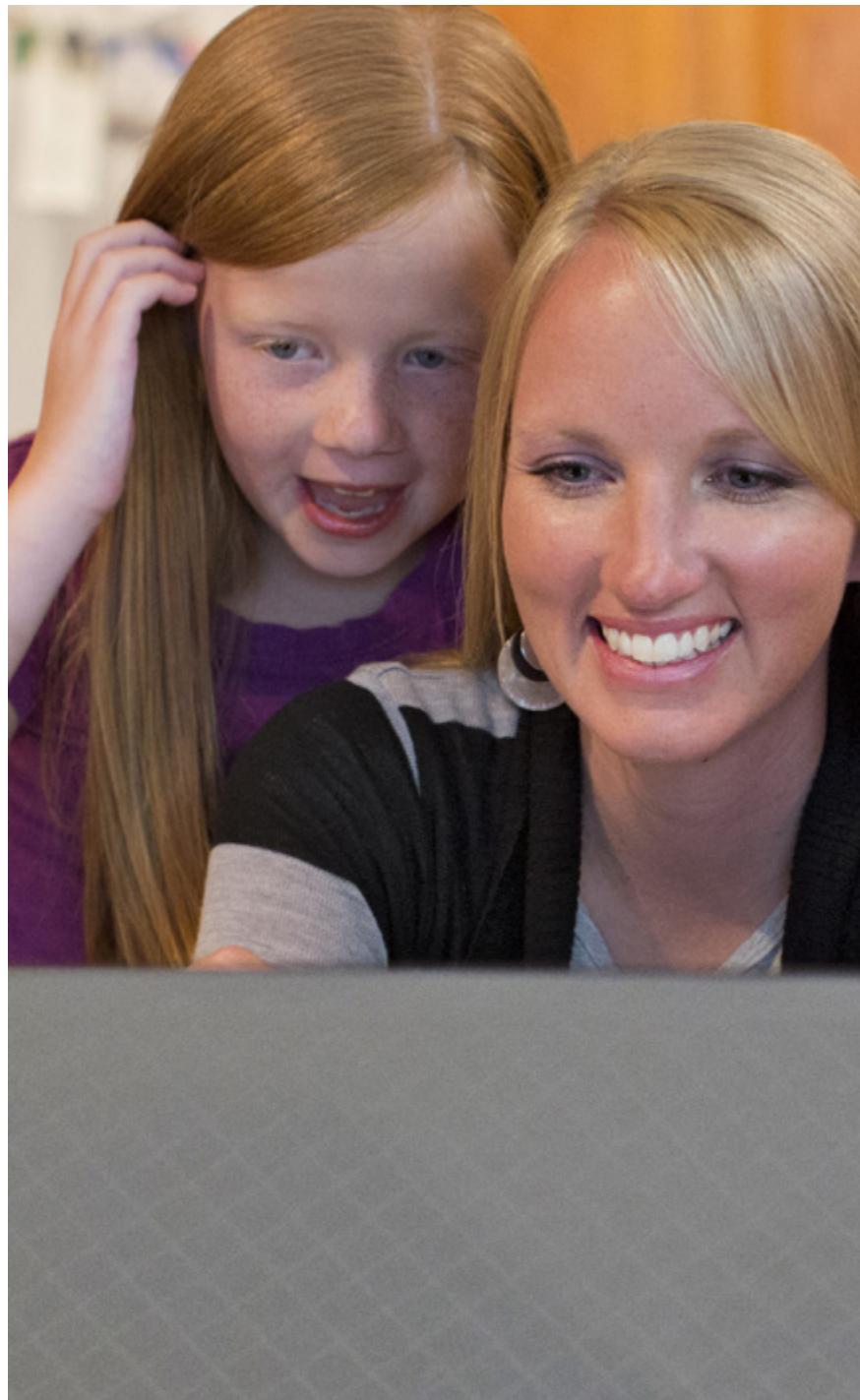


Staying CONNECTED

By Karen Sandberg Woodson

Saying good-bye to my husband at the beginning of his Army Officers Basic Leadership Course was truly a trial of faith. It was the first time we would be apart from each other for more than a few days during our five years of marriage. When he left, I felt so empty and lonely that it was easy to start to doubt our decision for my husband to join the army. Still, as I returned home to care for our children, I remembered the strong feeling of peace I had received when praying about our decision for my husband to pursue a career in the military and that “all things work together for good to them that love God” (Romans 8:28).

From modern-day prophets as well as in our training and work as behavioral health professionals, both my husband and I understood that families need to spend time together to strengthen their relationships. Our primary concern with military service was that frequent Temporary Duty (TDYs, or work assignments involving traveling), extended deployments, and other obligations would require my husband to be away from our family—anywhere from a few days to more than a year at a time. Still, we felt a strong desire to serve our country and trusted that God would teach us through our trials. Almost six years later, I am grateful for how the Spirit has taught us to keep our family,



Because my husband's military service sometimes requires him to be away from home, we've learned some valuable ways to keep our family connected.



and especially our marriage, connected. We have used the following methods—the same ones that have helped us previously—during a year-long deployment to Afghanistan and other separations due to military assignments.

Strengthen the Connection While Together

When we were preparing to move to our first duty station in Hawaii, USA, we began to discuss and pray about whether I would keep working part-time as a mental health therapist. During a Church meeting, the Spirit taught me that my top priority needed to be strengthening my relationship with my husband. I sensed that our first year or two in Hawaii would be a gift of time together to prepare us for future deployments. The impression also came with an increased desire to prioritize quality and quantity time with my family and to make necessary adjustments if work or anything else interfered with precious time when my husband was home. We tried to do this by developing traditions of connectivity, like playing games together, reading general conference talks, watching favorite shows together in the evening after the children were asleep, calling or texting each other during the day, and making family home evening and family dinners a priority. We also found that our relationship stayed stronger as we committed to having weekly dates and made time to pursue hobbies together.

Find Ways to Connect Daily When Apart

Many couples have to be away from each other for a season due to work commitments, military service, or even Church service. We



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are blessed to live in a time when we have phones, email, web cameras, traditional mail, and other resources to help us communicate during these temporary separations. My husband and I felt more connected as we were proactive and creative in reaching out to each other through these means, even when we were tired or busy. We also tried to replicate traditional ways we connected when together, such as reading the *Ensign* together over the phone, having family home evenings using a web camera, discussing important decisions using instant messaging for more privacy when my husband had to share his quarters, sending gifts and love notes to each other in the mail, empathizing with each other by email about challenges each of us was facing, and laughing together through text messaging about funny things our children said.

One of the hardest times of my husband's military service was when he was unable to have any contact with us for a few weeks. During one lonely and tearful day, I found myself looking at our wedding pictures and reading letters we had written to each other while we were engaged. Strong feelings of love and connection replaced loneliness and fear as I remembered that we were sealed

eternally. I decided I needed to find ways to feel connected to my husband daily to nurture my love and hope of being together again soon. I made time each day to write to my husband (even though I knew he would not be able to read my letters until much later), write in my own journal, or reread previous letters from him to help me remember how much I loved him and wanted to be with him forever. I learned that remembering is active, not passive, and spending time each day thinking about my husband benefited me and helped make our eventual reunion even sweeter.

Connect Spiritually

When we were both striving to live close to the Spirit, my husband and I found that we were able to feel spiritually connected to each other as well. I would pray and even fast to keep feeling close to my husband, to help us both feel comforted while apart, and to be able to reconnect quickly and comfortably when we were together again. I also found peace as I read the scriptures and modern-day revelation seeking for help on how to endure trials and maintain an eternal perspective—marriage is forever, and this time apart is only temporary! Moreover, I was able to develop

spiritually in new ways, as I had to rely on the Lord more while not being able to rely on my husband as much as I might otherwise have done.

Keep Children Connected

About a month before my husband left for one extended absence, he expressed his concerns about how our young children would understand and cope with his time away from our family. I was touched as he listed several ways he wanted to prepare them for this time apart. First we made a video recording of a family home evening lesson where my husband told our children about Captain Moroni and how their father would also be going away like Captain Moroni with his title of liberty to defend “our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children” (Alma 46:12). We also made other family videos of our children playing with their father and going to favorite places together—videos they enjoyed watching when they felt lonely for their daddy. Our son even developed a sticker chart for both him and his father so they could keep track of the days until we saw him again. A sacred moment was when my husband gave all of our children and myself priesthood blessings of comfort before his departure, including counsel about turning to the Lord when we felt lonely or sad.

The first few days were hardest for all of us. I appreciated my sister telling me it was all right to cry as a way to honor my feelings and love for my husband. Also I tried to stop what I was doing when our children became upset and cried about missing Daddy. I learned a valuable lesson from our four-year-old son during one tender moment as he cried about wanting his father home to wrestle him and put him to bed. After I held and listened to him for several minutes, he quickly cheered up and went back to his activity. I tried to follow his example of giving myself permission to feel the pain of separation and crying when I needed, and then choosing to cheer myself up and move on with my day after the feeling had been expressed. That method of experiencing the emotion in the moment and then moving forward blessed our entire family.

I am grateful for how the Lord prompted our family to prepare for—and then supported us during—the times my husband has been away from our home during his military service. I am especially grateful for the gospel perspective that these separations were “but a small moment” in Heavenly Father’s time, and that if we can “endure it well,” He will “exalt [us] on high” (D&C 121:7–8). As a result, our family has grown closer together, and we feel peaceful as we prepare for future deployments. ■

The author lives in Maryland, USA.



WHAT WE CARE ABOUT MOST

“Crisis or transition of any kind reminds us of what matters most. In the routine of life, we often take

our families—our parents and children and siblings—for granted. But in times of danger and need and change, there is no question that what we care about most is our families! . . .

“In the Church, our belief in the overriding importance of families is rooted in restored doctrine. We know of the sanctity of families in both directions of our eternal existence. We know that before this life we lived with our Heavenly Father as part of His family, and we know that family relationships can endure beyond death. . . .

“Our family-centered perspective should make Latter-day Saints strive to be the best parents in the world. It

should give us enormous respect for our children, who truly are our spiritual siblings, and it should cause us to devote whatever time is necessary to strengthen our families. Indeed, nothing is more critically connected to happiness—both our own and that of our children—than how well we love and support one another within the family.”

Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “What Matters Most Is What Lasts Longest,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2005, 41–42.