



Keeping In Touch *With Your Spouse* _____ _____ During Military Separation

Communicating is an important part of keeping any marriage alive. But when so many miles separate you for so long, communication becomes a vital necessity. As much as you need air and water, you **NEED** to hear from your spouse, and your spouse needs to hear from you. You have several communication options available to you during a family separation, several of which are discussed here:

Letters

Letters can be your lifeline to peace of mind. If you don't think so, just wait until you haven't received one in a week. But it takes a special skill — one you can easily develop — to write a letter during a family separation. You must walk a fine line between "Everything's falling apart and I can't handle it without you," and "Everything's falling apart but I can fix it without your help."

Some spouses only send letters about how great everything is and how wonderful the children are. But be honest; your spouse knows that things didn't always run smoothly even when he or she was at home. The more "everything is great" letters they get, the more they may worry. In time, your spouse will begin to believe that you do not need them around anymore. And that is one of the most common and worst fears a spouse will have while separated.

Other spouses go the other direction entirely — every little problem or irritation goes into a letter. Each letter is filled with complaints about how the car isn't working right or the children aren't behaving. These kinds of letters can make a family separation a living nightmare for the service member.

Handle your letter writing with the same tact and understanding you would want your spouse to have for you. If you were away, you'd want to know what's going on — the good and not so good. And you would want to be reassured that your family still loves you and needs you. Remember to keep sending letters and messages of love on a regular basis. Mail delivery is irregular at best. Letters and packages seldom arrive two days in a row — sometimes as much as two to three weeks pass between the time you place a letter in the mail and the time they receive it.

A Letter Writer's Guide

Here are a few ways you can make the most out of talking back and forth to each other by letter:

- Write your letters with your spouse's letter and picture in front of you, and write as though talking directly to him or her.
- Answer all of your spouse's questions. And ask your spouse for advice when needed.

- Explain problems clearly. If you are vague and the problem is left unresolved, your spouse will worry.
- Express an appreciation for letters, tapes, etc., that you receive. Mention one or two points that especially caught your interest.
- Talk about your daily activities in amusing and interesting ways.
- Remember, it is important to frequently express your affection for your partner. There's no substitute for an in-person hug, but find ways to make your spouse feel loved in writing.
- If you are feeling lonely or anxious, share your feelings openly and freely without indulging in self-pity. Let your spouse know you would like to know how he or she is feeling, too.
- Above all, express yourself clearly so that your spouse will not have to say, "I wonder what was meant by that!" Neither husband nor wife should read between the lines or try to interpret meanings. If you do not understand what is being said, ask questions — otherwise take things at "face value."
- If you have children and they can write, have them enclose notes or pictures in your letters. Children can use separate envelopes. Send pictures of home, the Christmas tree, activities around the house, etc.
- Although it may be difficult to do every time, the deployed parent should try to send separate letters back to the children rather than a joint letter, at least on special occasions, such as birthdays, holidays or when the child has done something that you are proud of.
- Relay news of the neighborhood, friends and relatives. Clip out newspaper articles that might be of interest to your spouse.
- Write often. If that is hard, supplement with cards (funny or romantic). Cards can help to express your thoughts and feelings, often in a unique or humorous way.
- Consider OCCASIONAL phone calls, if possible.

Email

Email is a speedy alternative to writing letters. If your spouse has access to email, you can send a quick note, or type a long message without having to pay for postage or wait for weeks for delivery. Although delivery may seem instantaneous, keep in mind that your spouse may not have the time or luxury to reply right away. Be patient while waiting for a response.

Sending Urgent Messages

Some occasions might call for a speedier method of contacting the service member than a letter: a serious illness or injury, a death in the family, a birth or a routine or unexpected hospitalization.

Depending upon the severity of the situation, there are two primary ways to send a message — emergency *Red Cross* or *Western Union* messages. If you are in doubt as to which method to use, contact your Family Support Center for advice. In either case, it is always a good precautionary action to follow a message with a written letter, clarifying the details of what has actually happened.

American Red Cross

In order for the Red Cross to send a message to your spouse, they must have verified information. They do not send greetings, only emergency information and they do not grant emergency leave. If the emergency situation does not occur in the local area, you will save some time by contacting the Red Cross chapter where it does. Ask the Red Cross there to verify and to contact the service member. In most cases, Red Cross notification is necessary for emergency leave to be granted by the spouse's commander.

Adapted from Air Force Crossroads Predeployment Guide – a Tool for Coping

FOH

Federal Occupational Health

A component of the U.S. Public Health Service
Department of Health and Human Services



THERE IS NO CHARGE FOR RED CROSS MESSAGES. Before you call, have the following information on hand: grade, full name, SSAN, and complete duty address.

Western Union Messages

Personal and non-emergency messages should be sent through the Western Union system. These include births, seasonal salutations, birthday and anniversary greetings, expected hospitalization, etc.

Remember! Your message will pass through many hands and many people are going to see whatever message you send before the service member is ever given the message. Do not say anything that might embarrass you or your spouse.

It is recommended that you do not use Western Union to send the service member bad news that is going to cause pain or distress: serious illness, hospitalization complications, a death or injury in the family. If these are sent through Red Cross, it will not cost anything, and the service member will be given the message by the Commander or Chaplain who will be able to advise and comfort your spouse. Otherwise, the message may be delivered with no preliminaries or support.

If you do send a message about an illness, injury, or hospitalization, be sure to include the doctor's diagnosis, the prognosis, and the length of any expected hospital stay or recovery period. The service member will feel better if he or she knows everything that you know.

Overseas Calls

Nothing can substitute for your spouse's voice. That is why overseas calls are so popular. But the cost is exorbitant! Agree before the separation or deployment starts how many times, and when, you will call. Budget money for the calls during the assignment or deployment so you are financially prepared when the bills start coming in.

One way to keep your phone cost down is to be prepared for the call. Keep a list near the phone so you know what to talk about. However, be prepared for the unexpected tears, both yours and your spouse's.

It will also be cheaper if, when your spouse calls collect, you accept the call and ask the operator to give you the country access code (you can also find this in the information part of your phone book), city code, and phone number, and then you call back. You will still be charged for the initial three minutes, but it is cheaper when you call your spouse direct if you plan on talking for more than five to ten minutes. Look in the phone book or call the operator and see what hours are cheaper; ask your spouse to use those hours whenever possible. Agree that if you cannot get through in fifteen minutes your spouse will call you back.

In some cases, your spouse might be able to call you free of charge from his/her deployed location through government telephone lines (DSN).

Care Packages

A "care package" is exactly what it sounds like — a little bit of home that says, "I love you; I'm thinking about you." With just a little planning, they can be a great link over the distances. Care packages are also a morale builder for everyone during remote assignments or deployments. Speculation and excitement run throughout an entire unit when just one package arrives. When you get your first "Thank You" letter, you will be eager to start your next package.

But, be careful of what you send — the one rare commodity is privacy. What you send will undoubtedly be seen by a number of people. Even most officers share their quarters. Packages going overseas are subject to customs inspection and may be opened by the host country inspectors. And, don't expect a lot of romantic talk on any recorded messages your spouse may send home to you. Most spouses would be too embarrassed for anyone else to hear what they most want to say.

Mailing Tips

- Check with UPS on mailing restrictions.
- Do not use wrapping paper or string if you can help it. Paper comes undone and string gets caught in postal machines. The post office recommends you use the reinforced nylon strapping tape.
- Sender will not have to pay custom tariffs on packages mailed to an APO or FPO.
- Be sure to put an extra address card **INSIDE** before you seal the package. If the box should be damaged, and neither address on the outside can be read, it will be opened by the post office. If they can not find where it should go from the contents, the whole package goes to the dead-letter bin.
- If you are sending a package for a special occasion, mail it early so it has plenty of time to arrive. Better to arrive a little early than to let your spouse think you have forgotten.
- Mark packages that contain recorded messages, music or VCR tape with the words "MAGNETIC RECORDED TAPES INSIDE — DO NOT X-RAY"

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healthy bodies
sound minds
a safe place to work

FOH

Federal Occupational Health

A component of the U.S. Public Health Service
Department of Health and Human Services



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