

Military OneSource Podcast — Maintaining Meaningful Connections in the Military Podcast

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

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. Today we're talking about maintaining quality relationships. And this is not going to be one of those touchy-feely conversations. Quite the opposite.

Military life is demanding, so it's important to have connections with people who know you, who get you, people who have been there. That can be family, it can be friends or a mentor.

I recently traveled to Fort Bragg, and I met with a soldier who shared her views on the need to maintain quality ties with people who provide encouragement and accountability, and keep your head clear and in the mission, and that's what it's all about.

So, I hope that you find today's episode helpful. I encourage you to share it with somebody who needs it. And if you have any questions or comments about today's episode, there's a link in the program notes. We always like to hear from you. So, here's today's episode.

Good morning, and it's great to have you with us today.

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

Good morning. Thank you for having me.

Bruce Moody:

I've been saying good morning for all the start of these podcasts because we rise early, and we get a lot done. So, a lot of these interviews are happening in the morning, but

we're here to talk about relationships and what it means to people who are in the military. I think the first thing we're going to do is define a relationship as anyone who's in your life, right? So, parents, cousins, neighbors, friends, significant others, spouses. Anyone else you want to add to that list?

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

I think extended family is really important too. Not just your parents and your siblings, but also those grandparents, aunts, uncles, anyone who has a vested interest in your life and your well-being is someone worth staying connected to.

Bruce Moody:

Alright. And those are the people that we're going to be talking about today because we can all understand the difficulty of being able to focus on your job when your personal life is upside down and sideways. And when you're talking about people who are in uniform and trying to do their job, it just gets amplified because, for a lot of reasons, there's the mission and then there's the health and safety survival of your fellow service members. And so, just give me your general thoughts on the importance of maintaining these relationships.

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

Absolutely. I have one distinct memory that comes to mind. When I was in the basic officer leader course at Fort Leonard Wood, I first commissioned as an engineer. And I grew up in New York; I went to college in the DC area, so Missouri was a bit outside of my wheelhouse. You could say there was some culture shock. And I was having a hard time adjusting to life after the pandemic, life in the active-duty military, life as an officer, all of the above.

And I had a phone call with a mentor, and I was just describing some of these struggles. And in that same conversation, I said, "Ma'am, I'm uncomfortable that people thank me for my service. I feel like I haven't done anything yet." And she was like, "Most college graduates don't move too far from school or from home. And if they feel like going home for a weekend, they just go. You don't have that same flexibility."

She's like, "People thank you for your service because you are making a sacrifice in your lifestyle to serve in the military and as a result your personal relationships are impacted. You're surrounded by people from all across the country that you've never met before, and you're forced to integrate and work as a team and develop an entire new skill set as a newly commissioned officer."

She was like, "There's a reason that people thank you for your service. That's not something that the average 21, 22-year-old new college graduate goes through and certainly not halfway across the country from home."

Bruce Moody:

That's true. It's really interesting listening to your response, and it makes me want to expand the idea of relationships to just people who come up to us and acknowledge us as people in uniform. And another is mentors. That's a really, really interesting concept. And what is a mentor to you, and what is the value of having a mentor?

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

We can spend this entire podcast just on mentorship.

Bruce Moody:

Is that a relationship?

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

Absolutely, without a doubt. In the iPhone message app, you have the opportunity to pin certain conversations to the top of your app. On mine, for example, I have my mom, my sister and two of my best friends. And another one that's on there is my mentor because we talk that often. I have a few different mentors that I reach out to for different things. Since I consider myself a recovering engineer officer; that's where I spent the first couple years of my career before I switched to public affairs.

I still keep in touch with my engineer mentor all the time because he was a company commander when I was a platoon leader, in different units though, so we had no... It's not like he was in my rating scheme or anything like that. It was genuinely just someone with wisdom and expertise that I could turn to for advice without fear of retribution for my evaluations. No judgment. It was just like, "Hey, I'm experiencing this conflict as a leader, can I get a second opinion?" And we joke that because I'm not an engineer anymore, that he's still my spirit guide when it comes to my career and leadership in general.

Bruce Moody:

So, you have a spirit guide? So, when we look at relationships, there's a value to each one of them and certainly a mentor is going to be someone that you can go to for leadership guidance, professional guidance, moral clarity on things. What are the other types of benefits that you're getting from other types of relationships that you have? I

mean, for example, your parents. I'm sure the answer is yes. Are they still giving you good advice? And the answer is yes.

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

Absolutely. I mean, I talk to my mom on the phone almost every day, and it can be for five minutes, or it can be for 75 minutes. It just depends on how much free time we have, but it's refreshing, in a way, to talk to someone who doesn't have such an in-depth understanding of the military all the time because, at the end of the workday, the last thing I want to talk about is more work. So, it's really nice to just hear about her life and what she's going through. And then if I'm going through a hard time when it comes to a fight with a friend or finances or trying to decide which trip I should take next, it's nice to be able to still lean on my mom for advice on just aspects of normal life that don't have anything to do with the military.

Bruce Moody:

So, I want to pack two things that I heard from that. One is that, regardless of the job that we have when we're in uniform, there's a huge emotional quotient to that. But let's put that aside for a second. And you mentioned talking to your mom versus being on social media. How would you compare the two types of engagements with people with whom you have a relationship?

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

Oh, I mean, now you're digging into my communication degree, right? Because we talk about the more rich forms of interaction and ...

Bruce Moody:

And media richness.

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

Exactly. And, I mean, face-to-face is the most valuable, right? Whereas a text message, it's so easy to be rude in a text because you don't have to look at someone's face when you say it. Not saying I'm rude to my mother, but just as an example. Right. And I am the first person who, if I get in the car, it's very rare that I listen to music. I'll just say, "Who have I not talked to in a minute?" And I just call someone. I mean, try to be respectful of the fact that I'm on my way to work at 5 a.m. in the morning and not everyone else is awake.

Bruce Moody:

Choose your time zones.

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

Exactly. But when I was in Europe earlier this year, I was driving, and I have a friend who's stationed in Korea, and I was like, "We don't have a 13-hour time difference anymore. It's only six or seven." I was like, "I'll just click, call, see if she was around." We ended up talking for two hours. It's so great to be able to actually have an in-depth one-on-one conversation with someone versus, I put something on my Instagram that 400 people see. They might scroll past it briefly, but it doesn't really tell them everything about that experience. Whereas I pick up the phone and I talk to my sister, my mom, my friends, and we talk for hours and catch up on the actual in-depth things in each other's lives.

Bruce Moody:

There's a whole science behind this, and the science of the dopamine hit that you get from a social media post that gets some reaction from a community is different from the kind of reaction that you get from actually having a conversation with somebody who knows you. Do you have an example of times where you felt a little more grounded at work that maybe you could attribute to conversations you've had with people in your life?

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

Yeah, I think so. I used to joke, back when I was at Fort Campbell, as a staff officer, you spend a lot of your day behind a computer, right? And I was going through air assault school for the second time because I failed the first time I went. And I was really in my head about it. I was very nervous to go back because that was a big failure for me as a brand-new officer in the air assault division to have failed the first time I attempted that school. And I had a really long conversation on the phone with my mentor before I went back a second time. And the whole time I was going through the obstacle course, I just was kind of replaying that conversation in my head and affirming the things that I needed someone else to tell me to really let them sink in.

And then, later in the course, I remember we had just gotten smoked for two hours, bear crawls in the grass, pushups, sprints, you name it, absolutely exhausted. And we were in the bleachers waiting for aircraft to come for part of the training, and I was just sitting there looking up at the sky smiling. And a soldier next to me was like, "Man, why

are you so happy right now? That was horrible." And I said, "Dude, I haven't checked my computer or my email once. This is a good day."

So, it's multifaceted in that I love to joke that a good day in the Army is a day that I wasn't on my email because I actually was doing soldier things, getting to be with soldiers and enjoying the sun. And then, the other thing was, I just went through something really hard. I overcame a previous failure, and I knew I had people in my corner who were cheering me on to achieve that goal. So, I'll never forget that moment, just sitting in the bleachers after doing two hours of pushups. It's like, happy to be there.

Bruce Moody:

That's really interesting. And let's talk about making new relationships, making new friends, the people that you want to be in touch with. One of the things that I really want people who are new to the military, whether a spouse or a service member, the worst the situation is, you need to scroll somewhere in your mind the understanding that this is fertile ground for friendships that will last a lifetime. The easiest times, things do not click, people don't stick. Talk to me about that. When you are out there executing the mission or training, and it just sucks, you look around people, and you just fuse to each other and the friendships that come from that.

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

I mean, prime example, I just spent Christmas in Germany with one of my friends that I did the engineer basic officer course with that I had not seen since we graduated in December of 2021. But we stayed in touch. And one of the things that we laughed about on that trip, as we were skiing and having a great time in Germany, was talking about how one of the last times we saw each other, we were huddled under the same sleeping bag in freezing rain in the woods of Fort Leonard Wood, literally crying because of how cold we were and both being like, "Oh my God, why did we do this to ourselves?" No joke, it's a trauma bond, to put it bluntly.

Looking back and all the things I've been through since then, that really was not that difficult of a field problem. But at that point in my career, at that point in my life, that was one of the hardest nights that I had had. And so, we laugh now, looking back three years ago, we were very different people, and our friendship was definitely cemented in that moment that we were in the same squad shivering together.

Bruce Moody:

I love the phrase "trauma bond." So how do people make the most of a trauma bond when it comes to making sure that relationship sticks? Is it just a natural thing? Do you just naturally bond to each other, or is there something that you need to do?

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

I think, at the end of the day, when it comes to the challenging things that we experience in the military, whether it's a field problem, a school, or just a rough day in the office, how we react to stress is really important. And if you're able to keep calm in the face of adversity and provide that grounding presence for others, that resonates with people, and you kind of gravitate towards those people that help you feel better in those stressful situations.

But I think that's just a natural product of being in the military. A lot of the senior officers that I have talked to, when I have said, "You've been in the Army for well over 20 years, you could have had your full retirement by now. Why do you stay?" The vast majority of the answer is because of the people. The quality and caliber of individuals that decide to raise their right hand — it's incredible. We truly serve alongside some fantastic Americans and then getting to go through those hard experiences with your fellow service members really just brings you even closer.

Bruce Moody:

Let's talk about what friends do for each other ... what people in relationships do for each other. When I was looking at my life and identifying the people that I considered the people who cared about me the most, I would identify those people as the ones most likely to smack me on the forehead when I was being an idiot. And I have been smacked in the forehead a couple of times. So, there's a difference between somebody who's just fun to be with and someone who is going to help you become a better you.

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

Absolutely. I mean, I think a really important example, too, is a lot of us are far away from home. And in situations where you need help, my mom can't just drive over here really quick and help me out. I sprained my ankle a couple months ago, and the first thing I did was call my friend Anna because, when we really first got very close, she was like, "Hey, I just want you to know that if you ever need anything, if you need a friend who can be your emergency contact, I'm that person for you." And that day, that's exactly what happened. I was like, "Hey, it's my right foot. I can't drive. I think something is seriously wrong." She was like, "Okay, I'll be there in 10 minutes. Let's go to urgent care."

So, in the same breath, the amount of times that we've just gotten a bite for dinner or watch a movie together or just both met up at the trail and gone for a long walk to catch up because we haven't seen each other in a few weeks, it's really important to have those people in your life that you can rely on because humans are an interconnected species by nature. So, it's important to have those people that you can turn to when you genuinely can't do something yourself.

Bruce Moody:

And accountability to really point out when you're falling short.

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I like to think that I don't ever really need that, but that's not true. We always need someone for a sanity check, and it's important to have those friends that will be honest with you when you need it.

Bruce Moody:

You do because life in the military is all about growing and challenging. And if you coast, not only are you not meeting your personal potential, but really, you're just making it more difficult on your fellow service members. So, do you ever give advice to people around you with regard to maintaining ties, having relationships, the kind of relationships that are going to be positive and growing?

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

Absolutely. I think whenever I've had brand-new commission officers reach out to me for advice, like the cadets who were freshmen when I was a senior, who are now serving as second lieutenants. I've only been in the Army for about three and a half years, but I've gone through a lot in that three and a half years. And it's interesting to compare my second lieutenant self to my first lieutenant self, and in a couple months here, soon to be a captain, there's a lot of growth that changes with that responsibility in the different things I've gone through.

So, something I really struggled with at the beginning was the fact that I am a major extrovert. I do not understand how people just want to go home and sit in silence. I need to be surrounded by people. I love to talk. It's very rare that I will just go back to my house after work. I usually have a weeknight activity. I know not everyone is that way, but that is absolutely how I am.

So, one thing that I really encourage, especially new officers, because we don't have as many peers. As a brand-new soldier out of basic training, who's immediately put into a squad, typically of a bunch of other soldiers of their same rank, as a new officer, there's a chance that you're the only person on staff.

It's like, don't go home right after work. At least one day a week, find some sort of community outlet, whether it be a gym, whether it be any sort of church group. My friend was in a sewing circle, you name it.

Find some sort of activity, whether it's volunteering; connect with your community; connect with not only the base and the service members and the civilians and the families, but the surrounding area. I have friends who volunteer as coaches for sports at their local schools surrounding their installations. Connect with the community and give back and then it will give back to you.

Bruce Moody:

That's a whole 'nother world into itself, and the more connections that you have, the more different people you're talking to, the more rich your understanding of yourself and what it is that you're here to do. It's just so incredibly important.

This has been such a really interesting conversation, and I'm just glad to have this conversation with an extrovert. So, I would actually, being the podcast host, identify myself as an introvert. I don't want to get too much into my personal life, but this is how I personally identify introverts from extroverts. It's not so much wanting to be away from people. Engaging people require you to give energy or does ... See, you're already shaking your head.

So, you, engaging with people gives you energy. And I have to contribute, but I want so badly to engage with people, so I bring the energy, and I'm exhausted by the end of the day. Maybe sort of a good way to wrap this up is to talk about the importance of acknowledging kind of people where they are, acknowledging their strengths and their personalities, their quirks, whatever, and how do you work that into the friendships and the relationships that you have with them.

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

Leaders talk a lot about emotional intelligence, and that's really important regardless of your rank, right? But the way I summarize it is, can you read the room? Plain and simple. I see it a lot in the meetings that I attend when people are briefing, it's very easy to tell when no one is paying attention to the things that you're saying. So, how are you going to adapt what you're saying to reach your audience?

And it's not always briefing a commander or trying to engage your soldiers and motivate them to do something. That applies to your friends too. Like, if a friend is confiding in you, are they asking for advice, or do they just want a shoulder to cry on? And it's important to know the difference.

Or, if you're in a large crowd, can you tell that someone doesn't want to be there, and can you kind of jump in and save the conversation and offer them an escape route? Or does someone else really want to finish telling their story, and is it time for you to just step back and listen? I think just the ability to read the room is really important, but if you're truly surrounded by people that love you for who you are, you won't have to worry about that too much.

Bruce Moody:

Excellent. We'll leave it at that. Thank you so much. I really enjoyed this conversation.

1st Lt. Amy Petrocelli:

Yeah, thank you for having me.

Bruce Moody:

All right, excellent. I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. If you have any questions or comments about what you heard today, we have a link in the program notes. If you have an idea for a future podcast episode, same link.

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Please subscribe to this podcast 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.