



Army Strong Starts at Home: Building Bonds Through Active Responding



U.S. ARMY

DIRECTORATE OF PREVENTION,
RESILIENCE AND READINESS

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In military life, where stress, separation and uncertainty can be frequent companions, how we respond to each other’s good news plays a powerful role in [strengthening relationships](#). Dr. Shelly Gable’s research on **active constructive responding (ACR)** reminds us that genuine, enthusiastic engagement—especially in response to positive moments—is a meaningful way to [build trust](#) and deepen connections. As you read through the following examples, consider how you respond to the people you care about.

The Four Response Styles

Scenario: Your spouse shares that they received a promotion. Below are examples of the type of response you may have to their good news.

Passive constructive: This style of responding might sound like a muted response with low energy, or you may be distracted by a phone or the TV. This is known as a *conversation killer*.

“Oh, that’s great,” “Uh-huh” or “OK” (while scrolling through your phone or not making eye contact).

Passive destructive: This reply fully ignores the sharer and often one-ups or changes the subject. This is a *conversation hijacker*.

“That’s cool. Hey, what’s for dinner?”

Active destructive: This type of reply is critical, dismissive or point out the negative in the sharer’s good news. This type of response is a *joy thief*.

“Are you sure you’re ready for that? Sounds stressful.”

Active constructive: This type of response to the sharer’s good news is enthusiastic, engaged and encouraging. It allows the sharer to relive the excitement of the good news and is known as a [joy multiplier](#).

“That’s incredible! I’m so proud of you. You totally earned this—how are you feeling? What does this promotion mean for your role?”

Why Your Response Matters

Using ACR does more than create a feel-good moment—it’s a powerful relationship tool. The Gottman Institute found that when people know they’ll be met with genuine interest and support, they’re more likely to open up. Over time, this culture of encouragement doesn’t just improve day-to-day connection—it becomes a [buffer against stress](#).

Practicing Active Constructive Responding

For military spouses, practicing active constructive responding is a meaningful way to stay emotionally connected through the highs and lows of service life. When your partner shares good





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news—whether it’s something big like a promotion or small like a good workout—be fully present: Put down the phone, make eye contact and let them know you’re listening. These intentional responses help build trust; reinforce your connection, belonging, fun and intimacy; and remind your partner that no matter what’s happening around you, you’re still in it together. When we respond with presence, curiosity and joy, we don’t just share the moment, we strengthen the relationship. We can commit to building Army Strong relationships—one response at a time.

