



MILITARY FAMILIES LEARNING NETWORK

Communicating Effectively During Transitions – Managing Turbulence and Dilemmas

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U.S. DEPARTMENT
OF DEFENSE



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FAMILY TRANSITIONS

Military Families Learning Network

Providing education and resources for professionals working with military families to build resilience and navigate life cycle transitions



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<https://www.youtube.com/user/MilFamLN>



Today's Presenters



Leanne K. Knobloch –

Professor in the Department of
Communication at the University of Illinois



Steven R. Wilson –

Professor in the Brian Lamb School of
Communication and a faculty affiliate of the
Military Family Research Institute at Purdue
University



Session Preview & Objectives



- Key premises:
 - Military families experience many transitions
 - The way families communicate during transitions matters
- Leanne:
 - Identify examples of transitions
 - Introduce and apply the Relational Turbulence Model as a framework for understanding communicating about transitions
- Steve:
 - Explain and understand behavioral health as an issue complicating transitions
 - Introduce and apply the Normative Model of Social Support as a framework for understanding communicating about transitions



Please tell us about your work

(type your number in the chat pod)

1. Civilian
2. Military Branch
3. Community-based
4. Extension

Transitions During Deployment

(Parcell & Maguire, 2014)

- Interviews with 50 Army wives about *turning points* that occurred during their husband's most recent deployment
 - *Military events*: deployments, leaves, personnel deaths, reunions
 - *Life events*: birthdays, moves, births, career changes
 - *Communication events*: disclosures, decisions, disagreements
- Communication played a role BOTH as a turning point and during turning points





“After my husband returned from deployment, there was some difficulty in adjusting to living with each other again ... the few months after his return were certainly the most trying time in our relationship.”

– at-home National Guard wife, 28 years old

Example Transition: Homecoming After Deployment

- + reunion is challenging for both returning service members and partners
- + escalated risks of depression, anxiety, and dyadic distress



Bowling & Sherman, 2008; MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010;
Nelson Goff, Crow, Reisbig, & Hamilton, 2007; Renshaw, Rodrigues, & Jones, 2008

Relational Turbulence Model



+ relating is intense during times of transition

+ people are *reactive* to circumstances that would be quite ordinary otherwise

Two Mechanisms of Relational Turbulence

Time to
Chat

1. Relational uncertainty

“What is going on in this relationship?”



Examples of Relational Uncertainty

Uncertain that we can keep our marriage together.

-deployed Army husband, 35 years old

*How do we go back to doing things together
when we got used to life apart?*

- deployed National Guard husband, 45 years old

*I didn't really know him anymore, he had changed so much.
I'd also changed, and we don't know how to deal with each other.*

- at-home National Guard wife, 41 years old

Two Mechanisms of Relational Turbulence

Time to
Chat

2. Interference from partners *“You’re getting in my way!”*



Examples of Interference from Partners

*Well, our way of life for a year has been disrupted,
so it is just hard to get back into a new “normal” routine.*

- at-home National Guard wife, 38 years old

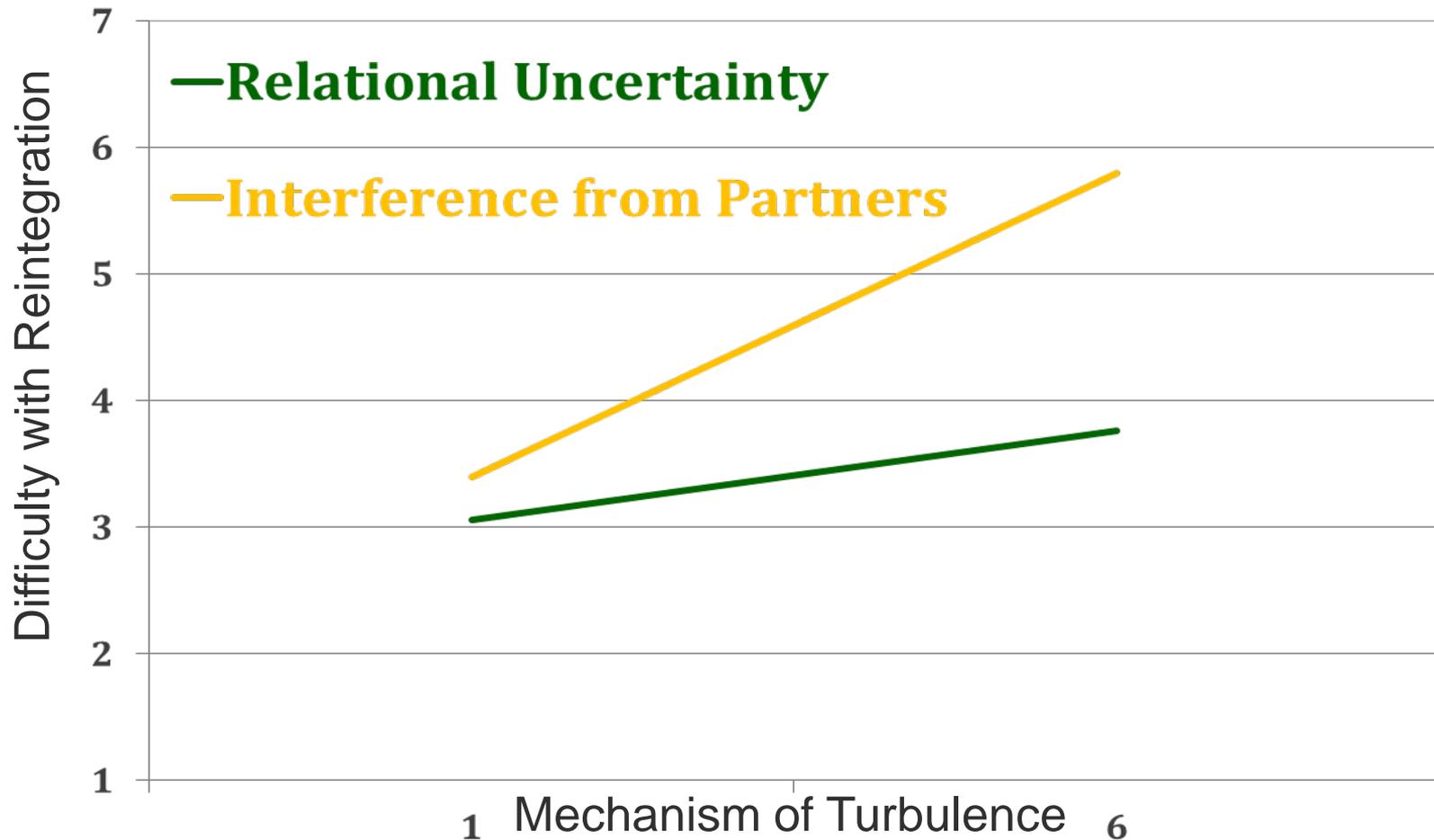
*Had a routine and now do not,
so learning to relax and enjoy is hard, but trying.*

- deployed National Guard husband, 55 years old

She kinda acts still in charge of the house as if I was still gone.

- deployed National Guard husband, 48 years old

Relational Uncertainty and Interference Predicting Difficulty with Reintegration



Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013, *Health Communication*;
Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013, *Communication Monographs*

Key Takeaways

Time to
Chat

- Reunion after deployment can be stressful
- Prepare for the possibility of encountering turbulence
- Develop shared expectations
- Work to facilitate each other's goals





Steven R. Wilson,
Professor, Purdue University

Dilemmas of Talking about Behavioral Health Concerns

- Reunion = transition that involves (re)establishing routines
 - Issues such as service member PTSD, depression, chronic anxiety can complicate transition
- Purpose = describe
 - dilemmas families experience when talking within service members about seeking help
 - communication strategies families use to manage dilemmas



Deployment and Behavioral Health

- About **20%** of service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan experience behavioral health problems (e.g., PTSD, depression)
- Only **30-40%** of those who screen positive for emotional problems seek professional help
- Issues such as sleep problems, mood swings, alcohol/drug abuse can have detrimental effects for all family relationships



Barriers to Seeking Help

- Societal stigma about mental illness
- Concern about
 - Impact on career
 - Coworkers/leaders having less confidence in them
- Pride in self reliance/handling own problems
- Doubts about behavioral healthcare
 - Skepticism about psychotherapy
 - Concerns about medication side effects

Rand, 2008; Vogt, 2011



Help Seeking and Families

“Members of veterans’ social networks...often play a key role in getting participants into treatment in several ways” (p. 248).

- providing encouragement
- helping service members recognize PTSD symptoms
- motivating service members to seek assistance
- helping find resources and providers
- helping schedule and obtain appointments

Sayer et al., 2009



Goldsmith's (2004) Normative Theory of Social Support

• ***Dilemmas*** arise when a speaker's attempt to pursue a task communicates incongruent meanings

- Example: *“You’re normal but you’re not normal.”*
- Therefore, speakers must manage multiple, conflicting purposes



Dilemmas are Situated

- Dilemmas in this context arise from:
 - The task the speaker is performing (e.g., offering advice)
 - Relevant cultural premises (military culture, societal stigma of mental illness)

Strategies for Managing Dilemmas

- People use a variety of strategies to manage communication dilemmas (e.g., when/how much they talk, how they frame their talk)



- Strategies are most effective when they allow a speaker to accomplish a communication task while maintaining identities and relationships



Research Questions



Time to
Chat

- RQ1: What dilemmas do family members experience when talking with service members about seeking behavioral healthcare?
- RQ2: What strategies do family members recommend using when attempting to navigate these dilemmas?



Recruitment (Fall 2012-Spring 2013)

- Emailed FRCs/Chaplains from multiple service branches
 - Asked to forward recruitment email and online survey link to military families
- Eligibility criteria: participants had to:
 - Be 18 years or older
 - Have had a family member return from OEF/OIF within last 5 years

Participant Demographics

Family Members	
N	80
Gender	94% female
Age M (SD) in years	44.59 (11.47)
Military themselves?	94% not in military
Ethnicity	85% White, 5% African American 6% Asian American, 4% Hispanic, 2% Other
Relation to SM	49% Spouse/Partner 40% Parent 5% Sibling 2% Child, 4% Other

Service Member Demographics

Service Members	
Gender	99% male
Age M (SD)	32.37 (9.31)
Where deployed?	24 Iraq, 55 Afghanistan
What branch?	30% Marines, 24% Army NG, 16% Army, 11% Navy, 8% Air NG, 6% Air Force, 4% Other
Number of deployments?	31% once 39% twice 30% three+
Current military status?	48% Active 21% Reserves 13% Inactive Ready Reserves 4% Discharged 4% Retired, 10% Other



Procedures

- Online Survey

- Hypothetical Scenario (imagine a conversation about seeking help)
 - described a situation in which their service member was experiencing problems readjusting (e.g., mood swings, dangerous driving)
 - developed by talking to military families, behavioral health professionals
 - participants wrote what would say if their SM was having these issues
- Three open-ended questions:

Dilemmas

- ➔ (1) What were you trying to accomplish in this situation?
- ➔ (2) Why might your service member resist doing what you suggest?

Strategies

- ➔ (3) What advice would you give to others in a similar situation?



RQ1: Dilemmas of Talking about Seeking Help

1. Getting my service member to recognize the problem without implying that s/he's not normal**
2. Convincing my service member to seek help without implying s/he is weak
3. Being persistent and patient
4. Wanting my service member to open up without implying I can understand**

**These two dilemmas are illustrated on next slides

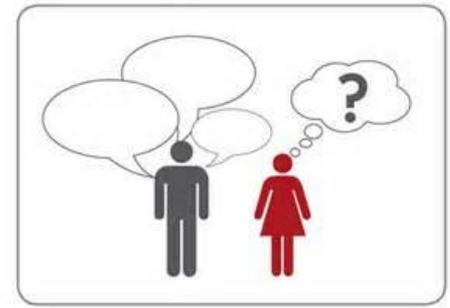
Getting you to recognize the problem without implying you're not normal

- Participants wanted to get the SM to recognize s/he is having difficulty reintegrating
 - *“Have him recognize that he is different”* (parent)
 - *“Get him to acknowledge that he has a problem”* (spouse)
- Participants also wanted to say reintegration difficulties are normal
 - *“Help him know that others have been through the same thing”* (parent)
 - *“Gently point out all of us have problems”* (spouse)
- Potentially incongruent meaning:
 - You're normal but you're not acting normal





Wanting you to open up without implying I can understand



- Participants often wanted to start a dialogue
 - “*Give my son a chance to open up and talk*” (parent)
 - “*Understand what [the SM] is feeling*” (spouse)
- Participants also wanted to avoid sounding like they had first-hand experience
 - “*Validate that I have no idea what he has been through*” (parent)
 - “*Validation what he experienced and that I will never truly know what he lived through*” (spouse)
- Potentially incongruent meaning:
 - I’m trying to understand but I can’t understand you



RQ2: Strategies for Navigating Dilemmas

- **When to Talk:** Strategies related to the amount and timing of talk
 - “*Pick the right times to talk...not every time you are together*” (parent)
 - “*Be available to listen when they are ready to talk*” (parent)

- **How to Talk:** Strategies related to the style/relational tone of talk
 - “*Always be nice and patient*” (spouse)
 - “*Never make your loved one feel inadequate*” (parent)

Continued

RQ2: Strategies for Navigating Dilemmas

- **How to Frame Talk:** Strategies that alter the meaning of help seeking
 - *“Emphasize achieving a healthy, productive life”* (spouse)
 - *“We need to work together as a family to move forward”* (spouse)
- **Where Else to Turn:** Strategies that don't involve or complement efforts by the family member to talk directly with the SM
 - *“Don't be afraid to ask others to try to help convince them”* (stepson)
 - *“Seek out help for yourself...Stay healthy until they are ready to get healthy”* (spouse)

Key Takeaways



- Transitions often create dilemmas
- There is no “magic bullet” for handling dilemmas
 - “Be open” → How/when to be open?
- “Quality” communication is sensitive to
 - potentially incongruent meanings
 - conflicting purposes





Resources: Communicating about Behavioral Health Issues

- **VA Coaching Into Care:** a national telephone-based service for families who want to help a Veteran seek behavioral health care in a VA clinic or Vet center. Coaches provide information about mental health issues, discuss how to communicate effectively with the Veteran, and help families navigate the VA health care system. See <http://www.mirecc.va.gov/coaching/>
- **Star Behavioral Health Providers:** a registry that service members, veterans, and families can use to find *civilian* behavioral health care providers in their local area who have completed specialized training for working with military families. The program, developed by the Center for Deployment Psychology, MFRl (Purdue) and others, now operates in seven states. See <http://starproviders.org/>
- **Real Warriors:** a public awareness campaign to encourage help-seeking behavior among service members or their families who are struggling with behavioral health issues. The campaign, launched by the Defense Centers for Excellence in Psychological Health and TBI in 2009, includes a 24/7 call center plus online information and real-life stories for service members, veterans, family members, and health professionals. See <http://realwarriors.net/aboutus>



Resources: Communicating about Transitions in Military Families

- **National Military Family Association:** their website includes information and resources for military families experiencing transitions such as deployment, adoption, wounded service members, and leaving the military. See <http://www.militaryfamily.org/info-resources/>
- **How to Help Military and Veteran Families:** publications for various audiences on how to help support service members, veterans, and their families. Information is available for educators, legal professionals, financial professionals, and medical professionals (among others). The series is a joint effort of the DOD, USDA, MFRI (Purdue), and NMFA. See <https://www.mfri.purdue.edu/publications/how-to-help.aspx>



Resource for Further Reading

- Knobloch, L. K., & Wilson, S. R. (2015). Communication in military families across the deployment cycle. In L. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of family communication* (pp. 370-385). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

<http://knowledge.sagepub.com/view/the-sage-handbook-of-family-communication/n25.xml>

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Communicating Effectively During Transitions – Managing Turbulence and Dilemmas

Tuesday, August 18 at 11:00 am EDT

Location: <https://conference.apps.mil/webconf/milfamlearningnetwork1>

This webinar explores some of the challenges military families may face as they undergo transitions (e.g., deployments, reunions, relocations). On the one hand, transitions can

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Tuesday, August 18 at 11:00 am EDT

AUG
18

(GMT-05:00) Eastern Time (US & Canada)

60 minute session

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- Upcoming - Engaging Military Families on Social Media
- Upcoming - Military Family Financial Transitions: Handling Changes in Income Benefits & Money Management
- Building Resiliency During Change - Finding Courage Within

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Find slides and additional resources under 'event materials'



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https://vte.co1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_0DnWV1i3toPJBxX



MFLN - Family Transitions

Upcoming Events

Engaging Military Families on Social Media

- September 17, 2015
- 11:00 am Eastern
- <https://learn.extension.org/events/2166>

Military Family Financial Transitions: Handling Changes in Income, Benefits & Money Management

(in collaboration with MFLN Personal Finance)

- October 13, 2015
- 11:00 am Eastern
- <https://learn.extension.org/events/2163>

For more information on MFLN - Family Transitions:
<http://blog.extension.org/militaryfamilies/life-cycle-transition-support/>



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