 2004, www.deploymentguide.com