

The Emotional Impact of E-mail on Deployment as Experienced by Submariners and Their Families Stationed at the Naval Submarine Base New London

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Abstract

The Emotional Cycle of Deployment can be characterized as one of the most significant challenges facing submariners and their families. Limited opportunities for communication during deployment require significant self-sufficiency and independence among family members. The recent implementation of e-mail has introduced a new mechanism for communication during deployment. This survey examined the impact of e-mail on morale, emotional connectedness during separation, reunion, expectations, the ability to focus during deployment and the existing emotional cycle. Survey results indicate that e-mail boosts morale, increases emotional connectedness and facilitates a positive reunion experience. However, respondents note that expectations about e-mail were not met. In addition, respondents indicated that the emotional cycle of deployment may be shifting to include more positive emotions such as *confidence* and *self-assuredness*.

Introduction

The deployment experience within the submarine lifestyle creates a broad range of emotional responses in both the active duty member and his spouse. The recent implementation of e-mail as a communication tool used between sailors and their families during deployment has introduced a new variable to the dynamics of separation and maintaining an emotional relationship with loved ones during separation. Anecdotal reports about e-mail use from both family members and senior personnel aboard several submarines homeported at the Naval Submarine Base New London in Groton, Connecticut, provided the impetus to explore the impact of e-mail during deployment through a written survey distributed to submariners and their spouses.

The objective of the research was to obtain reliable information from which to answer six pertinent questions:

- 1. What is the difference in perception about e-mail between sailors and spouses?*
- 2. How does e-mail use affect the ability to focus and concentrate on the job (or at home)?*
- 3. Is there a difference between seasoned and new spouses in terms of e-mail use as it relates to the issues studied?*
- 4. Has the existing emotional cycle of deployment changed since e-mail has been implemented?*
- 5. What is the general relationship satisfaction rate?*

6. *How can commands (the Navy) be more proactive in educating sailors and spouses about the e-mail process?*

In addition, survey results will be used to modify, when necessary, current education and training on deployment administered by the Navy Family Service Center to sailors and their families.

Methodology

A combination of closed and open ended responses were collected from written surveys distributed to crew members and spouses from three fast attack submarines homeported at the Naval Submarine Base New London in Groton, Connecticut. Each submarine had returned from deployment (a separation of three months or longer) less than 120 days prior to receiving the survey.

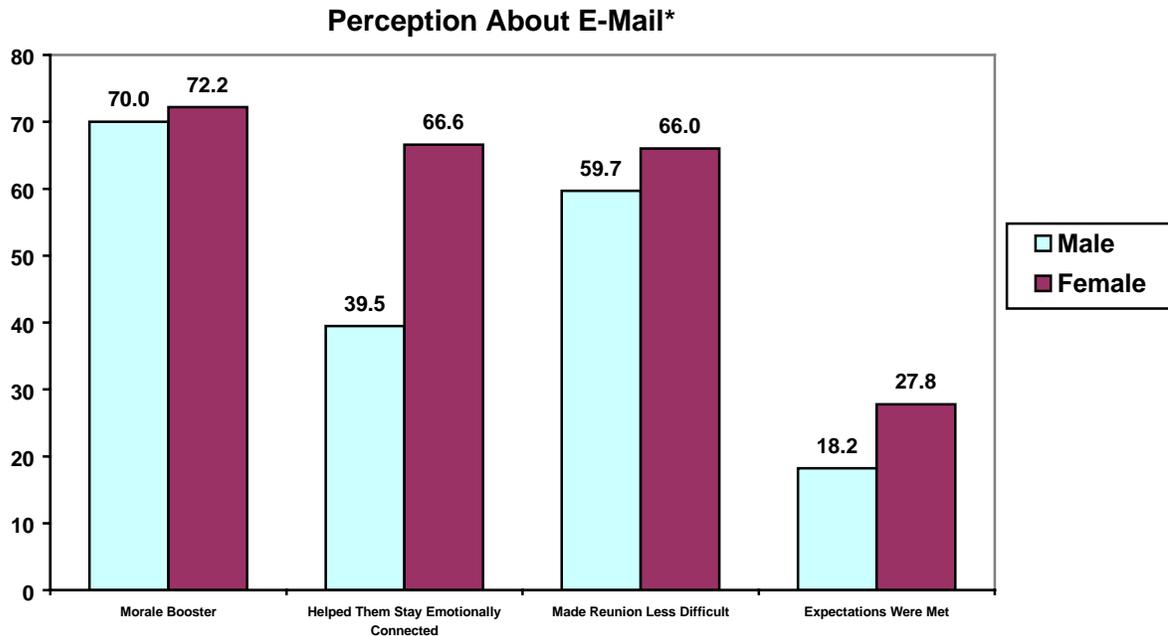
Surveys were mailed to 239 spouses with a postage-paid return envelope and were also distributed on board to 375 crewmembers with sealable envelopes for collection. Two hundred and fifty-nine surveys were returned, 188 from crewmembers (50% response rate) and 62 from spouses (26%). 75% of respondents were male and 79% were either married or were single sailors involved in a significant relationship. The average age of respondents was 28 years, with 53% reporting one or more children. In addition, 59% of respondents reported some college coursework or degree, and 71% reported family income of \$40,000 or less. This sample also reported significant separations with more than 52% stating experience with three or more deployments of three months or more.

Findings

Perceptions About E-Mail

Perceptions about e-mail are indicated by responses about the degree to which e-mail served as a morale booster, helped respondents stay emotionally connected, impacted the emotional experience of reunion and the degree to which expectations about e-mail were met. Male and female respondents report that e-mail boosted morale a great deal or always 70% and 72.7% respectively, reflecting very little gender variation.

However, male and female responses in the area of emotional connectedness vary significantly. Males reported that e-mail was not a significant tool in staying emotionally



* Percentage reporting Always or A Great Deal

connected during deployment. Emotional connectedness during deployment may not be critical to male respondents, indicating the lower percentage rate response.

Responses regarding e-mail’s impact on reunion indicated that the majority of male and female respondents found reunion less difficult emotionally. This finding is noteworthy given that historically reunion has been the most emotionally difficult stage of the deployment cycle to experience.

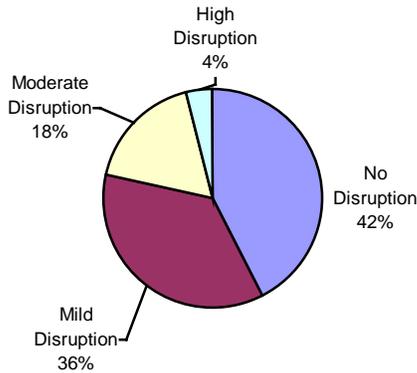
Survey results indicated that issues regarding expectations need to be addressed. Less than 28% of both sailors and spouses responded that e-mail met their expectations a great deal or always. Data indicated that continued education in realistic expectations regarding reliability and effectiveness of the e-mail process is warranted.

Survey results indicated that e-mail has impacted the emotional experience of deployment – morale has been boosted, reunion is less difficult and relationships maintain greater emotional connectedness. Only modest gender variations exist. Survey results indicate that use of e-mail has enhanced quality of life and the emotional experience of deployment.

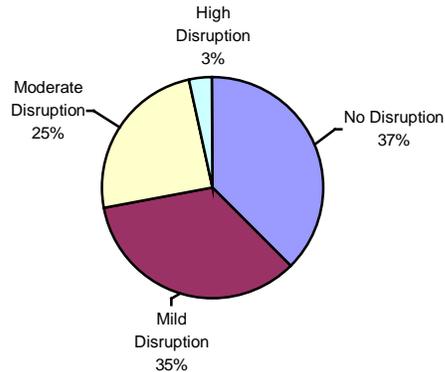
Ability to Focus

Survey results indicate that both male and female respondents experienced disruption in the ability to focus or concentrate during their deployment. However, among all respondents, less than 4% indicated that their ability to concentrate or focus was highly disrupted. Among

Ability to Focus - Male



Ability to Focus - Female



male respondents, no correlation existed between the number of deployments experienced and the level of disruption reported. Among female respondents, a negative correlation between number of deployments and level of disruption (ability to focus) indicated that the more deployments experienced, the less disruption occurred. Therefore, spouses with fewer deployments, which generally indicate less experience with the military lifestyle, reported greater disruption during deployment .

Relationship Satisfaction

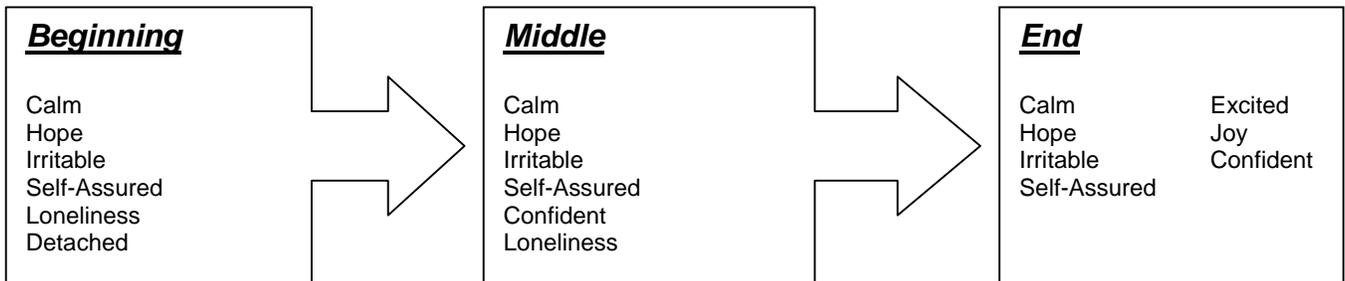
Relationship satisfaction was assessed using seven questions. The overall relationship satisfaction rating was 4.34 on a 5-point scale indicating relatively high satisfaction among respondents.

There appeared to be no correlation between relationship satisfaction rate and number of deployments experienced. However, sailors who reported more frequent e-mail use also reported greater relationship satisfaction and higher relationship satisfaction was related to easier reunion experiences.

Emotional Cycle of Deployment

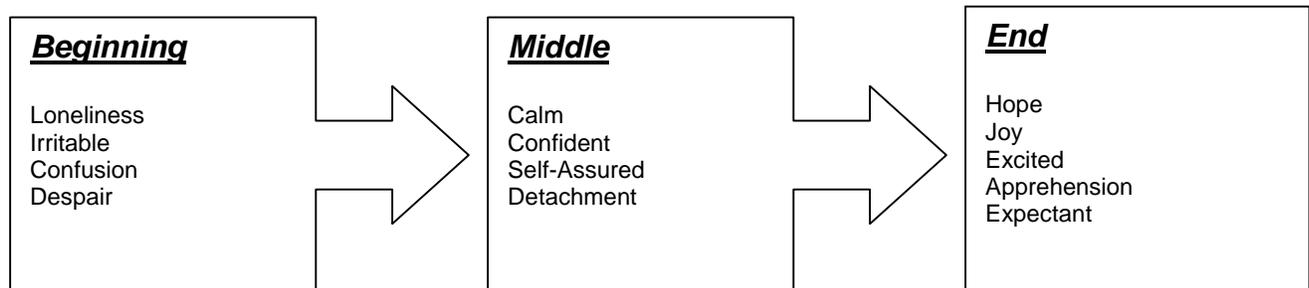
Survey respondents indicated their experience using a 5-point scale to indicate experience with a variety of emotional responses to deployment during the beginning, middle and end phases of the

The Emotional Cycle of Deployment indicated by survey respondents*



*Respondents reporting Somewhat, A Great Deal or Always

The Emotional Cycle of Deployment traditionally used in naval education and training programs



separation. Responses were then compared to the existing emotional cycle of deployment used in education and training programs delivered by the Navy Family Service Center at the Naval Submarine Base New London installation. Responses indicate modest changes to the emotional cycle as a result of e-mail use by sailors and spouses.

Of particular interest is the presence of *confidence* and *self-assuredness* during all phases of the cycle. Traditionally, these responses dominate the middle deployment phase only and may indicate that a shift in the deployment cycle is occurring. This shift may be indicative of the increased opportunity for communications throughout the separation and the influence of e-mail on morale, emotional connectedness and reunion.

Participants who were in a relationship (either married or with a significant other) responded similarly. However, single respondents reported less loneliness and irritability during the beginning and middle phases of the cycle and less joy and hope during the end phase of the cycle. Responses support current education and training regarding single sailors and deployment.

Further study is indicated to determine if the findings of this study are valid in reflecting a changing emotional cycle of deployment. Several variables were not addressed in this study:

* Spouses currently experiencing deployment may be more self-sufficient and self-assured as a product of their development and exposure to life experience compared to the typical spouse of the early 1980s when the existing emotional cycle of deployment was first developed. Is the increase in confidence and self-assuredness a result of e-mail or other societal factors?

* Each of the three submarines surveyed was engaged in a routine, scheduled classified mission dissimilar to each other. While spouses do not know the nature of any deployment mission, they will know the general location in the world from which the submarine will execute its mission (i.e., Mediterranean, Northern Atlantic, Western Atlantic). However, in a high profile deployment, lack of specific information regarding mission, coupled with very public news about conflict occurring where spouses believe their husbands to be, may generate emotional responses throughout the separation that cannot be generalized from routine deployments.

* The existing emotional cycle of deployment includes six stages or phases of emotional responses:

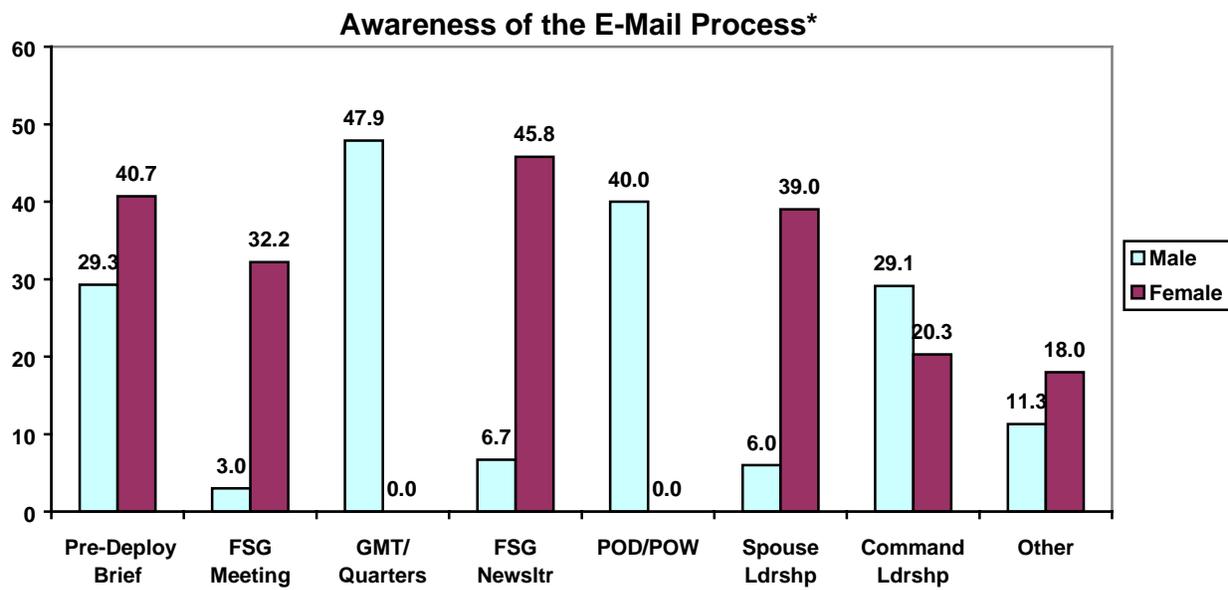
- Anticipation of Loss (pre-deployment)
- Emotional Disorganization (1-3 weeks after departure)
- Anticipation of Reunion (1-3 weeks prior to arrival)
- Readjustment (1-3 weeks after return)
- Equilibrium (in between deployments)

- Mid-Deployment/Equilibrium (Mid point)

In order to ensure ease in completing the survey, the six stages were condensed into three distinct components – Beginning, Middle, End. The results provide significant insight as well as an invitation for further study to parallel the existing six stages to those examined.

* The emotional descriptors used in the survey can be interpreted differently among respondents. Emotional responses are subjective by nature and labeling increases the subjectivity since respondents may define the same word in different ways. For instance, “depression” may mean sporadic sadness, or long-term emotional gloom. “Fear” may mean nervousness, doubt or even horror to some. “Joy” may be interpreted as pleasure, fun, or ecstasy. The range of emotion attributed to the descriptor can vary widely.

Awareness of the E-Mail Process



* Percentage that used source for e-mail information.

Responses indicate that the major communication mechanisms currently available within the military system are utilized effectively by both sailors and spouses. The tools cited by both sailors and their spouses reflect a combination of verbal and written mechanisms. The numbers indicate that the variety of mechanisms used does not over saturate the targeted audience but is used appropriately. Command utilization and support of these efforts appears to be appropriate and effective in building awareness of the e-mail process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Data collected from this study has confirmed several anecdotal reports on the impact of e-mail on deployment. For both sailors and spouses, use of e-mail boosts morale. While the majority of survey respondents agree that e-mail is a morale booster, a similarly large percentage reported that e-mail did not meet their expectations. In addition, female respondents report significant emotional connectedness during deployment resulting from e-mail use.

The ability of sailors to focus or concentrate during deployment is essential and driven by the nature of the work and the risks inherent in operating the required equipment and ensuring the safety of fellow crewmembers. Male survey respondents report only mild disruption in concentration as a result of e-mail use.

Spouses report much higher levels of disruption and those with less deployment experience indicated even higher disruption, which may be a function of their previous experience with e-mail. Spouses relatively new to a submarine lifestyle may also be younger and more dependent on e-mail to communicate with family and friends than on traditional Navy communication mechanisms. As e-mail is increasingly used by sailors and spouses during deployment, expectations rise. When the system fails or encounters delays or malfunctions in light of rising expectations, disruption is experienced. Ensuring that the current e-mail technology utilized within the submarine force is comparable to that within the civilian population will help encourage realistic expectations and efficient service.

Despite the difficulty with reconciling expectations regarding e-mail use with the existing technology and processes, respondents report that reunion was less difficult emotionally and overall relationship satisfaction was high. There was greater self-assuredness and confidence during the beginning and end phases of the deployment cycle, indicating a shift in the traditional cycle of deployment. While this study cannot definitively attribute the shift in emotions to e-mail use, the shift invites further discussion and analysis of current education and training programs that may need to be modified.

Lastly, communication tools utilized by the Navy to educate sailors and spouses about e-mail use have been effectively implemented. Interestingly, despite the variety and frequency of messages about e-mail use during deployment, expectations are still not met. Commands must better educate both sailors and spouses about current e-mail technology, processes, potential pitfalls and differences between civilian and on board e-mail systems to enable formation of realistic expectations. Or, recommend implementation of technology to enhance e-mail reliability and efficiency.

Survey data indicates that sailors and spouses are reaping the quality of life benefits afforded by e-mail in terms of morale, emotional connectedness, ease in reintegration after deployment and increased feelings of confidence and self-assuredness throughout the deployment. High levels of dissatisfaction with e-mail reliability (expectations) among both male and female respondents indicate areas for improvement. Respondents offered several write-in suggestions for improvement in utilizing e-mail to augment communication between sailors and spouses. Responses included:

- Increase reliability and timeliness. Options listed included assigning technicians to address hardware problems and difficulties with multiple satellites, as well as adding additional receiving stations.
- Provide more education/orientation on how the e-mail system operates.
- Maintain screening.
- Increase quantities of incoming and outgoing messages and establish equity among all crewmembers.
- Provide e-mail access in all areas of deployment locations.
- Use other boats to relay messages.

Separation from loved ones is difficult under any circumstances. Deployment for several months with limited, sporadic communication can be challenging for even the most adaptable and self-sufficient families. E-mail has introduced a new dynamic to the quality of life enjoyed

by sailors and their families. While not a perfect system, the increased communication opportunities provided by e-mail have contributed to increased satisfaction, greater spousal confidence during separation and enhanced overall quality of life – important assets to mission readiness.

(The research and opinions expressed by the author are her own and not an official expression by the Department of the Navy)