

Chaplain Urges Military Spouses to Avoid 'Compassion Fatigue'

By Donna Miles
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Nov. 23, 2010 – With almost all the 101st Airborne Division deployed to Afghanistan, military spouses here have their hands full taking care of each other.



Army Maj. Stanley Arnold, family life chaplain at Fort Campbell, Ky., is working with Karin Jenkins, wife of 101st Airborne Division 4th Brigade Combat Team commander Col. Sean Jenkins, center, and Rebecca Santos, wife of Command Sgt. Maj. Hector Santos, the brigade sergeant major, to identify and address compassion fatigue among spouse volunteers. DOD photo by Donna Miles
(Click photo for screen-resolution image):[high-resolution image](#) available.

Day in and day out, they're called on to help a suddenly single parent juggle work, kids and household chores, and set aside time to visit with the lonely wife who needs a friend. Too often, they find themselves consoling a widow who has just learned of her husband's death as they quietly wonder if they'll be the next to receive that dreaded knock on the door.

Army Maj. Stanley Arnold, a family life chaplain here, praised the outpouring of family support that's become a hallmark of the 101st Airborne Division's "Screaming Eagles" and nearly every other military organization.

But he's also concerned he's seeing signs of "compassion fatigue" -- with spouses already laden with their own responsibilities and

burdens giving so much of themselves that there's sometimes little left to draw on.

Arnold met last week with spouses of the division's 4th Brigade Combat Team leaders, encouraging them to recognize signs of compassion fatigue in themselves and each other, and emphasizing the need to take time out to recharge their emotional batteries.

Last week's session was the first Arnold plans to conduct with family leaders throughout the 101st Airborne Division as their loved ones serve in Afghanistan. He's hoping the message will resonate beyond the Kentucky bluegrass, and strike a chord with military families everywhere struggling to be all things to all people as they deal with their own deployment-related issues.

"You see it in all the brigades, people who are stepping up and helping each other, bringing meals, being there and walking with spouses and families" through the difficult times of the deployment, Arnold said.

Never is this support more important -- or more emotionally and physically draining for the one providing it -- than when it's for a family who has just lost a love one in combat, he said.

That's when caregivers are particularly likely to experience what Arnold calls "secondary trauma." As they grieve with the family and share in its loss, they also know that their own loved one is serving in the same combat zone, facing the same circumstances and even walking the same bomb-laden roads as their fallen comrade, he explained.

"These spouses are really in a unique place," Arnold said. "They are back here, dealing with the families of our fallen soldiers, and at the same time, dealing with the day-to-day ups and downs of being that single parent, with their spouse deployed in a combat zone and never knowing whether that knock on the door is for them.

"That places them in a very, very difficult position," he continued. "When they walk with these other families through their grief they are having to face daily the possibility of their own grief."

As the Fort Campbell community rallies time after time again to support each other in the face of combat losses, Arnold said he's seeing troubling signs of compassion fatigue.

"I am seeing the withdrawal, the symptoms of depression, the loss of energy, the change in sleep patterns, irritability, those types of things," he said. "You don't want to watch the news because you are afraid of hearing about another soldier getting hurt or injured, and you think, 'That could be my knock on the door.'"

Karin Jenkins, wife of the Army Col. Sean Jenkins, the 4th BCT commander, recognizes the signs all too well, particularly among family readiness group volunteers who dig ever-deeper into their own physical and emotional reservoirs to help brigade families.

"We have incredible, caring, loving family readiness group leaders. Why else would you

step into a volunteer position that is 24 hours a day, seven days a week for a year or more?” she said. “They want to help. They love to help. That is their calling.

“And because they are so caring, it is hard for them to say no to another human being,” Jenkins continued. “They will say ‘yes’ many times, and many times a day and many times a week, and they are still taking care of themselves and their families and saying ‘yes.’”

But as Arnold explained to Jenkins and other senior leaders’ spouses, it’s not only okay to say “no” and defer to someone else to help; sometimes it’s critical.

“What I’ve learned over time is the importance of taking care of ‘me,’” he said. “If I don’t take care of me, then I become unable to perform the job that I need to. And if these spouses don’t take care of themselves, then they are going to be unable to care for their families and their soldiers.”

Arnold suggested various ways spouses can break the cycle the leads to compassion fatigue. They can take a few minutes to meditate, sneak off into a corner to read a book, soak in a bathtub, meet their “battle buddy” for coffee –whatever helps them relax and reenergize.

Most importantly, he said, they have to be honest about what demands they can and can’t carry, and recognize when it’s time to step aside so another volunteer can step up to the plate.

“It is really about dialogue,” Arnold said. “There are some people who, as the caregiver, feel that it’s really not acceptable to talk about what is going on inside themselves. They feel that they have to put on a tough face and pretend that everything is okay. But that doesn’t work.”

“My hope as I work with the brigades and the family readiness group senior leaders is for them to recognize the toll this is taking on them,” he said. “I want them to understand that they need to take care of themselves, because they are being asked to walk into these situations again and again and again.”

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