

Chapter 1

What If I Don't Fit This Life?

The Myth of the Perfect Military Spouse Versus Authenticity and Uniqueness

Ask any spouse who's been married to the military what preconceived notions they had about the typical military spouse or possibly the "good military spouse," and you'll often hear the myth.

The mythical creature described is a wife who has two children and doesn't work outside the home; or if she does, she cheerfully puts her spouse's career first. She keeps a perfect house with seasonal decorations on the door, moves and settles into new quarters with curtains up in three weeks flat, easily keeps things running at home during deployments, and makes all food from scratch for unit gatherings.

The myth is usually a wife, although we have many men married to women in the military now, and they come in with no set role model of the "perfect military husband." The "norm" for so long was a male military member with a female spouse that that's where these stereotypes developed. And how many of those mythical creatures do you know? In our many years of being married to the military we can't say that we've even met one, but the myth persists.

One thing that perpetuates this myth is the number of spouses, ourselves included, who spend many years trying to fit themselves into some aspect of this myth. We've both spent time trying to dress "right," fix our houses "right," entertain "right," say the "right" things. We were trying so hard to live up to everything we kept hearing in this military world. We often felt like we were black sheep who just didn't fit into this world. We beat ourselves up by comparing our less-than-stellar lives to this mythical ideal. It's certainly not a healthy way to go about your life.

We loved hearing what Cecilia Abrams, wife of Gen. John Abrams, had to say about her own experience. “I remember watching the majors’ wives and colonels’ wives. I thought to myself, Look at all they do. They run things. They volunteer. They look perfect. They entertain beautifully,” she said. “I told my husband we were in trouble; he would not make major because I like to wear sweats and I like to wear them to the commissary.”

Another army spouse, Lynn Edwards, shares the story of the first coffee she held at her house for the unit wives. “I had this image in my head that I had to have china and crystal and a fancy coffee service,” says Lynn. “If it had been up to me, I’d have had pizza and soda, but I bought into the myth.” Since she worked in the hospitality industry, she was able to borrow all the fancy stuff she wanted. “It was the most uncomfortable evening I’ve ever had,” she continues. “The other wives would have been much happier with pizza and sodas too. I never made that mistake again. I decided to just be myself from then on.”

The strength of the military community comes from the wide variety and diversity of its members. It’s important to pay attention to your interests and passions whatever

they are—and find ways to fit them into this life. It’s important to live from the place of your own

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authenticity and uniqueness rather than trying to fit yourself into some mold that isn’t you. By figuring out what you need and carving out pieces of what you need—what feeds your soul—you’ll change your daily experience of life.

Let’s celebrate the fact that we have the great opportunity to interact with such a diverse group of people. As army spouse Theresa Donahoe says, “One thing I’ve learned in this lifestyle is to expand my definition of ‘friend’ in the military spouse arena. I had to learn that just because my initial impression of someone might be that they were ‘not my type,’ I often found that my ‘type’ was changing and that I enjoyed a much larger variety of friends than I ever had growing up. People I may never have given myself a chance to know in my old life turned out to become some of my closest and dearest friends.” Those diverse friends help you to stretch and grow as you move through this life. We’ve found that there is a strong bond among military spouses—or at least there can be if you are open to it. We have all entered a life that is different and often difficult for all of us. Connecting with others who are going through the same thing is a big part of that experience.

We aren’t saying, “Ignore all conventions!” Don’t confuse authenticity with a license to blatantly disregard or disrespect common courtesies. You will

encounter many formal occasions during your military life. Remember we have already mentioned that military life is a lifestyle, not a job. We encourage you to find out about the military lifestyle by understanding military traditions. Ask questions and talk with your spouse and others. The formal social occasions that you will be invited to are tied to long military traditions, traditions that feed into the pride and esprit de corps of the military. By learning more about the traditions in this lifestyle you will become more comfortable at formal functions and enjoy being part of tradition. In this chapter we are advocating that you be your authentic self. But the bottom line is don't be stupid. A Change of Command ceremony for your spouse's unit is not the time to show off your new belly-button ring by wearing short shorts and a halter-top. You can show your own authenticity and still be appropriate to the occasion.

What about That Mythical Creature Who Shows Up during Deployments?

Back-to-back deployments have raised the mythical creature again. Here's what we hear—and often what we read about in news articles and see in television interviews. “Military spouses are strong, self-reliant, courageous, independent”—the descriptive list goes on. We are the first to stand up and say military spouses are amazing human beings who manage to handle more than most people will ever be asked to do. However, the key words are: human beings. Human beings get lonely, depressed, scared, lazy, and apathetic during difficult times in their lives, especially during deployments. That is reality and that is okay.

One of the biggest responses on military.com's forums/chat rooms recently was to a topic titled “confessions.” The moderator started with her own and added, “We won't judge you.”

“I confess that in my husband's absence I've been depressed and lazy. I confess that I don't do the very things that he didn't do and I nagged him for. Like, I don't put my dirty clothes in the hamper all the time. I don't make the bed. I confess I don't shower every day. I don't shave, either—who's going to see my legs?”

She struck a chord. More than three thousand responses poured in.

- “I confess that I've eaten an entire bag of popcorn for dinner on many occasions.”
- “I confess that I watch way too much TV and haven't set out to accomplish any of my goals for this deployment (i.e., lose weight, learn to sew, read more.)”
- “I confess that I have been lazy and if it weren't for me having to get up and go to work I would probably never get out of bed.”

- “I confess that I cry every night when I am alone in bed.”
- “I confess that my son is getting himself ready for school in the mornings and I get up in time to make his lunch and drive him to school in my pajamas and slippers.”

It really helps to know you aren't the only one who slips into negative behavior during a deployment. It's not uncommon.

We've both been there. Holly remembers days when she really didn't manage to do more than brush her teeth. Kathie can remember making little agreements with herself, such as, “Today I'll finally leave the house and go to the store,” but then she'd break that agreement, hiding out in the house and staying up way too late night after night watching videos or reading. Why shower when you can live in sweats with your hair pulled back and a baseball cap on your head? Why clean the house if you don't plan to have anyone visit?

We don't agree with people who criticize others for these actions and say, “just snap out of it,” or who put on a “better than thou” attitude because they are handling the deployment so much better. Deployments are difficult—period! With all the repeated deployments, it can be even more challenging to break out of the cycle of negativity and despair.

What happens, however, is that the longer you let the negative actions (or really, inactions) go on, the harder it is to break the inertia and get yourself showered, dressed, and out of the house. But it's essential to your energy and your sanity. It's important to be aware of that.

The only one who can make changes in your life is you. As one spouse added to the confessions, “I confess I have never felt so negative before. I confess I need to kick myself in the butt and get a move on!” She's right.

That's where friends come in (refer to chapter 3) and where interests of your own are essential.

Here's the good news: if you were meant to do things all by yourself, you would have been put here all by yourself. The fact is, as a human being and military spouse, you are not here on this earth all by yourself. You do not have to do things by yourself. There are people here to help you—and many who are in your shoes need friendship and support as well. It does take some effort on your part to take the step out.

Sometimes we do need someone to kick us into action every now and then—to remind us to get out there and start living again—even in the midst of a deployment. The things we share in this book are exactly the things you can do to start making changes in your life and start living again. If you find yourself stuck in despair, we hope this book will be what you need to help you pull up your bootstraps and get out there and start living your life. And that's

exactly what the research on happiness—and interviews with hundreds of spouses—tell us: engaging in life is key to your happiness in life. You can take action toward that. Here's how.