

Military OneSource Podcast — Managing Deployment Stress and How to Prepare

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 going to talk about managing the stress of deployment, how to prepare to deal with the stress of deployment. And to do that, we're going to welcome two guests with us today. We have Amanda Romero and Tychera Mayfield. Tychera goes by Ty. So we'll be welcoming the both of you to the podcast. Hello.

Tychera Mayfield:

Hello.

Amanda Romero:

Hello, Bruce. Thank you.

Bruce Moody:

All right, great to have you with us. Now, both of you are Navy veterans and you're both Military OneSource licensed professional counselors. And sometimes, or in the context of this conversation, we're going to refer to you as peer-to-peer counselors. So let's start with you, Amanda. Let's get an idea of what a Military OneSource licensed professional counselor is and what your background is.

Amanda Romero:

All right, my background is I was in the Navy for nine years. I have a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling. A licensed professional counselor is someone who provides therapeutic services, so psychotherapy, basically specializes in providing therapy, a counselor, the traditional lay on the couch. But in working with Military OneSource and doing peer-to-peer, the idea is a little less clinical and a little more relational in terms of offering support to service members and their spouses, where it's more of a relationship that we provide, like shared experiences, support. Basically, referring to their experiences and their understanding so they can have a sense of support and information. Sometimes it's resources, sometimes it's just pointing them in

the right direction. But it's less clinical, less formal than actually going to counseling and providing a therapeutic intervention or a clinical-based modality of service.

Bruce Moody:

So, Ty, when did you serve, what did you do, and what does all of that service bring to your job?

Tychera Mayfield:

Sure. I was an Navy veteran, operations specialist, and I was on the ship for nine years. And so what that brings to our current position or my current job is that I'm able to just relate to military service members a little bit more of one-on-one, some of the challenges that they may be going through in regards to deployment, changing commands, dealing with different work environments. And I'm also a military spouse as well. So I'm able to also relate to military spouses in a way that they're able to understand a little bit more on a personal level of what to expect as a military spouse. And they're not just talking to just some random person who's never experienced being a spouse or they're not talking to someone who has never experienced being in the military.

Bruce Moody:

Got it. Yeah, so I'm a Navy veteran. I'm retired Navy, and I can tell you, I am not going to let this episode devolve into sea stories. We're going to stay on task, I think, I hope. So let's just get into it and lock ourselves into this conversation.

Let's talk about deployments, and stress, and some of the changes that service members and family members can expect to maybe help to ease that time of getting ready for a deployment. And, Amanda, let's start with you.

Amanda Romero:

Obviously, there are a bunch of changes that happen within the dynamics of the family. Somebody's leaving. Whether it's a married family with children or a single person who lives with parents or just has connection to their community. I mean, no matter what happens, you're leaving that aspect of your environment and going into something totally different. So being prepared for that — both mentally and logistically — is so, so, so important. There's so many things that come into play. And obviously, on your first deployment, you have no idea what comes into play. So for me, it was at 20-something years old, my early 20s. I had no clue about life, and leaving things with people, and power of attorneys and money. And your intention is like, "Oh, let's go on this deployment and get all this money and go shopping."

Bruce Moody:

Yay! And make every mistake in the book along the way.

Amanda Romero:

Exactly.

Tychera Mayfield:

[inaudible]

Amanda Romero:

Absolutely.

Tychera Mayfield:

Absolutely.

Bruce Moody:

So, Ty, what are some of the issues that you are often maybe helping service members and their families with?

Tychera Mayfield:

Some of the things that I help service members and their families with is trying to figure out how to prepare for a deployment. Especially if they're going on their first deployment, it's trying to just understand what it is that they need to do on their end to help their families be able to be prepared. And so that, in regards, is telling them about how to make sure that their families have support, power of attorneys, know what communication is going to look like depending on what branch they're in, because different branches, depending on where you are at in your deployment, you may be able to talk on the phone or your communication may be just strictly through email. So just understanding the different phases of deployment and how to prepare for that.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. And it changes as time goes by. You have your first deployment, that time when you do it all wrong, and then you figure out how to do it right. But, I mean, do you really? Because they just change every single time. There's always something different.

Tychera Mayfield:

Right. No deployment is the same. So even with those service members that have been on deployments, right, this may be their first deployment with a family. And so now, it's like having to talk to them about their emotional well-being of having to leave their spouse and their children, because this is their first time that they're ever going to be away from them. So just navigating those emotions with them and helping them to just be able to learn how to manage those emotions while they're away on deployment. And then also with their families, their spouses, helping them to understand how to manage their time while their service member is away on deployment as well.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, so it starts out you're going to deploy; you find a buddy to look after your car when you're gone. Couple of deployments later, it's all different. You're married, you got kids. So how is it different for family members?

Amanda Romero:

I really think, for family members, it's just a different aspect of dynamics and things to figure out. When you're the service member, you're figuring out what you have to do to leave things lined up while you're gone, so all of your personal things, people being able to act on your behalf. So that's where the power of attorney and family care plans, things like that come into play. When you're the family member at home — and I was also married for 10 years to a service member who is retired now — and that aspect of it is totally different. Because you're the person at home, so you're hoping the service member did everything they needed to do so you could be able to do everything.

Bruce Moody:

Oops.

Amanda Romero:

Exactly. That's why I said hoping, because you're really the person at home. So anything for that service member, if they didn't do their part, you can't do it. And then they're calling you going, "Hey, can you go run and do this? Can you go to the bank and do this?" And they're like, "No, you're the spouse. You cannot do those things."

Or just having support in place, being able to have family members close by. And sometimes, if you're the spouse and you're following the service member, you're going to all these places where you guys have no friends, no family, no support outside of utilizing the things that are in place like an ombudsman and family support, depending on where you're stationed. So it's really about being intentional and finding that support.

There are things that are put in place intentionally through the military for service members and their families, but then it is also about putting yourself out there, which is sometimes the hard part, finding your own network, especially if you have children. And if you're on your own, just being able to keep your sanity intact and find things that you can do that fill your time that are healthy coping skills that keep you on track and planning ahead.

Bruce Moody:

What are some of those coping skills?

Amanda Romero:

The biggest thing for me that I found when I was married and my husband was gone... And with my ex-husband, we got married before, which was a unique experience, because we got married; I didn't have any children prior to my marriage, and I was single, living on my own, and then I went: married, child, dog, house.

Bruce Moody:

An insta-family.

Amanda Romero:

A instant family.

Tychera Mayfield:

Real fast.

Amanda Romero:

So I went from...

Bruce Moody:

Just add water.

Amanda Romero:

Yeah, exactly. I went from completely single, great luxury vehicle, making great money, spending all my money, and then it was like I had all this stuff and no money. And so the process of making the adjustments to being able to manage all of those things was really difficult.

Bruce Moody:

OK, so there's the logistics, there's things they got to think about. But as far as mental wellness tips, tricks, advice that you have for them. When you're talking to them about how to deal with this stress, what are you talking to them about?

Tychera Mayfield:

What that looks like, so understanding what their stress level is. This one is key, because everybody's stress level is different. And so when it comes to, like — for me anyway — for spouses, it's understanding who their support system is. Understanding what they find interest in, any hobbies, understanding that they need to sometimes take a break for themselves, whether that be five or 10 minutes, just to decompress.

And I always tell my service members and spouses that, when you find yourself just overwhelmed and frustrated, the first thing we need to do is take a breath. Because sometimes as humans, we forget to just breathe. And so when I'm talking to service members or spouses, we tend to go over breathing techniques, just to help them understand how to just breathe when they're feeling just overwhelmed and frustrated and not really knowing how to deal with their stress.

And then from there, we try to navigate, OK, well, what do you find interest in? What helps you be able to just decompress, even if it's just five or 10 minutes? And then also, what does your support system look like? Who can you talk to? Who do you confide in when you're in trouble or you're just wanting to just laugh or vent? And so I help them to just be aware of those things. And then from there, we're able to help them learn how to just manage stress at a more easier level. Because stress is going to come, no matter how much we try to get rid of it.

Bruce Moody:

I really want to hear from the licensed professional counselor side of you. Because you talk about the importance of breath, and it's one of those things where it's just simple things that can have such a tremendous benefit. I guess we kind of all get it. People say, "Oh, take a breath. Breathe deep," or whatever. But, I mean, there really is a lot to it, and it's just such a powerful thing, and it's always there. Air is always there. You don't have to put money in a coin slot or anything. Maybe just take a moment and just talk about the real benefits of just giving yourself a moment to breathe.

Amanda Romero:

I mean, really, deep breathing, meditation, just the process of how we think. Of course, there isn't the clinical aspect of that that has to do with just oxygen and what air does for your body, but a lot of people don't even realize that we go from day to day living in the moment. I mean, that's the world we live in today. The world we live in today is built around instant gratification. If we want to do something, if we want to see somebody, if we want to talk to somebody, it's a phone call away, it's a video away. We are just going through the moment, and instant gratification has everything at our fingertips. So it's hard for people to deal with being separated from family members and being away from people and not being able to have that connectedness when we want it.

So a part of establishing coping skills is walking through the process of what it is to establish coping skills. Much like what Ty said, establishing, what do you do for fun? What do you do to pass time? What do you like to do? What do you enjoy doing? And a lot of people, when you say "coping skills," they don't even know what a coping skill is. If they've never been in therapy, they're not even thinking of the things that they do as coping skills, but a lot of people go to them unintentionally, not thinking that it's a coping skill. If you are a person who runs to the bathroom when you get stressed out at work just to sit in a stall and take a couple of deep breaths, or...

Bruce Moody:

It's a thing.

Amanda Romero:

It is. It really is. Or run to your car and cry or scream, or scream into a pillow — all of those things are coping skills. It's just about identifying it as that and being able to utilize those tools when you have a specific issue.

One of my coping skills is going to the gym. I can't be at work stressed out and be like, "Hey, guys, I'm so stressed. I'm going to the gym right now." Can't do it. So what do I do for a work stressor versus a stressor that I have at home where I can go to the gym? What do I do for a tension issue where I may develop tension headaches or maybe I need a nap in those moments? Or maybe some people do meditate and know how to do those five-minute meditations or, like Ty was saying, breathing. Sometimes you can do something simple, like box breathing or you have tap therapy. I mean, so many tools out there now that you can literally YouTube and figure out how to establish a coping

skill. And it may or may not work, and people have to go through the process of figuring out what works for them and how to start doing those things.

Tychera Mayfield:

I think it's also important to understand how stress affects your body, because oftentimes people don't know how the stress is actually affecting their body. So when we identify as an LPC how stress is affecting their body, then they're able to just be more aware of like, OK, I'm having stress and I'm starting to have more headaches. I'm having a hard time sleeping. I've started to gain weight. So what do I need to do in order to not have those things? And oftentimes I tell them, "Well, it's coming from stress, so we do have to become more aware of what activities we can engage in so that you're not as stressed."

Bruce Moody:

Got it. So we're talking about a lot of the things that a person can do to get ahead of their stress, but what happens when that's not quite enough and maybe they really ought to be talking to somebody? What should a person be doing at that point?

Tychera Mayfield:

Well, then that's when we're going to refer them to actually speak to a counselor so that that counselor can help them actually navigate the deep-rooted cause of what they're experiencing.

Bruce Moody:

So how does that work? So a person may call up Military OneSource, and they're speaking with you. And would you determine that they need something different? How would that work?

Amanda Romero:

Yep, so they would be dealing with us as in peer to peer, and they may be describing things that distinguish for us... Because, I mean, professionally, we are counselors, so we know the difference between something that's just managing day-to-day stressors and something that's having a clinical effect on the body. A lot of people, like Ty was saying, we feel these stressors on a day-to-day basis and we're like, "Oh, I'm just stressed out. It's not a big deal." But a lot of people that don't know the clinical side of that, how it affects us in our mind and our body, don't understand that the worse your stress becomes, it affects things that can be big issues. Maybe not right away, but long term, they can affect things like your blood pressure, muscle tension. They can affect brain fog, impairing memory, concentration. There's a list that goes on and on and on, just how our body responds to stress physiologically; impact on the nervous system. I mean, there's a number of things.

So when we start to notice those things in peer support, sometimes I think we gently remind the person like, "Hey, this is peer support, not meant to be counseling. Maybe..." Ty is laughing because we have these conversations so much like, "Maybe this

is not the place for you.” Because I think it’s hard for people to say, “OK, maybe this is more than just a stress that I feel every once in a while. Maybe this is something that’s really affecting my life and causing a significant enough impairment where I need a higher level of care than just somebody to blow off steam to.”

Tychera Mayfield:

And so we can recommend them to an actual counselor, but they can also still see us while they’re going to that counselor, so that we can still be their accountability partner for them to continue to work on any goals that they may be working on with that provider that they have decided to see. But we do see a lot of times, with service members or spouses, they really don’t want to start counseling, so they are hoping to get what they need out of peer support. And then while they’re talking to us, we do inform them that they need to actually seek a little bit more long-term counseling, because what they’re needing, we can’t provide in the type of environment that we’re in.

Bruce Moody:

Again, I don’t want to devolve into sea stories. However, I just know that the two of you just have a couple of stories to share, experiences, amazing mistakes that you’ve made and maybe what you’ve learned from them, or just the experience of dealing with stress during a deployment — either as a service member or a spouse. I really want to hear from you guys.

Amanda Romero:

Well, I’ll take that one. Well, I mean, and I shared this a little earlier, but I was on a, in the Navy what they would call a “big boy.” I was on an aircraft carrier for my first deployment, and over 6,000 people on board the ship. You see the same... You work 12 hours on, 12 hours off every single day, except for Sunday sometimes. And I don’t think anyone, especially — I’m going to say children — just because some people join the military at 17 years old. And I feel like between 17 and 25, most people still are kids at heart at least. I don’t think any kid is prepared to be secluded in that way and see the same people every single day, day in and day out, every day.

Bruce Moody:

Every day.

Tychera Mayfield:

Yeah, every day.

Bruce Moody:

Small spaces, many people.

Amanda Romero:

Yeah, exactly. I mean, and...

Bruce Moody:

Turn up the heat.

Amanda Romero:

Yeah. And small is not even... For what we see on a day-to-day basis out in the civilian world, small is not even the word. We're talking a couple of feet of space. You see the same person every single morning when you wake up. And I mean, I remember, and this is going to sound so crazy...

Tychera Mayfield:

Face-to-face.

Amanda Romero:

Exactly. It's going to sound crazy. I remember saying to my mom after my first deployment that the level of a relationship that you have, it doesn't hold a candle to a best friend. And I'm not talking about people that you necessarily even love, but you see them and you're with them so much that every detail of who this person is... My mom, I was telling her, "You could go into a bathroom stall, and you know how in a public bathroom, you look down and you can see the person's feet next to you? Everybody on a ship is wearing the same uniform." And I told her, "It is so funny that I could look at somebody's boots, and by the indentation in their boots and the way their boots are shined, I know who that is next to me." And she was like, "Yeah, right. There's no..." And I was like, "Mom..."

Bruce Moody:

No, it's true.

Amanda Romero:

It is so true. I could look at somebody's boots, they could not say two words, and I know who that is, by boots, by breathing, by smells. It is incredible what your body can do to recognize things when you're around people that much.

Bruce Moody:

And that can go so awesomely well, and it can go in the total opposite direction in a blink.

Amanda Romero:

Absolutely. If it's somebody you don't like, I mean, God forbid you have somebody that lives in the same vicinity as you — which chances are you will — that you don't like, and they wear the same, say, perfume every single day or spray or whatever it is. If you ever leave the military and meet somebody who wears that same scent ever again, you will...

Bruce Moody:

[inaudible]

Amanda Romero:

Yes, exactly. You will automatically be like, “Uh-uh, get away from me.”

Tychera Mayfield:

That’s true.

Amanda Romero:

It is such a different experience. It’s so unique that having peer support, I mean, I’ve had people that are like, “I don’t know what I would do without it.” Because it’s such a unique experience to be a spouse or to be a service member that having people that are relatable is so important.

Bruce Moody:

There’s nothing like it. And that’s such an important point. And this goes for being a military spouse. Being a military spouse has levels of intensity that only a military spouse can truly get. And you guys know both sides of the fence, and it is so valuable, because you have seen and done and smelled things that nobody else does. You have a perspective that another service member is going to totally get.

I want to tell more stories, but I know we don’t have time. This is so awesome. But I just want to thank the both of you for being on the podcast today. We have a bunch of links in the program notes. Again, you’re with Military OneSource, you’re both licensed professional counselors, and the links in the program notes get into the peer-to-peer support that you provide; all the various ways that people can reach you, and I just encourage people to reach out to you or maybe share this episode with somebody. But I just want to thank you. So, Amanda Romero and Ty Mayfield, thank you so much for joining us today.

Tychera Mayfield:

No problem.

Amanda Romero:

Yeah, thank you for having us. It was such a pleasure.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, we’ll have to finish this recording and go back to telling more stories. All righty. OK, all right, here we go. I want to remind you all that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. If you have a question or a comment, maybe on an idea for a future episode, please send us a message. We have a link in the program notes.

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.