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NEW YEAR, NEW YOU!

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Making New Year's resolutions is a tried-and-true tradition among many families, but keeping those resolutions can be a challenge! According to a 2016 study, of the 41% of Americans who made New Year's resolutions, only 9% reported that they were successful in keeping them.

Military families face an even steeper uphill climb when it comes to keeping New Year's resolutions because of frequent moves and uncertain family schedules. It can be tough for many military families to make and stick to a new routine at any time of year but most especially during frequent deployments, which can wreak havoc on established family habits.

"Military life makes it very hard to stick to resolutions!" acknowledges Rebecca Macomber, a military spouse whose husband has been in the U.S. Navy for 19 years. "It's very hard to plan far in advance with the military, which makes things difficult. In the military lifestyle, you always have to have a plan A, B, C, and D. Whether it's a last-minute weekend that my husband has to work, or a last-minute deployment, it's hard to have one plan and be able to stick to it consistently. The hours can be long and inconsistent which makes it hard to make plans for the weekends because we don't want to disappoint the girls. We try to keep our plans secret until the last minute as a surprise so they don't get disappointed if it doesn't work out."

Caroline Schafer, a military spouse for 20+ years whose husband Justin is in the U.S. Army, agrees, noting, "The inconsistency in schedules and having to always be ready to adapt can be a challenge. For example, when 2022 started, I had no idea my husband would leave in March and be gone until the first of November. If you make family resolutions that require in-person accountability, that can feel unattainable. However, military families are known for being able to adjust and keep moving forward."

Ashley Sartor, an 11-year Navy spouse and mother of three high-energy boys, comments,

"Now that the joyful chaos of the holidays is mostly behind us, we start to think about this next year and all the wonderful things we want to accomplish. So maybe we jot down a few of those things and start to make plans. Well one thing we are guaranteed as military spouses is there will be plenty of speed bumps popping up with definite unpredictability. We've moved six times with 60 days or less firm notice. So, how are we supposed to set goals, or resolutions, and stick to them while on this wild ride supporting our amazing military spouses?"

That being said, these military spouses don't shy away from setting goals for the New Year. "The resolutions we have for this year are to travel as much as possible, whether it's quick day or weekend trips; and also hopefully go on at least one longer trip during the year," notes Macomber. "We also want to be more active and spend more time together as a family whenever possible."

Schafer says she tries to focus on simple and practical resolutions "such as spending time walking outside three to five days, planning meals each week to save money, reading at least 10 minutes a day, practicing kindness just because, and writing at least three handwritten letters a month to a friend. At the end of the year, I re-evaluate how the previous year went and see what new resolutions I might want to work on or new ones I'm interested in trying.

"We have always tried to keep our resolutions simple," Schafer adds. "We want them to be fun and a learning experience. We talk about how most people don't keep theirs, and part of that is because they don't always take into account everything going on in their lives when they



Ashley Sartor with husband Andrew and their three children enjoying time together as a family

make the resolutions. One year, everyone in the family decided to pick one thing in their life that challenges them, and we all decided to take an active role in adjusting our attitude towards it. In my case, I decided I would work on finding a way to not be cranky if I'm behind on a project. I decided I would be proactive and communicate that I was behind and explain my expectations. And, if I found myself getting cranky, I would take a break and remind myself of my resolution."

Top Right: Rebecca Macomber with her husband Dan and their twin daughters Hannah and Makenna at Disney World; Bottom Right: Family's own Caroline Schafer spending time with her husband Justin



Sartor offers some specific suggestions to other military families: "Make January a 'No Go for Launch' kind of month," she advises. "This means I don't schedule much outside of necessary health appointments and occasional low-key, pop-by-in-sweats-and-a-beanie play dates. I don't plan anything else this first month of the New Year because we just need this time to unwind and recalibrate our families and ourselves. It's not always just from the holidays. We could be coming off of a particularly long/hard deployment or experienced what we know as a 'life event,' in which case slowing down and encouraging family-only time can be re-energizing and may help alleviate stress." Sartor also proposes having a "no obligations" day with no plans, appointments, or scheduled activities at least once a week.

"Find your tribe," Sartor recommends. "This is your person, or your people, who you hang with on a regular basis; friends who build you up, listen and give wise council, who could care less about the full sink of dishes and the obstacle course of 5,000 toys to sit down for a chat. We've all been the new spouse-on-the-block before; most of us will be again in six months. Yes, it can be nerve-racking to say hello first, but it can also open the door to an amazing friendship and support while navigating the next deployment.

"I met one of my dearest friends in a Navy Exchange after talking about the fact we both have twins," she continues. "Another friend I've kept in touch with through long distances after being stationed in the same area two different times. And if you are struggling to get connected, that's okay – reach out to your long distance friends and talk as much as you can until you do make new connections. At one of our last duty stations, it took me over six months to make some friends. I found out someone I had met at a previous location was also now stationed there, and I'd also had calls with a friend around the world."

A common theme among military spouses is making lists. "I use an online program to make quick, attractive lists," Sartor explains. "This way I can pick fun, readable fonts and add either a picture of the 'thing' I'm aiming for or add fun embellishments to the list. Visuals go a long way to build forward momentum towards a goal, as well as helping other family members learn and stay on tasks."

"The best tip I have to keep myself organized

and be able to stick to any resolution after a move is lists," Macomber relates. "I have multiple lists for every possible thing. Whether its house projects, travel plans, tasks to get done for the week, or plans that we want to achieve many years down the road, I have a list written down. It is great to be able to go back and reference when I'm thinking about things I want to get done this week, this month, or this year. When moving, this is even more essential. I have a list for immediate priorities when moving into the house and then a longer term list of projects or ideas of changes that I want to make in the house. It's a great way to keep organized and crossing things off the list always feels like an accomplishment! I also keep a binder with several different sections for the move process. This will have things like utilities that I need to turn on or off, budget and receipts, school information, etc."

Still, many people agree that flexibility is also important. "The biggest thing with resolutions and trying to stick to them is to know that you have a plan but if that plan goes awry, it doesn't mean you have to drop the whole resolution," Macomber notes. "If your resolution is to spend more time together as a family, and your spouse has to work three weekends in a row, you can just pick back up when work slows down. Being flexible is a very important part of being a military family."

Sartor agrees, observing, "We spouses can bend every which way without breaking. We do it day after day. I want to embrace the flexibility to change direction and see the sudden changes to my plans/goals as a chance to find a different way to the finish. Life is unpredictable and military life even more so. Having a plan gives us direction and guides us towards our goals and on towards our dreams. It helps us feel grounded and in control of an aspect or our lives that is otherwise directed by our extraordinary spouses' careers. But we don't have to be so rigid that our resolutions stress us out. This is where we can have some spontaneity, where we can plan quick day trips and special 'together' times with our spouses when they are home, where we can choose to see joy in all the chaos."

Schafer encourages others to celebrate successes, both large and small. "We have a saying in our household, 'Practice makes permanent, not perfect,' and this applies to New Year's resolutions," she explains. "Resolutions are a good opportunity to 'practice' personal growth and personal accountability. And, if you're doing it as a family, you can celebrate monthly milestones. Each month, you can look at how it's going, what you have learned, and so on. You can have a fun night of it! Order pizza and spend some time with each person having a safe space to share their journey." 