

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My husband Eddie is in the Army, and stationed in Iraq. This separation has been particularly hard because we were not getting along before he was deployed. We were fighting all the time, and screaming at each other. Right now, we have a little contact by email, and sometimes a short phone call. We can't seem to get anything resolved, and I'm becoming more and more upset. I'm thinking about leaving him when he gets back, but we have a baby and he's a good father (when he's home). Do you think I should try to email him with my feelings?

-- Barbara

Dear Barbara,

In a word, "no." I'm not suggesting that you not speak with him, or email when you can, but don't bring up the subject of a separation while he's in harm's way. Those of you who read this column regularly, know that 'telling others how you feel' is something of a mantra for me. Good communication, and clearly talking about feelings are ways that people resolve conflicts and get closer. But there are times when restraint is required. This is one of them.

There will be time to discuss all of the problems in your marriage when he is safely home. In the meantime, there are lots of things you can do to help yourself.

First of all, ask yourself if the arguing increased just shortly before his deployment. If so, I'm wondering if the stress of his leaving – and not just to a relatively comfortable billet in Europe but to a war zone -- increased stress for both of you, and contributed to the emotional eruptions you experienced.. This may or may not be the case, but it is a possibility, and one worthy of your reflection.

Second, when you talk with or email him, focus on the things you have in common, and don't focus on your difficult, angry feelings. Keep him informed about how the baby is doing. Send him photos if you can. Fill him in on how other family members are doing. Tell him what's going on in your neighborhood. Some of these subjects may even be superficial, but you are not going to resolve your marital problems over a squawking satellite phone, with who knows whom listening in.

Third, find a good therapist who is used to helping military spouses. Military life is not an easy way for a couple or family to live, with it's frequent separations, moves, stress, and potential danger.

Look also to the Army for some help. Most bases have excellent resources for families of soldiers (and that goes for sailors, Marines, and the Coast Guard as well). Family Services and Spouse Support Groups could be excellent ways for you to get encouragement and help. There are few things as powerful as talking with and looking into the eyes of another person who says, "I know how you feel," and means it.

Check out the Internet for places that offer help to families at websites like National Military Families Association (www.nmfa.org). You have many more choices than keeping everything bottled up inside, or telling Eddie you're ready to leave him just before he has to go out on guard duty in a treacherous situation.

Fourth, keep a journal so that you will have a place to vent your feelings and you will know what you want to say to Eddie when he is home and out of this dangerous situation.

Five, don't make any decisions about separation until he is home and both of you have an opportunity to readjust in more "normal" circumstances. Seek marriage counseling especially directed toward resolving conflicts instead of screaming at each other.

After all, you have a new baby who deserves, at the very least, both of your commitments to try and work out your problems. If that's not possible, and you both have done everything you can to find ways to love each other and be happy together, then you may have no choice but to separate. But you will sleep well at night knowing that you handled the situation maturely and with compassion. This is the least that anyone can do for our men and women in uniform, and, regardless of how one feels about this war, they deserve our help and support.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.