

W I L L I A M G E I M



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Oh, how quickly that match made in heaven can turn into a tattered marriage from hell. In the military, where honeymoons can be spent counting the days until deployment and anniversaries are routinely observed via combat zone webcam, it can be all too easy to lose the love of your life in the fog of war.

Best thing you can do to give your marriage a fighting chance?

“For starters, don’t marry a jerk,” says Dr. John Van Epp. Van Epp, who trains scores of chaplains every year on how to help young troops pick good mates, has written the book on the subject: “How to Not Fall in Love with a Jerk.”

What makes so many troops jerk magnets? It’s the same intensity that can cause weak marriages to fail. “Military life can be a kind of marriage incubator — things can heat up very fast,” Van Epp says.

He calls these “accelerated relationships.” And when things are moving fast, jerks are hard to spot.

Jerk Spotting 101

“Good chemistry is important, but it’s not everything,” Van Epp says. “Ultimately, you live with the character of a person. There have been a lot of people who’ve enjoyed the fireworks early in a relationship only to have those fireworks burn them later on.” All that dazzle and sizzle can

what make a mate a jerk — after all, everyone brings a certain amount of baggage to a marriage. “What makes them a jerk is persistent resistance to change,” he says. “That resistance becomes very, very difficult to live with.”

Jerk-proof your mate

The first rule: Be careful. Lt. Cmdr. Kay Reeb, a Navy chaplain for a Marine Corps regiment at Camp Pendleton, Calif., has counseled hundreds of sailors and Marines through all kinds of marital messes. “Probably the most common problem is they don’t choose well in the beginning,” says Reeb, who took Van Epp’s class about a year ago. You have to look at your potential mate without blinders on, she says. “There are some predatory women out there looking to marry

8 years of war take a toll on military marriages

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After more than eight years of war, some 200,000 military marriages have crashed and burned — more than 27,000 last year alone. If troops got a Purple Heart for every broken heart, those who have suffered through a divorce since Sept. 11, 2001, would eclipse those with physical wounds by about 5 to 1.

Married troops are bickering more, loving less and deciding in ever-increasing numbers that they are better off without their better half, according to the latest surveys. Officials say it’s hard to estimate exactly how much the wars in Iraq

and Afghanistan are to blame, but the trends are disturbing. “There is no doubt that prolonged and multiple combat tours have put great pressure on the force,” Defense Secretary Robert Gates told Congress in July. “We are monitoring the situation and paying close attention to telling statistics like suicide and divorce rates.”

Those statistics are troubling. A Military Times review of divorce data from 2001 to 2009 reveals: ■ Active-duty divorce rates are up more than one-third across the Defense Department, climbing steadily from 2.6 percent of military marriages failing the year before the U.S. went to war to 3.6

percent in 2009. ■ The Army shoulders the majority of that increase, with 63.6 percent more soldiers getting divorced in 2009 than in 2001. The Air Force is up 38 percent, the Navy 17.2 percent. The Marine Corps saw the smallest increase at 12.5 percent.

■ Enlisted marriages are breaking up at more than twice the rate of officer marriages, at 4 percent and 1.8 percent, respectively. That’s a 43 percent increase in enlisted divorces since 2001. Officer divorces spiked in 2003-04 but otherwise have stayed relatively stable between 1.6 percent and 1.9 percent. ■ Military women are divorcing

more than twice as often as men, and the gap is widening. Last year, about 7 percent of married military women filed for divorce, compared with about 3 percent of men.

In the trenches

Nationwide, it is estimated that more than half of all marriages among those born after 1971 will fall apart, with one of every 10 collapsing within the first five years. Just how the military stacks up is unclear; the Defense Department compiles its divorce statistics in a way that makes direct comparisons difficult.

But one thing is clear: Marital

survival doesn’t get any easier in the military. Lisa Konen-Park, a marriage and family therapist at Fort Hood, Texas, has seen it all when it comes to problems between soldiers and spouses.

While every situation is different, there are common themes, she says. Most problems involve bad communication skills, deployments or combat-related stress and injuries — or a combination of all three.

“They don’t know how to talk to one another and solve conflict in a healthy manner,” she says. “A lot of the soldiers we’re seeing married quickly before deployment and now [the couples are] just getting to know each other.”

Roughly 60 percent of the couples she works with are enlisted, have been married for less than

PROBLEMS HAVE RISEN STEADILY — divorce rates have risen steadily — up 38 percent — since 2001.

Fear that tying the knot right away is the only way to show your commitment should give way to patience. "Take your time," Reeb says. "If it's the right relationship, it's not going to go anywhere. Don't rush into things."

Don't be a jerk
Not marrying a jerk cuts both ways. Along with taking a thorough look at your partner, it's a good idea to look in the mirror, too, says Kim, who has taught Van Epp's class to single soldiers more than two dozen times.

What do you call people who have problems but refuse to try to fix them? Call them jerks — and don't let them call you husband or wife. □



MARCIA SPANER/STAFF

"Repeated, chronic exposure to high danger and combat is definitely making it much harder for couples to make it," he said. By March, American troops will have been in sustained combat as long as both world wars and the Korean conflict combined.

About one in three troops say

things don't go your way? What things flip your switch and make you angry or depressed? After all, it's hard to find someone you're compatible with if you don't have a clue about your own potential to act like a jerk.

"If you look up 'jerk' in the dictionary, it says 'a foolhardy person,'" Van Epp says. "A fool is someone who is stuck in their issues and doesn't want to do anything about it. The bottom line is not whether you have a shortcoming, but whether you have an openness to addressing that shortcoming, and how it affects the person you love."

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fighters with their spouses have gotten worse since returning from downrange. Since 2005, service members who broke it off with their spouses or significant others within a year of deployment jumped from 14.4 percent to nearly 20 percent, according to the Defense Department's most recent survey of health-related behaviors, released late last year.

Numbers like that have top leaders worried. In an update of his guidance to senior commanders in December, Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen specifically ordered the services to do a better job of monitoring divorce trends and how the wars are affecting families.

headed assessment of your potential spouse, says relationship expert Dr. John Van Epp.

To know where to look, Van Epp suggests studying your partner's FACES — his shorthand for family dynamics, attitude, compatibility, examples and skills.

When a red flag comes up, consider:

Family dynamics

Is there evidence of this issue in his or her family background? Is this something learned from family?

Attitudes

Is this consistent with how his or her conscience works? Has he or she expressed remorse and been motivated to address it?

Compatibility

Is this something that conflicts with your own morals, values and goals?

Examples

Is this how he or she treats friends, co-workers, or an ex? Even interacting with a waitress can be a clue.

Skills

How does he or she communicate or handle conflict and anger?

Just like you need skills to do your job well, these are the skills that can make or break a healthy relationship.

— Jon R. Anderson

Strengthening marriages?

While war may be hell, its fire can become a refining crucible for some military marriages rather than a force of destruction, some experts say.

A 2007 Rand Corp. study had surprising conclusions indicating that married service members who had been deployed were less likely to end their marriages than those who had not been deployed. In fact, the study's authors found that longer deployments could reduce the chance of divorce.

But studies done since then are calling those findings into question.

The Army's latest annual survey of troops in Iraq found that married troops in combat units who said they intended to get divorced had nearly doubled from 12 percent in 2003 to 22 percent in 2009.

Thirty percent of junior enlisted troops deployed for 15 months said their marriages were over.

"One of the things we worry about with combat stress and more — and more frequent — deployments is that it's becoming difficult to drop your pack," says Navy Chaplain (Lt. Cmdr.) Kay Reeb.

"Of necessity, you distance yourself from your spouse and family when getting ready to deploy," she says. "You get compartmentalized and focused on the mission."

If the next deployment already is looming on the horizon when you get home from the last one, "it's tempting sometimes to not bother shifting back," she says.

"It's easier, but it takes a toll on the marriage." □