



## *Building Bonds,* Army Strong

By Cassandra Yardeni

For the ninth consecutive year, divorce rates among military couples continue to rise. In fact, last year marked an all-time high for divorces, bringing the number to 27,312 throughout the armed forces, according to a November 2009 report from the Department of Defense Manpower Data Center. The statistics suggest that not only are American Soldiers fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but they also continue to struggle on the homefront.

With rates up a full percentage point since 9/11, the rising number of divorces has commonly been attributed to more frequent deployments, post-traumatic stress disorder and an inability for couples to cope with the pressures of serving in the military — issues that affect not just couples, but entire families.

In an Army battlefield survey taken in Iraq in spring 2009, nearly 22 percent of Soldiers questioned said they planned to get a divorce or separation, compared to 12.4 percent in 2003. In addition, approximately 30 percent of first-year enlisted Soldiers are dropping out of the Army, a figure Army officials link to instability at home and a lack of familial support.

“We’ve been at war for [nine] years now, and we’re finding that marriages and relationships are simply falling apart,” said Chaplain (Maj.) Paul Rodgers, chaplain for the Warrior Transition Battalion, Fort Bliss, Texas. “Some are finding that it’s easier to deal with

conflicts in war than the emotional aspects of a relationship after it.”

“Every marriage has controllable and uncontrollable factors,” said Joe Davis, spokesman for the Veterans of Foreign Wars organization. “But, when you interject eight years of war, preparing for war, being at war, coming home and having to think about going back to war again — and when you have children — it just has a tremendous impact on the family unit.”

In an effort to quell mounting statistics, military services have implemented a variety of programs to strengthen Soldiers’ relationships and create stronger bonds between military couples. The Army introduced the Strong Bonds program, “a preventative skills-based relationship building program, led by Army chaplains, designed to assist commanders in building, strengthening, preserving and restoring Army families,” a May 2009 memorandum from the Department of Defense states.

### **Strong Bonds, Stronger Leaders**

Originally conceived in 1997 as “Building Strong and Ready Families,” a skill-building workshop for Army

couples, the program was revamped and renamed Strong Bonds in 2005 to serve as a more comprehensive approach to relationship training. The program is now accessible to Soldiers, their families and single Soldiers throughout both active and reserve components of the Army.

“[Strong Bonds] is a fun, skill-building program that’s constructed in a safe environment, out of the normal training area location, where Soldiers and family members can learn skills to improve their more important relationships,” said Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Carleton Birch, director of strategic communications at the Office of the Chief of Chaplains. “It’s not a chapel program,” he explained. “It’s a unit program that’s brigade-centric. Leaders within the units create the demand for the program. At the [Department of the Army] level, we provide training, resources and support for the demand created in the field.”

Participants from a unit attend an off-site, weekend seminar administered by an Army chaplain and chaplain assistant certified to teach the program. All Soldiers, from junior enlisted to senior NCOs, are encouraged to attend Strong Bonds programming. The retreats are available on a first-come, first-served basis, with up to 20 couples (or 40 singles) per trip, based upon the destination and program focus.

Past retreats have taken place at ski resorts, beachfront cabins and horse ranches, depending on the location of the unit and nearby resources. Off-site retreats offer participants a respite from daily responsibilities as well as the opportunity to reconnect with their spouses and absorb the material being taught.

“We try to do things at a distance so that [participants] are not tempted to go back home. There are no distractions, so they can concentrate on what’s happening here,” said Sgt. Maj. Lorrie Nichols, chaplain assistant at the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas.

Funded by the Chief of Chaplains, there are 10 approved curricula from which chaplains can pick and choose, Birch said. However, chaplains are not limited to the outlined curricula, and

have the freedom to tailor the seminars to the needs of their unit. Programming is often modeled after popular self-help literature, including the *Eight Habits of Highly Successful Marriages* workshop series, The Arbinger Institute’s *The Anatomy of Peace* and *Laugh Your Way to a Better Marriage* by Mark Gungor. The retreat can also include workshops, group activities, discussions and guest speakers, as decided upon by the chaplain.

The workshop material is chosen to appeal to both partners and can be used as a resource throughout the course of the relationship. “The goal is to help the [participants] take something that they normally wouldn’t pick off the bookshelf and actually apply [the material] themselves,” said Chaplain (Maj.) Anthony Horton, chaplain at USASMA.



Photo by Staff Sgt. Dave Conklin

Chaplain (Col.) Mark Larson (right), the 9th Regional Readiness Command chaplain, leads couples in a marriage vows renewal ceremony at the Oahu Strong Bonds Marriage Skills Workshop, Aug. 15 to 17, 2008, in Laie, Hawaii.

### A Beacon of Hope

While divorce rates throughout the Army have risen steadily in recent years, couples who have taken advantage of Strong Bonds have found themselves beating this statistic, according to a recent unpublished study by the National Institute of Mental Health. In a random trial of more than 500 couples who participated in Strong Bonds retreats, divorce rates among the couples were one-third of those in the control group — a statistic which translates to 2,000 to 3,000 marriages saved in a single year.

Nichols’ experience echoes these findings. “I believe that we have saved some families [through the retreats]. I believe that because [couples] tell me that,” she said. Nichols herself has attended two family retreats with her husband and two daughters, experiences she considers

“important” to each family member.

After a difficult year chock-full of transitions — including a cross-country move and gaining custody of two children — one couple said they left a September 2009 Strong Bonds family retreat in Ruidoso, N.M., feeling “refreshed.” Master Sgt. John Wade, a USASMA student, and his wife, Christy, attended their second Strong Bonds retreat in Cloudcroft, N.M., in January, hoping to start the new year off with a positive mindset, Christy

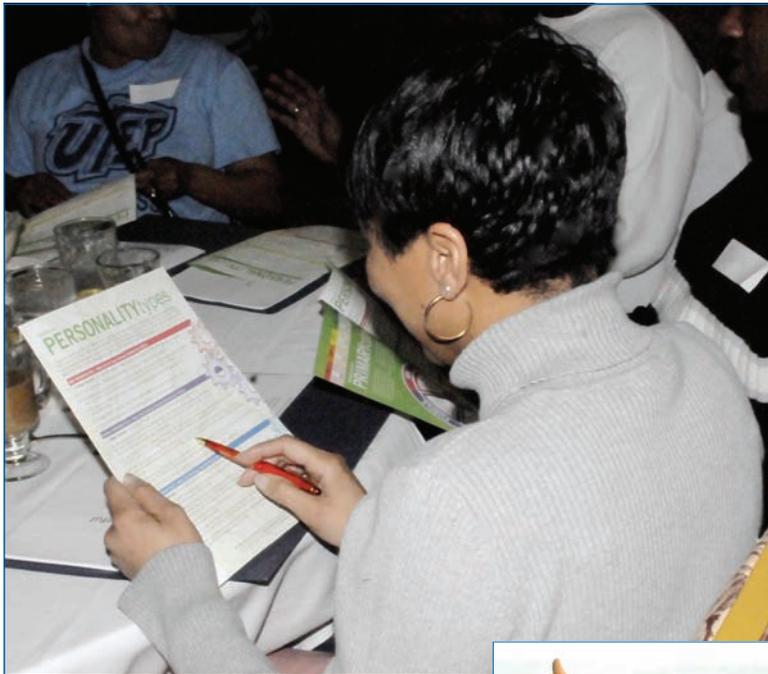


Photo by Cassandra Yardeni

Beverly Wayne reviews the Primary Colors Personality Test, a personality assessment distributed at a USASMA-sponsored Strong Bonds family retreat, in Cloudcroft, N.M., in January.

Wade said. “We wanted to come [again] because we learned a lot before. We’ve had to deal with a lot of adjustments this year, and at the last [Strong Bonds retreat] we attended, we learned ways to handle it all.”

## A Sense of Community

At the retreat, Horton stressed the importance of peace in one’s life and the significance of prioritizing what’s most important. Aside from the skill-building activities, the group of 20 couples was split into smaller groups based on a personality questionnaire to discuss their own communication strengths and pitfalls. Married for 20 years, Master Sgt. Terry Easter and his wife, Robin, attended the Cloudcroft retreat with their 6-year-old daughter, Julia. Robin Easter said what resonated with her most were the feelings of mutual understanding and community during the workshops. Speaking with and relating to other military families was a cathartic experience in and of itself, she said.

“It’s great to see that other families go through the exact same things we do. What I’m seeing is that there’s so much similarity — we’re not the only parents who have wild teenagers; we’re not the only ones with problems. You spend so much time trying to keep everything private; it’s nice to [know] that other families aren’t so perfect either,” she said.



Photo by Sgt. Nathaniel Smith

Chaplain (Lt. Col.) David Waters, the 1st Infantry Division chaplain, shows off his catch at the Ringneck Ranch in Tipton, Kan., Oct. 13, 2008, during a Strong Bonds Singles retreat.

Because the seminars are conducted in open-discussion forums, Soldiers and their spouses are able and welcome to interject their own thoughts and experiences. Sharing personal anecdotes about relationships, telling war stories and venting about work- and family-related issues foster a sense of community among attendants, who, under other circumstances, may feel guarded or embarrassed by their struggles. Horton said enrolling for a retreat should be viewed not as an admission of a troubled marriage, but as a proactive choice to improve communication, intimacy and happiness.

While Strong Bonds is beneficial for seasoned couples, the program is just as helpful for newlyweds, Rodgers emphasized. “It’s intended to be marital training that can be learned, re-learned and re-applied over the lifetime of a relationship.”

“The program is useful for all ages, because as your perception changes, you’re able to extract different things from what’s being taught,” Horton said. “Couples who have been married for 30 years come with all kinds of issues that can be redirected, and newly married couples can gain the tools to avoid and maneuver around those same issues.”

Rodgers explained that couples are encouraged to attend as many retreats as they can, because the message and curriculum are always evolving.

“People who have come again always tell me, ‘I caught something this time that I didn’t catch last time,’” he said.

## Something for Everyone

Aimed at building better relationships, Strong Bonds does not focus only on marriages. Single Soldiers from a unit can attend retreats that offer training on identifying and choosing a compatible mate. These retreats are also offered for single parents, who learn how to establish their needs in a relationship, as well as to identify which relationships work and don’t work.

The Strong Bonds Single Soldier program utilizes a nationally recognized curriculum called Premarital Interpersonal Choice and Knowledge to “learn the importance of building safe relationships, while knowing what to look for in a partner,” program literature states. Combining matters of the head and heart, the PICK approach explores five key areas when considering a long-term relationship.

Similarly, family retreats offer activities for each member of the family to enjoy — from newborns to teens to parents. “We work on family interactions. Sometimes families watch other families and coach each other,” Rodgers said. Childcare is provided on-location while parents participate in couples seminars.

Depending on the retreat, some even offer separate work-

# Children & DEPLOYMENT

It's no coincidence that the rate of military divorces has increased with the number of multiple deployments over the past decade. Among the most affected are Soldiers' children, according to a recent study by the Strategic Studies Institute. Public opinion of the war was also shown to greatly influence children's confidence in their deployed parent and their ability to cope with deployment. The study also revealed the factors that best lower stress levels in adolescents with a deployed parent:

- high participation levels in activities, like sports
- belief that America supports the war
- belief that the Soldier is making a difference
- strong familial support

shops for teens while parents attend their own workshop. "I've had sessions with the teenagers alone, where we talk about schools, their friends and how it is with their parents being in the military," Nichols said.

In addition, Strong Bonds offers re-deployment seminars and programs for families of deployed Soldiers. These workshops are created to "provide the tools to enable families to not just survive, but thrive in the midst of the Soldier's deployment," according to the May 2009 memo by the DoD. Meanwhile, retreats aimed at reintegration provide tools to assist Soldiers and their families with "issues pertaining to the transition from the battlefield to the homefront," and are designed to facilitate a more comfortable reconnection among military families.

Because it is designed and funded by the Chaplains Corps, Strong Bonds does not favor any particular faith. Rather, "most Strong Bonds classes are intended to provide tools to help in relationships despite faith or beliefs," Rodgers said.

Though Strong Bonds is an optional program, its success is only as certain as the effort Soldiers and families put into it.

"Not everyone takes advantage of it, but if you look at divorce statistics just within our community, it's clear that we can all benefit," Nichols said. "If you have a loving family to go home to at night, it just makes life easier. The last [retreat] filled up in 12 hours. That tells me that it's working for people; people are finding out about it, and people want it." 

*Editor's note: For more information on Strong Bonds or to sign-up for a retreat in your unit, visit [www.strongbonds.org](http://www.strongbonds.org).*

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Photo courtesy 3rd Sustainment Command Public Affairs

Above: A group from the 3rd Sustainment Command attend a Strong Bonds retreat at the Galt House Hotel and Suites in Louisville, Ky., in November 2009.



Photo by Cassandra Yardeni  
Left: Participants attend a marriage strengthening workshop at a USASMA-sponsored Strong Bonds family retreat in Cloudcroft, N.M., in January.