Supporting Partners of National Guard Service Members During Domestic Operations

Partners of National Guard service members play a critical but often under-recognized role during Domestic Operations (DOMOPS). National Guard DOMOPS are missions conducted within the United States in support of civil authorities, border security, public safety, and community stability. These missions may occur in service members' own communities and can place them in emotionally complex, morally challenging, and operationally ambiguous environments. In addition, public sentiment about missions beyond disaster support can be mixed, presenting further potential frictions for service members and partners.

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Understanding the Impact of DOMOPS on Partners

For mental health providers, understanding the specific stressors of the Guard lifestyle is essential to supporting partner well-being. In addition to typical activation stressors, DOMOPS can present unique challenges that directly influence family resilience and service member readiness, such as:

- **Sudden Role Shifts:** Domestic activations often arise on short notice and can have uncertain end dates, requiring partners to quickly plan for and adapt to increased household and childcare responsibilities.
- **The Proximity Paradox**: A service member may be serving in their own local community but remain functionally unavailable. Partners may also struggle to manage expectations around availability for and content of communication. Despite being within the United States, service members may have limitations on information sharing and time to connect with their partner.
- **Geographic Isolation:** Unlike active-duty families, many Guard families live far from military installations. This distance can create isolation from traditional military support hubs and resources.
- **Employment and Financial Disruption**: Unexpected activations can disrupt the partner's civilian career, shift household income streams, and complicate access to military and civilian benefits.
- **Unique Risks for Moral Distress or Conflict**: Partners may see news coverage or social media content expressing ambivalence or criticism about the mission. They may also have complex feelings of their own about the mission and the real or perceived safety of the service member. These can create stress for partners and add to relationship strain.

How to Help

When working with National Guard partners during a DOMOPS activation or reintegration period, providers should:

- **Anticipate the Non-Traditional Mobilization Cycle**: Understand that the stages of anticipation, separation, and reintegration that define the military activation experience may be compressed or absent in DOMOPS.
- **Maximize Clinic Flexibility**: Consider offering a more flexible approach to scheduling and late cancellations. Anticipate possible changes or disruptions in health insurance coverage based on service member's duty status.
- **Promote Proactive Communication**: Encourage active and early communication between the partner and service member while acknowledging the potential limitations imposed by the mission.

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- **Integrate Family Systems**: Incorporate family-level perspectives by addressing stressors, such as parenting or caregiving, and leveraging available supports, like extended family, to strengthen the partner's and family's overall functioning and resilience.
- **Foster Early Resource Engagement**: Encourage partners to connect with peer networks and mentorship programs early to build social support and practical coping skills.
- **Address Moral Ambivalence or Distress**: If partners experience internal conflict surrounding DOMOPS, support open exploration and facilitate partner communication strategies that normalize human limitations in high-stakes situations.

Resources for Partners and Families

- **National Guard State Family Programs**: Offers practical support and connection to financial, employment, and other resources.
- **Service Member and Family Readiness Groups**: Supports partners and families through peer-to-peer connection opportunities and information about how to effectively navigate the stresses of the activation cycle.
- **Military OneSource**: Offers trusted information as well as specialized tools and services for military families.

Additional Reading

- Advancing the Health of the Family Left Behind: Guidance for Providers. Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. **https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_CTC_Advancing_the_Health_of_the_Family_Left_Behind_Provider.pdf**
- Community Support For Military Children and Families Throughout the Deployment Cycle. Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. **https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/community-support-mil-children-fam-deployment-cycle**
- Becoming a Couple Again: How to Create a Shared Sense of Purpose After Deployment. Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. **https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_CTC_Becoming_A_Couple_Again.pdf**
- Understanding Post Deployment Stress Symptoms: Helping Your Loved Ones. Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. **https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_understanding_postdeployment_stress_symptoms.pdf**

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