

Military OneSource Podcast — Building a Stronger MilSpouse Community

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody. We're going to talk about deployment today, and we're going to focus on the community of military spouses and how the power of that community can help a military spouse deal with the stresses and the challenges of life during a deployment. So let's bring in our guests. Evie King is the 2023 Armed Forces Insurance Military Spouse of the Year, also an Army spouse. And Aimee Selix is the Armed Forces Insurance Space Force Spouse of the Year for 2023, obviously a member of the Space Force community. Welcome to the both of you.

Evie King:

Thank you.

Aimee Selix:

Thank you.

Bruce Moody:

Aimee, you are the second member of the Space Force on the podcast, so we're making inroads into the Space Force. It's great to have the both of you with us today.

Aimee Selix:

Oh, it's wonderful to be here.

Bruce Moody:

What I want to do is I just want to have the really free-flowing conversation here. Again, we're going to talk about deployment and the community. Let's start by describing what it is that we're talking about when we talk about a community of military spouses. What is it? Is it your neighbor? Is it somebody online or a friend from a duty station, possibly a combination? What are we talking about?

Evie King:

Well, I think Bruce, it's all of that, right? A community is a group of people who live around each other. So it could be your neighbors, or it is people who share a common, either characteristic or hobby, whatever that happens to be. So it's just a group of people who share something in common. And I think for those of us who are military spouses, that is an automatic community that you join when you marry a service member. But within that, obviously, you find your own small niche of community, and sometimes it has to change because people move, you move or maybe your spouse is going through something that others around you aren't. So you have to find another community to help you through whatever change in circumstance that happens to be.

But I think that automatically, once you become a military spouse, you are a member of the military community. But that doesn't always mean that you've found your community within that community. Or at least, I didn't when I first became a military spouse. I don't know about you, Aimee, what do you think?

Aimee Selix:

I agree with everything that you just said. I think you hit the nail on the head. The only thing that I would add to is that our community sometimes doesn't change. I think it's constantly always changing because people are coming and going, and circumstances are changing at the drop of a hat. And so you have to approach community a little bit different with each of those changes. And in some cases you have to create it.

Evie King:

Yeah, absolutely.

Bruce Moody:

As far as creating a community, being a part of a community, I want to get into that a little bit later on, especially for people who are just trying to figure out how to take that first step. And

there's definitely a lot of good ideas behind that. I'd like to hear from you some examples of what being in a community has meant for you and specifically as it refers to deployment and the various triggers that a deployment can bring, all sorts of stressors. I was tempted to say, big and small, but there are no small stressors. They can all become a bigger problem. So what does being part of a community mean to you? And maybe you have some examples to share.

Evie King:

I remember my first deployment with my then boyfriend, now spouse, he actually deployed with the National Guard, and I did not have a military community around me. So I really leaned on my coworkers and I was doing community theater at the time, and I leaned on the people around me to fill in that gap. But I felt separated from the other families because at the time he was with the New Jersey National Guard, and I was living in Ohio. I felt separated from the families who had service members going through a very similar experience. So when we finally got married, then my spouse's active duty, having neighbors who were on the same deployment and sharing those same challenges and experiences, it was a completely different experience.

So I think having been on both sides, I really cherish the camaraderie that comes with being in a unit and living near those people who are in that unit, who are going through that deployment. Because it was, and for many is, hard when you're surrounded by people who not only don't understand the military experience but might not have a service member, who are going through the things that you're going through. So that was a really big comfort for me when I finally had that.

Aimee Selix:

I'll chime in, Bruce. Everybody's situation is unique when it comes to deployment, I feel. And when my husband deployed, we were still under the Air Force, but we've always been Space. So with his specialty code, I guess, I think is what it's called, it doesn't happen in the traditional sense where other branches he's deploying with his unit. He was sent out just by himself to go and support the Army, actually, in Kuwait. And so I didn't have a community around me that was necessarily going through the same thing. It was really isolating. His home unit forgot about me. It was really a struggle not having that community that could relate to what I was going through.

Oftentimes when you have family support, and I was lucky enough to have that, they still don't get it. And so not having that was really, really hard for not just me but my kids. I had a military spouse, one of my dearest friends who at the time was living in D.C. and we were in Colorado, and she recognized this challenge and actually told me, "Just come out here. Just come out here." I thought she was crazy at the time but decided to take that risk and loaded up the kids and we drove from Colorado to D.C. to find our community to help support us. And so while we were out there visiting with them, my boys were able to see another military family under the same specialty code, how they bonded as the family and help the boys understand why Dad was deployed and help me have a breather, have somebody to talk to.

And we stayed with them a few days, and then we came back home. But that relationship, it didn't change, it just grew from there. And the support, even though now, we are thousands of miles away, the bond that we had is ultimately what helped us get through that deployment. So in that experience, I learned the importance of being included and something that needs to change in the future for other families who are going through the same situation.

Bruce Moody:

And those experiences are changing. And I want to unpack this a bit because deployments are fast-changing in a lot of really important ways as it pertains to how military spouses are emotionally dealing with these. And let's start with what it means to have a spouse who's deploying to an area that people would maybe consider to be not a high-risk zone. In other words, we have service members who maybe a few years ago were deploying into Iraq and Afghanistan and now they're going to Germany, and they're going to Poland. So what has changed, and what has remained the same with that?

Evie King:

Well, I think it's so interesting because it's very similar to our experience. When we lived in South Korea, there were a lot of people who moved out there unaccompanied, and their family stayed back in the United States. And to the military, that's not considered a deployment even though they're away from their family for those assignments for 12 months. Now living in Germany and hearing some of my friends saying their spouses are deploying to Poland and Germany, which is where I currently live, they're having a lot of the same marital struggles that I saw those families who were having those unaccompanied tours, as they called them, to South Korea. Because you are seeing your spouse, able to go off base, they're able to eat out, they're able to go to the movies, they're able to drink alcohol and enjoy life. Some of them are even able to travel over the weekends, if they're not working.

While, when your spouse was deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, there was this shared misery. I don't know how else to say it. So the service member and the spouse could both say, "Yeah, this situation sucks." But now because there are more amenities and opportunities to live semi-normal life, even though you're not with your family, the experience is the same for the spouse back home, right? They're the ones holding down the home front. They're the ones taking care of children if they have children and everything's leaning on them, but now their spouses are having a completely different experience and potentially enjoying themselves. Not to say that they don't miss their family, but there are more opportunities to have fun and get out and experience Europe.

And I think that it's bringing a level of stress to marriages that previous deployments didn't have. And it's been very interesting to see the comments now and hear the stories of those spouses. There's just a lot of resentment, honestly. There's a lot of resentment that I'm seeing. And again, I think it's because there isn't that shared misery. But at the same time, it's not like these service members want to be in Europe away from their family. So they're just making do with the situation, but it's different and it's difficult.

Bruce Moody:

So I think we're talking about, a lot of it hasn't changed, and there is still the fact that your spouse is gone, that you're having to juggle life on your own, and that hasn't changed. And I think Aimee, to what you were saying, this is where your community may go through some changes or you do find people who have shared experiences. Or at least shared emotions or perhaps nothing shared, but an openness to listen and to understand and to continue cycling through people until you can find those who can really nurture perhaps. I mean, to really be there for you, to put it more plainly. But again, and maybe talk to this, because what the service member is experiencing is changing, but what the spouse back home is experiencing is quite the same.

Aimee Selix:

So yes, I will say it is the same, but it is a little different because when we have some of our members who are in the Middle East, that in my mind looks scary. And I envision what that looks like is they have issued weapons, they have body armor, they're in the desert, they're not comfortable. But then we have the spouses who are deploying to the states. And the reason why they do that is because for some time now the need to be present in the Middle East has been lower. And so certain functions have been pulled to the States. Where the mission is the same regardless as to where it's being supported, the stress on the spouse looks different. When you're in the States, you don't have that constant worry about, "Well, what is he going through over there?" But you're still dealing with all the same day-to-day stressors that Evie said, getting the kids to school, making sure everybody's fed, maintaining a house, all of that's the same.

But for me, the stress was I am now worried in addition to all of these things that my husband who's in Kuwait, is safe. Whereas I don't think I necessarily would've had that if he was stateside supporting the same mission.

Bruce Moody:

And the popular imagination of what it means to be deployed is shaped in a large part, I think by the media, the movies, the images that we see. I was in a shop that caters pretty strongly to a military population, and it had a picture of a service member in desert cami, sitting on a rock, writing a letter. Obviously, this was the face of deployment. Movies are still portraying that, and I guess it's going to be a couple of years before that catches up. But to your point, a lot of the common thread is a service member who's just not home for an extended period of time. And maybe we can talk about this because this does include things like schools or TDYs, training, sometimes field training, where especially some of these larger army posts, they're still on the same installation.

They've just gone across the street into field training, but they're gone. They're out there. And really for the experience, as we're talking about military spouses, it has the same feel of a deployment. And maybe to bring this background to community, what are we bringing to the community and what are we asking from the community as we look at these periods of separation?

Aimee Selix:

So inclusion is huge. Support, I think, is going to look different for each person. I see things one way, Evie sees things another, and support for her might look different to me. The fact is it's so needed within our community, and we're lacking. And so we have to create that support within each other. And when we go back to defining community, it's that shared interest. So we are looking at the spouses who are experiencing the same thing. So we just came out of the weapons school out at Nellis, and our husbands are members. The hours that they put in were insane. We didn't spend holidays with our spouse. We typically spent holidays with the spouses.

And so we learned to lean on each other and really be there for each other, and that really became a beautiful thing. Evie, you have any thoughts?

Evie King:

Yeah, I think what is important when I'm thinking about this and talking about creating community and everything like that, is I think about how these experiences, even if they're the same, we all reacted differently to them. And so something that I think is extremely important right now is deployments generally are shorter than they were at the beginning of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are rarely fifteen-month deployments. And what can easily happen when you're talking with someone who, say the last time their spouse deployed was to Afghanistan and Aimee, was a really long time. And then you're hearing a spouse whose service member is deployed, say to the states or on an extended TDY or even to Europe, and they're hearing them struggle, and it's easy to be like, "Well, we had it worse." And I always want to caution people because this isn't a race to see whose life sucks the most or who had a worse deployment.

And it's important for us to listen and to be there for each other. And even if say like, Aimee, your experience was different from my experience, and I might hear you talk about your experience and be like, "Well, the last time my spouse deployed, it was for this many days, and clearly you have nothing to complain about." That's not the point of listening to Aimee share her challenges or her experience. And so I think it's important, especially when we're talking about these different separations, at the end of the day, our loved one is not at home with us. And whether that's for a week, whether that's for three months, whether they're in the states or whether they're not, it doesn't matter. We should be there for that person.

They could be having a really difficult time. Clearly if they're sharing their experience from you, all they need is for you to listen and to empathize with their situation. It's not a time for us to be one-upping each other or to say who has it worse in the hopes that it will make them feel better

about their situation. I don't think that ever works. It always goes so much further to building a community and helping that person just by empathizing and listening to their experience.

Bruce Moody:

Let's talk about building a community from an individual level, and specifically I want to talk about someone who...you say, "Oh, build a community. Well, I don't know who my community is." And maybe this person is not the most outgoing, feeling very isolated. Maybe they live off-installation, and they have a full house at home. They probably would benefit from being in a community. In fact, I would actually say it's a requirement. Aimee, you had mentioned before we started talking that maintaining connections with people is absolutely required for health and well-being. So explain the importance of being in a community in terms of how we talk to someone who is maybe brand-new to the military, feeling isolated, feeling overwhelmed and saying, "I am not in a community." What are the first steps that that person should take?

Aimee Selix:

Well, reaching out, one, is huge. I had talked to one of my friends last night about this, and she said, "You are really good at reframing how you support people. And instead of saying, 'Do you need to be supported?' You're always just saying, 'I am doing this,' telling me when it's going to be convenient for you." I guess I've been breaking down the barrier of waiting for them to ask for support and just giving it to them and telling them I'm there. And most have responded really well to that. There's been a couple that are quiet, or you don't necessarily get the feedback right away, but maintaining that consistency over a period while their husbands are gone or away or they're going through a challenging time, has always paid off.

You just don't always get that feedback. But it's just a matter of leaving that door open for them. So if they need support during that time or years down the road, they know that they can approach you with it.

Evie King:

Yeah, I think Aimee and I were talking yesterday about this question actually, Bruce, and we both agreed that you need to be the person that you needed when you were going through that situation. So I almost feel like when it's the person who is isolated, the only thing I would ask from them is to say yes when someone offers help or when someone asks them if they want to get together, meet for coffee. But really, I almost want to flip the onus not on the person who's feeling isolated, but on the community itself to open their doors and almost take that person's hand and bring them in, or at least say, "Hey, you are welcome." Because generally when you're feeling isolated or when you're in the thick of a very challenging experience, asking that person to then create their own community is continuing to place that burden on them when they might not have anything more to give.

And so for those of us who at that time might already have an established community or might not be going through the challenges that that person is going through, we need to be the ones to be like, “Hey, come have coffee with me.” And then that could be the one thing that gets that person out of their house and then becoming more involved in the community. That one bit of outreach gets them rolling and getting them out of their home and finding what it is that they need. And I don’t know, I just feel like we always tell the person who’s isolated and who’s already just stretched thin like, “Oh, you need to get out there and put yourself out there.” Not everyone’s at that place. So what can we do to extend and create the community for them?

Aimee Selix:

Right. And I think assuming that everybody is going to need the person that we needed, just showing that effort is huge.

Evie King:

Yeah. It really is.

Bruce Moody:

Such an important conversation. I’m glad that we’re doing this. It really is. We tend to have an experience together over time, and over time we tend to lose the appreciation for how difficult and daunting and just how much of a shock to the system it is to suddenly be in the military, to be a military family. It is a total change of culture, of life, of experiences, but we lose that over time. And the other thing is that when we’re all going through it together, we tend to not realize how both difficult things can be, but also how strong we can be. Because we take it for granted when we’re all doing that together. And maybe what we can do to wrap up this conversation, I really want to talk to the person who is young and new to the military and just feeling overwhelmed and maybe in the middle of a deployment or they know one is coming up.

And again, it doesn’t even have to be a deployment. Sometimes just the job itself is so demanding that a spouse can feel lost, and maybe we can just wrap up this conversation with an appeal from the community to that individual spouse.

Aimee Selix:

So what I would say to that, to a spouse who’s new, is that there is a significant number of spouses who have gone through what you’re getting ready to go through, you may be going through, or maybe you’ve gone through too. The consistency of the separation from our member that we go through can be so challenging. My advice would be to reach out to those spouses and ask for help or maybe ask for coffee and really start to take some ownership in your role as a spouse and embrace it.

Evie King:

I would add to that with if you have a unit and they have meetings, go to those meetings, even if it's just to get information or it's just to put a face to a name. So should something happen, it's not the first time you're connecting with the unit. I know it can seem intimidating, but I do think it's important if you have the ability to meet with the unit that your spouse is deployed with or on a training with. And you don't want the first time that you're communicating with that unit to be hopefully when something goes wrong. I think it's just really important to at least be plugged in, even if it's just via email. And usually even if you're National Guard or reserve, there is somebody there who you can call and have a conversation with and really take them up on that opportunity because you want to be plugged in.

Yeah, you don't know what might happen. And so I just think it's important for the first time to never be when we need them the most. So set that foundation at least early, that you can either put faces to names or you've called someone and just ask, "What are the resources that are available to me?" There is someone, like I said, even if you're National Guard or reserve, there is going to be someone that at least you can call if you don't live near the location and can answer some of those questions for you. The other thing I would say is, don't be afraid to find your community outside of the military. I think so often we think that the only people who can support us during those hard times is the military community, but maybe it's getting plugged in with a hobby that you really like or an activity that brings you joy.

That is also a way to build community and find support. Some of my most supportive friends are actually not military. Yet, they've been able to be there for me every time my spouse is deployed or every time we've been geographically separated. And so I always want to encourage people, don't automatically assume that the civilian community cannot also be a community for you when you're separated from your service member.

Bruce Moody:

Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. We'll end it there. Evie King, Aimee Selix, thank you so very much for joining us today.

Evie King:

Thank you for having us.

Aimee Selix:

Thank you.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely our pleasure. And want to remind you that military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you, so click on the link in the program notes. Send us a question, a comment, maybe an idea for a future episode, and to be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts. Because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.