



By Aaron Childers

As a member of the military, we are programmed to plan, especially for deployments. We have to fill out DD93s, Servicemember's Group Life Insurance (SGLI) paperwork and get medical clearance. Whether we want to or not, we are poked, prodded, and complete health assessments. Planning for the worst-case scenario isn't just encouraged, it is mandatory.

But, we don't talk about when the unthinkable happens at home. We don't plan for our spouse or child to get sick. There is no manual or regulation that guides us when our families go through something traumatic. For an organization that is so good at planning, we fail to account for something that is so devastating to mental readiness - A major health

crisis at home.

For my family, this became apparent when my wife was diagnosed with cancer last December and spent the next 10 months fighting and eventually winning HER battle. Along the way, we applied several lessons that I learned in the military. I think they are worth passing on in the event you find yourself in our shoes.

**Communicate with your higher HQ.** You wouldn't make contact with the enemy without calling back to your higher HQ, so why wouldn't you keep your boss informed when your family is facing challenges as well. You need to be clear and transparent with your chain of command and let them know the gravity of the situation. Your boss may want to move you to another position or may want to accommodate a treatment schedule. Don't be afraid to tell your boss the full story. You will miss work to attend appointments and take your loved one to treatment. With my wife's cancer, my chain of command was extremely supportive and my coworkers were fantastic. We worked out a plan for me to attend key events with my wife and adapted my work schedule so the office wouldn't fall behind.

**Deploy the reserve.** Accept help from your friends, unit, church, etc. Treatment can be a long road. Don't be too proud to accept help. Everything from babysitters to gift certificates for meals. Let your friends and neighbors make meals and watch kids. I understand that you may want to keep your struggle private, but there is a difference between sharing personal information and letting someone drop off dinner. This is a little like Ranger School where your teammates are the ones who will help you through this time in your life. When my wife was diagnosed, I was on the Joint Staff. I will never forget the Navy family that came by the first night to drop off the first meal. A dear friend came to every one of my wife's chemo sessions to sit with us. Your friends want to help you through this - you should let them.

**Make a plan and develop a common operating picture.** Get ready for a LOT of appointments. Keeping track of all of these medical appointments is like planning an

operation and keeping a battle map updated at the same time. You have to keep track of your loved one's care on top of every other competing event (work, kids sports, etc). Deconfliction is key. Our family has a giant calendar where the appointments are recorded. This was...and still is the most up-to-date tracker in our house. This had all of my wife's appointments and treatments, my work events, and the key events for each of our four kids. We would use the same calendar to verify that we had babysitters and transportation provided for each event. This became our family execution matrix. The same way you fight off of products in a battalion or brigade, you need a common product to get your family through this busy time.

**Location of key leaders.** You need to decide which events are essential. We talk about work-life balance and making events with your kids, but your family usually ends up making sacrifices for the military. When you have a sick family member, this is no longer an option. The same way a commander has to decide where they should be located on the battlefield, you have to decide where you will be for different events. For us, surgery and chemotherapy were the non-negotiables. I would plan these events out in advance and make arrangements at work. Every family is different, but I would accept having a pile of paperwork waiting for me at work any day of the week to be able to make those family "key events."

**Displacement criteria.** Just like you have displacement criteria in combat, the conditions where you would withdraw from a position, you need to discuss what conditions would trigger possible reassignment. This could be a compassionate reassignment or moving positions within your organization. This goes back to communication with your chain of command; most units have some flexibility within their own organization.

**Go see the medics!** Take care of yourself. At the end of my wife's treatment, it was clear that we should have both been in better touch with our health. It isn't that we were unhealthy; we just put the needs of our kids and other activities before our own health. Things like diet and exercise are more meaningful to us as a family and are part of my wife's

long-term care...and we should have been doing this all along. In the Army, we have a tendency to “tough it out” when our body is actually trying to tell us something. The PHA and other programs exist for a reason. Take advantage of the military’s healthcare to get anything and everything checked out.

This list will change for every person and every family and is by no means exhaustive. However, it should help you manage some of the daunting tasks that come with fighting an illness or tragedy. What happens in our personal lives affect our professional ones, so we should plan with the same level of detail.

My wife recently shared a message to other Mothers at <https://www.momstrosity.co/blog/breast-cancer-in-your-30s>

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