



How to Stay Healthy While Your Partner is Deployed

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Dealing with the deployment of a partner can be challenging, especially when it comes to keeping healthy.

Managing the many parts of health — staying active and alert, managing stress, connecting with others, eating well, getting rest — might feel like a lot, especially when your partner is not by your side. Add to that the natural worry that comes with time, distance, long-term separation and any dangers that may arise, and it keeping all of those aspects of health together might feel like too much. It may feel like a short-term fix to let your regular wellness routines lapse. Or it might just become difficult to find the time or energy or motivation to move your body, get into bed on time or prepare better meals.

“My husband is my best friend and it affects my mental status sometimes while he’s gone,” explains military spouse Mary Cooper, whose husband has been deployed for seven months at a time. “He’s my rock and I’m missing that part of my life when he’s not there.”

Here’s how she and other military partners move through the months of separation by sticking to one commitment to self-care at a time, and how experts advise you get or stay healthy during deployment.

1. Find a passion. Military spouse Danielle E. found that making exercise her passion helped to keep the “fun” in her life.

“Find your own passion in Crossfit, aerobics, running, etc.,” Danielle suggests. “Enjoy what you’re doing!”

2. Lower stress. The stress of having your partner deployed can unfortunately wreak havoc on your health and your weight. When you are stressed, your body produces the “stress hormone” of cortisol, which when produced in elevated amounts in the body, can have a lot of negative affects.

“The longer the body stays in a state with elevated cortisol levels, the greater the increase in your appetite, and the more likely you are to gain weight!” **explains nutritionist and exercise physiologist Franci Cohen.** “Prolonged elevated cortisol levels are a precursor for obesity, so during times of stress, the best thing to do for both your mind and body, is to quickly rid yourself of that stress, thereby lowering your cortisol levels, and bringing the body back to a normal well-functioning state.”

3. Exercise. Combining a passion and a great health habit all into one, exercise can be a fantastic way of lowering stress — and keeping your mind off of your partner being gone.

“My way of dealing with stress while he’s gone is actually exercise,” admits Cooper. “It helps me get away from everything.”

And if you have children at home, finding the time to exercise as a solo parent can be a challenge too, so Mary and her husband came up with the solution of bringing the gym to their home.

“We have been accumulating workout equipment for the home so that if he deploys again and I’m not able to get away with the kids, I have that available for me right at home,” she explains. “It’s an investment in her health, which happens to be pretty priceless.”

4. Stay busy. Cooper, who has four young children and whose husband has been deployed multiple times, has found that staying busy is the key to staving off the loneliness and depression that can set in.

“The hardest part about deployment to me is keeping myself busy so I don’t get lonely,” explains Cooper. “My kids help out a lot in this aspect. We try and do plenty of activities together, including the beach and the pool.”

5. Nurture your spirit. An important part of staying healthy can be nurturing not just your physical and mental states but practicing spiritual practices that are meaningful to you as well. If you have a particular spiritual affiliation or methods that make a difference in your life, it may be helpful to spend more time exploring your spirituality while your partner is deployed. Cooper finds that she nurtures her spiritual side more when her husband is deployed and incorporates the spiritual practices that are important to her with her children as well, such as praying together and attending their local church services.

6. Give yourself a break. While it’s important to nourish your family with a balanced diet, it is OK to give yourself a break in what is very much a time of survival. Staying healthy means taking care of yourself as well and sometimes, that means taking breaks when you need to.

“I find it difficult to prepare healthy meals,” Cooper admits of the times her husband is deployed. “It’s so much easier to go out to eat so I don’t have to clean up as much. I do try and make healthier meals but it doesn’t happen as often as I would like to.”

7. Make appointments and stock up on supplies. Under stress, it might be difficult to remember or follow through with simple steps to stay well. Get back to the basics by scheduling your doctor, dental, vision and other annual visits for the year so you are sure to get all the check-ups you and your family need. Sign up for pharmacy text alerts so you are notified when it is time to refill prescriptions. Next, stock up the first aid kits in the house and car. Then, replenish your cold and flu supplies so you are not stuck without

bandages, medications, thermometers, tissues and chicken soup if illness strikes.

8. Know your resources. Much like your partner in the military knows that he or she is only as good as the team that surrounds him or her, if you're the one at home, you shouldn't feel like you have to fly completely solo. Have a supply of tools at your disposal, should you need them. Military spouse websites offer individual and family therapy, face-to-face consultations, life planning and education.

9. Build community and support. Build a support network of friends or family who can help you take time for yourself to reset and recharge. Join a walking group in your neighborhood or trade babysitting time with friends so you can each have a few hours to go to a support group, take a fitness class, plan meals or take a hot bath and nap. Create a meal exchange with other military or single parents, so that you each make and swap extra servings of one healthy meal a week. Sign up for a 5K and enlist your children, relatives or work friends to walk or run it with you. When it feels good to finish (and it will!), sign up for another.

Make a list of loved ones you can call when you are overwhelmed, need a laugh or could use a reminder that it is OK to take time for yourself. Post that list inside a kitchen or bathroom cabinet door, on your phone or somewhere handy so you see it regularly and remember there's a circle of support around you. If you can't find a group that suits your needs, start one. From Friday parent-and-kid pizza nights to road-trip buddies to movie dates to Sunday running clubs, create a community that will motivate you and your kids to let go of stress, enjoy your time together, move, relax, laugh and play.