

Travelling Towards Transition - Considerations for the Military Family

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Military-to-civilian transition is a complex and active process. Although researchers have concentrated on the experience of the serving member, there has been growing international recognition that transition involves and affects everyone in a military family.¹⁻¹⁰ Everyone leaves the military at some point, so the journey out should be an expected one.

Drawing on family science, we take an ecological systems approach to conceptualising the journey undertaken by family members experiencing military-to-civilian transition. Understanding that families are a set of individuals interacting within broader, interdependent systems,^{11, 12} we use the analogy of a family preparing to take a trip to conceptualise family factors that need to be considered through the military-to-civilian transition process. The family will be travelling towards a destination—in this case, life outside of the military. For any trip, one needs to have a plan that includes, among others, mode of travel and travel style; these converge with the travel style to create a military-to-civilian transition experience for families. Those planning for this journey need to think beyond how the ‘driver’ will cope with the demands of the trip and extend that lens to consider the accompanying ‘passengers’.

Mode: How will they get there?

As transition approaches, the family will select the most appropriate mode of travel for their journey. The family may choose to travel by bike, car, train, plane, bus or boat, depending on the size, composition and family dynamics, along with the health and ages of the family members. Is everyone travelling together, joining for part of the trip, or meeting the family at the final destination? Key features related to cost, comfort and reliability of the selected travel mode will affect the journey. Is the mode of travel newer or in need of maintenance? Is it reliable or prone to breakdown or delays? How far can the selected mode of travel go before a stop is required? Depending upon a given family profile, say a family with younger children who have a lot of safety equipment and who

need diaper changes, driving may be a preferred option to flying.

Plan: What’s their plan?

Now, think of the different kinds of trips the veteran and his/her family could take. This might be a scenic drive along the old roads of the coast, with sightseeing and getting back to nature in mind. Or, it might involve a direct flight to get to an urban centre with amusement parks and shopping outlets. Alternatively, a cruise might provide something for everyone because some family members don’t ride roller coasters, others don’t enjoy shopping and one has a leg injury that limits the kinds of activities the family might engage in. Perhaps the family is heading back to connect with their larger, extended family in their hometown or going ‘off the grid’, removed from society. If the trip was unexpected, as it might be if a friend or family took ill; the family may be planning the trip as they are taking it.

Style: What’s their style?

In addition to the mode of travel and plan for the trip, organisational style and comfort have to be considered. Some families will have every stop mapped out, with a clear plan, right down to a daily schedule. These families will be stocked up with snacks, drinks, hand wipes and emergency kits. Other families might have a looser plan of what they want to do on a given day, determined the morning of, with decisions informed by factors such as weather and the collective energy of the group. Some families may be able to adapt to unexpected challenges like delayed flights and change their route, while others may feel the need to adhere precisely to the original plan.

What about a guided tour? Trip reviews? Or travel insurance?

All of these variations presume the family is planning their own trip; however, they may be more comfortable

on a guided coach tour where the navigation of new and unfamiliar territory is done for them. Under those conditions, they are able to enjoy the process and make it through; if they had to do it on their own, it could be distressing for the whole family. For some families, this might mean doing a lot of research and exploring trip reviews to better understand potential pitfalls and reputable providers. For other families, they may consider if some kind of travel ‘insurance’ might offer them the supports they need should the trip run into issues.

Implications

This analogy demonstrates how the transition journey can be experienced in various ways for families, considering factors such as mode, plan and style of travel. The mode of travel is informed by family composition, structure, age of members, family dynamics, resources and resiliency that they are bringing into the trip. If the trip doesn’t align with the family’s sense of what kind of trip they were planning to take, this is likely to increase strains within the family system. Trips can be *laissez faire* or

involve a full itinerary with precise scheduling. For different families under various circumstances, these factors combine in multiple permutations, with the likelihood that different members of the family could have diverse expectations and approaches regarding travel. A variety of potentially conflicting perspectives within the family, along with family members’ responses to unanticipated events and opportunities that appear along the way, can also put pressure on the family system during the journey. Recognising proactively that the transition journey will unfold and that there should be some form of plan in place would be precursors to a successful transition and allow for a more responsive modification to the journey should the need for transition be accelerated. Many travelling towards transition can find the trip harder than they thought it would be to get to their destination but eventually find their way. No one transition journey will work for every family. As policymakers, researchers, clinicians and service providers, we need to ensure that this diversity is adequately reflected in our practices and interactions with families. We offer suggestions for families travelling towards transition in Table 1.

Table 1. Suggestions for families travelling towards transition.

To ensure the trip goes to plan:	To ensure transition goes to plan:
Start planning as early as possible.	Families must engage in the transition process early in their loved one’s military career. The military and other providers could engage with the family early in the process.
It is advisable to do some research.	Families should invest time into exploring what they might need during transition.
Shop around, as different trip providers will provide opportunities.	The military and other providers need to raise the profile of their resources.
Talk to those who have taken similar trips and draw on their experiences.	The military and other providers should draw on the experiences of those who have already left the military. Families should talk to those who have left the military and draw on their experiences.
Keep looking at the options and don’t rule anything out.	Further research into these experiences is needed.
Use accessible and easy to understand resources.	The language and terminology of materials provided to family’s needs to clear and accessible.
Only use reputable trip ‘providers and advisers’.	Services provided should be evaluated to ensure families receive the best support available.
Trip ‘providers and advisers’ need to cater for a variety of audiences.	The military and other providers need to recognise all forms of family.

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