

Couples Communication: Military Marriages and the Languages of Love

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We often heard statements made that military marriages have shockingly high divorce rates, or that “only the strongest survive.” If you or your spouse is a member of the military, you know that sometimes the separations are long, and the stress levels are high. Many researchers and experts have tried to find out how marriages within the military fare when compared to civilian marriages. Do Military couples break up more often?

Challenges of the Military Marriage

Military service places demands on personnel that have the potential to affect their romantic relationships, such as frequent relocations, sometimes to different countries; long working hours; time away from home for training; and operational deployments which may place military personnel at risk of injury or death. These demands often happen concurrently and are not optional or negotiable.

Especially in the U.S Military, Military couples have experienced relatively long and frequent deployments with high exposure to combat. One of the most important aspects of stress for the non-deployed spouse appears to be the level of worrying about issues commonly related to deployment during wartime such as the soldier’s safety, emotional adjustment, and opportunities for communication and emotional stress particularly concerns about injury and death.

In the study conducted by Wright et al (2006) focus was placed on the level of stress that Army couples experiences regarding combat, reintegration, loneliness, sexual frustration, difficulty staying in touch,

spouse fidelity, death, injury, psychological problems, and effects on children. There are high levels of this stress and is detrimental to the psychological and physical health of the civilian wives, It is often found out that civilian wives experience greater emotional stress compared to the Solider himself.

Marital distress and instability can have negative effects on physical and emotional well-being). Married soldiers were more likely to report negative consequences, including time away from family/missing important events and the deterioration of their marital relationship and the civilian wife dealing with more than his or her share of the day-to-day responsibilities (e.g., solo parenting, chauffeuring, cooking, laundry, errands, bills, yard work, vehicle maintenance, etc.). When apart, couples are less available to provide one another with emotional support; maintaining a sense of connectedness can become more challenging. Differing time zones, limited access to phones, spotty internet connectivity, and a range of other factors can negatively impact communication when a military couple is apart – often contributing to frustration, miscommunications (Newby et al., 2005).

In Singapore, there is not as much overseas deployment in the army compared to the US. But there are still overseas deployments. It is also a norm in Singapore that it is difficult to be married to a Solider. It is very similar in terms where if a Solider must go, he has to go. The Army is always the first priority. I have encounter cases where the Solider has to be deployed last minute and his civilian wife has to deliver the Child alone. Most common cases are Civilian wives often felt that the Husband is not physically present and is unable to provide emotional needs. Few examples given by the civilian wives are:

- They are unable to plan for anything because their Husband often has to go back to work suddenly and they are unknown of the uncertainty. Even planned holidays may always have the possibility of rescheduling.
- Civilian wives often have to spend special events alone. Birthdays, holidays, anniversary. Their Husband is often away.

- In cases of emergency, the husband is always not an alternative. For example, the Child has a fall in School and needs a parent to pick up from school. The Civilian wife can only rely on herself or other family members not the Husband.
- It is always difficult or impossible to reach the husband. This is because in the military there are certain restricted zones and usage of mobile phones are not allowed. Even mobile phones are allowed, the husband is always busy with training or other commitments. Getting a quick reply is not possible.
- It seems that life is always planned around the Husband's schedule.
- Even the husband is not deployed, the husband often left the house during early mornings and only comes home late evenings.
- Trust is also an issue where the civilian wives worry about the Husband's fidelity as he may be deployed to other Countries for months.

Many soldiers shared that they have difficulties maintaining relationships. Either they are unable to have a long-lasting relationship or their wives are always unhappy with them and some even end up in divorce. I do notice that Soldiers often blame it on the nature of their job which is demanding, and this is the main reason that they are unable to fulfill their duties as a husband.

Personally, I do agree that maintaining relationships may not be as easy for military couples. It is often perceived as there is nothing that a husband can further do as it is the requirement of his job and the Civilian wife is often seen as not understanding and unhappy. I feel in most cases. Military couples can still have a good relationship or marriage.

I feel that a common perception that Soldiers in Singapore has. "I am needed by my Country, so I need to serve. There is nothing much I can do. My wife has to be the one who is carrying the heavy load." As

much as the Soldiers feel guilty about it, they seem to be fixated at this thought that there is nothing much that they can do to improve the relationship.

I understand that as much as military couples are not able to change their situation, but they can focus on their communication styles which will improve their marriage greatly. Lavner et al (2016) suggests that communication plays a central role in marriage. The quality of communication between spouses is widely assumed to affect their subsequent judgments of relationship satisfaction. Couple communication skills are the key predictors of relationship satisfaction. For example, having conversations with one another such as things as discussing the works or daily activities, expressing the things which they like and which they dislike will have significant role in maintaining the good relationship.

The way of communicating is also important. For example, if the topics is more about Children then the relationships between Couples. This communication may not be as effectively in boosting satisfaction in the relationship. Communication is not as simple as just exchanging information using the words we speak or write. Sometimes conflict arises between Couples because of ineffective communication. The husband may interpret the information shared by the wife differently and vice versa. Therefore, communication skills are important in boosting marital satisfaction.

The Languages of Love

For military couples in Singapore, I would recommend that they start off using the five languages of love identified by Dr Gary Chapman (1995). This is because it is not as prevalent in Singapore to go for therapy to seek professional help. When Couples encounter issues in their relationship, seeking professional help will not be the first thing that it comes to mind. It is more prevalent in western

countries to seek for professional help. In Singapore, when a couple has issues, they will turn to their family members or friends for advice.

According to Dr. Chapman, there are five love languages: Words of Affirmation, Acts of Service, Receiving Gifts, Quality Time, and Physical Touch. Depending on individual personalities, one may feel loved differently. Understanding and decoding these different ways of showing love will help to know the partner's expectations and needs.

A brief explanation of each love language:

1. *Words of Affirmation*- This love language express love with words. Verbal compliments do not have to be complicated. Short and simple praises can be effective. Examples include you look pretty today, that is such a pretty dress, you are always so kind to me. Words mean a lot if your partner has this love language. Compliments can really boost the relationship but the other hand, negative or insulting comments can hurt the partner and it could affect them a lot and may requires longer time to forgive.
2. *Acts of services*- This love language expresses itself by doing things that you know your partner would like. For example, cooking a meal, doing the household chores. All of these actions should be done with positivity and with the partner's happiness in mind to be considered an expression of love. Actions out of obligation or with a negative tone will not be effective.
3. *Receiving Gifts*- If a partner has this love language, it does not necessary mean that the person is materialistic. It refers to a meaningful or thoughtful gift makes the partner feel loved. For example, getting your Partner's favourite dessert after he/she had a long day of work.
4. *Quality time*- This love language is all about undivided attention. No usage of phones or distractions. Meaning needing to make sure to dedicate time without other distractions. It is

important to try not to cancel or postpone a date or not being focused during time together. It can make the partner feel hurtful and not important.

5. *Physical Touch* – This love language refers to the physical touch of their partner. Partner feel more connected in a relationship by kissing, holding hands, kissing and hugging. If this is the Partner's primary love language, the partner can feel unloved without physical contact. They need to feel close physically.

I would like to share a case study of my Client who is working in the Singapore Military.

Mr. R works in the military and recently has been given a new appointment and has been busy. He can only afford to go back home during weekends. There are times when he is tied up with trainings, so he is unable to go back home. He is rarely able to call or text his wife. Even when he does, usually is around 11 pm or 12 am for around 10-15 minutes as he and his wife need to sleep. Mr. R is newly married, he describes his wife as being understanding and independent which he considers himself lucky as he does not have to face as many issues compared to his colleagues. He shared that his colleagues often have arguments with their wives and the wives demand for them to come home or often ringing them expressing their unhappiness. There are wives who had extra martial affair and some marriages end up in divorce.

However, he shared that recently it seems that his wife has been withdrawn and has less conversations. His wife seems to not bother of whether he contacted her or waited for his call in the evening. When he does go home, his wife seems easily irritated with him and does not have patience with him. When he offered help in doing chores, his wife rejected him and mentioned that it is her daily routine and she is used doing alone. They started to have arguments whenever he is home. Mr. R was not close to his family and did not like to share his personal stuffs with his friends or colleagues.

He decided to bring his wife along into the session. The wife shared in the intake session that she felt that she had been doing her part all along, but she does not feel appreciated or even taken granted for. She felt that she was always giving. The wife mentioned that she felt that she is not emotionally connected with her husband. She felt that it seems that her husband has “resign to fate” not putting in any effort in the marriage. She mentioned she understands the job of her Husband and she has been very understanding and accommodating. She always felt that in a relationship is about give and take. So, she understands the job of her husband and at the same time when it is areas of her shortcomings, she hopes for Mr. R to do the same.

However, the wife shared that she does not feel the same. The wife shared that she comes from a not so nice family and there are times she often encounters issues with her own family which may affect herself and Mr. R. Mr. R often blame her and argue with her. She felt helpless and hurt by his words. Often when they argued she shared that the words that Mr. R said was hurtful to her which she finds it difficult to forgive and forget. She shared that as much as Mr. R is busy with his job, she felt that Mr. R only care for himself and does not feel important. She shared that Mr. R is unable to use the phone frequently, but he could send her short messages whenever he could. Every night before they sleep, he could always send a note to sum up his day.

She shared that whenever he is at home, he often spends time on his phone and doing his own activities. When she brought that up to Mr. R, he was often unhappy and replied saying that he rarely has the privilege to have free time to do his things. Mr. R often complained that he is stressed and tired from work and did not assist with any household chores. Mr. R only did selectively on rare occasions. The wife mentioned that Mr. R always have the chance to do more. For example, Mr. R could send flowers to her once in a while or get gifts for her, but he never did. It feels to her that he is using his job as an excuse and does not even try.

As often as we hear how demanding military jobs can be and how they may cause relationship problems, it is good to note that what the couple actually did for the relationship or did the Husband tried to think out of the box and maintain the relationship in different and maybe creative ways. Communication is a powerful tool. Communication can be engaged in different ways not only limit to words. The five languages of love by Gary Chapman seem to be a good start point for any couples. To offer a brief explanation of the above case study, Mr. R's wife has her own emotional needs to be fulfilled, as is the case in any relationship. Based on her sharing, it seems that receiving gifts, words of affirmation, quality time and acts of services are on the list of Mr. R's wife. Mr. R probably can have better understanding of his wife and he is able to come up with different creative ideas which previously he may did not think of. Mr. R may feel limited as there was nothing much he can do about.

In conclusion, I do think this is something new and interesting to explore for military couples and other couples in Singapore. I do hope in future there could me more studies done in Singapore identifying common issues that Couples faced and more psycho education for Couples to understand and improve their relationship.

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