



# Fact Sheet

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Families the strongest link

## Roles and Responsibilities: Who Does Them When You Are Gone?

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It's no new revelation that many parents lead hectic lives. It's a daily challenge to orchestrate the comings and goings, the details of the household, and maintain some personal balance for relationships when all family members are living at home. It becomes an even greater challenge when a member of the family is away from the home for a period of time because of employment, education, or military service.

The partner remaining at home is left to manage the day-to-day family and household issues. The constant transition of roles, responsibilities, and rules within the family unit contributes to the stress between partners. The most common stress is associated with what tasks are to be done, how and by whom; criticism about maintaining contact while gone; family rearrangement or reorganization of roles, routines, and rules; shifts in social support networks; jealousy regarding potential or real extramarital affairs; and disappointments over homecoming fantasies.

The stay-at-home partner assumes new roles and responsibilities when the other partner is gone for a day, a week, a month, or longer. The effect of the change on the family depends greatly upon the family's coping system. What are the particular personal resources or traits within the individuals or family members that assist in managing the daily stressors?

- The family's ability to pull together in time of need.
- How flexible they are in their decision-making and discussion.
- How organized the family is.

Each going and coming of the family member has a roller-coaster effect on the family. Initially they go through a crisis stage, then reorganize, recover, and settle into a new lifestyle

pattern. This builds experiences for them to draw upon for the next departure, and gradually the adaptability helps to make transitions easier.

There are three areas of external resources for families to meet the demands of separation: (1) other family members, (2) the family system, and (3) the community. Internal resources include financial well-being, emotional and physical well-being, educational problem-solving ability, psychological resources, and self-esteem. Other factors that influence how easily a family adapts to the absent member would be individual confidence, past experiences, and the pile up and nature of stressors at any given time.

Many family members reveal that personal confidence, family support, and support from friends and community determine how easy it is to adjust to the ongoing transitions.

### Coping Strategies

Below are strategies shared in a recent survey conducted nationwide with people living this lifestyle regularly:

#### Personal Strategies

- Use a video camera or cassette recorder to record all the week's events.
- Post laminated photocopied maps and use markers to track travel reports.
- Do not change discipline during absence or upon return. Make a special effort to stand together on how situations are handled.
- Use a calendar to write daily events to share on the phone and mark days off until the parent will return home.
- Avoid whining or arguing on the phone.

- Never let your partner leave home or end a phone call mad or upset.
- The first six months to a year are the hardest. Think positive and give yourself time to adjust.
- Channel energy from worry into productive efforts like volunteering or pursuing further education.
- Maintain your physical health by focusing on healthy habits, such as walking or other types of exercise.

### Family Strategies

- Make major decisions together.
- Be prepared to handle situations as they arise. Decide on emergency procedures before the family member goes on the road. Think through the problem. Ask yourself if it is something you can fix. If you can fix it, do so; if not, call a repair person. Don't sit around and worry about the problem or wait until your partner comes home to fix it. Mark where the power, gas, and water shut-off valves are. Obtain a power of attorney. Go through budget and investment training together.
- Set up times to call. Keep in touch three to five times a week. Make a list of items that need to be discussed. Make a master list of phone numbers for your partner to have; family, friends, neighbors, schools, bank, and local flower shop. Consider getting a 1 (800) number to save money on phone bills.
- Have enough clothes for two cycles of travel, you won't waste weekend time doing laundry.
- Continue the children's routine. Don't stop your life because the other person is gone.
- Have activities for yourself and the children to do during the other parent's absence.
- Develop rituals for leaving and returning home.
- Remember that both partners need to prepare mentally and emotionally prior to being together after all those days apart. Plan ahead for the homecoming so that expectations are met.
- Understand that both of you are contributing to the success of your family. Be openly thankful and accepting of thanks. Neither of you can make it happen without the other one doing their job.
- When at home, family should come first. Make it a point to spend time together.

- Have mutual respect for the person left at home and the traveler.

### Outside Support

- Form outside support with family, friends, church, and spiritual faith.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help, especially from those who have been through it.
- Love and trust each other.
- Decrease isolation by involving family with outside support systems.

Self-led support groups were found to be very successful. Partners who have successfully adapted to the lifestyle of work induced separation and reunion share strategies they have found successful. The support groups focus on personal growth with a strong educational component for teaching coping skills. Additional topics to include might be coping with loneliness, lack of companionship, making decisions alone, lack of social outlets, discipline problems, and financial concerns.

Another suggestion was to take at least one trip, if possible, with the traveling spouse to see exactly how stressful his or her job is. Having an understanding and appreciation of what each person does during the separation is very helpful in adapting to ongoing separations and reunions.

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