Moral Injury: Invisible Wounds of Combat

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Objectives

• Define moral injury and how it differs from PTSD.
• Discuss the causes and symptoms of moral injury
• Discuss treatment options for healing these invisible wounds of combat:
  • Medical-Mental Health model
  • The role of the Chaplain in treating wounds of the soul
  • Spiritual/community healing
Why do I need to know about Moral Injury?
I don’t work at the VA.
“Thou shalt not kill.”
Moral Injury

• Not a new concept
• It has been present in soldiers and veterans going back to ancient Greece (battle fatigue, shell shock, inner conflict)
• New recognition, interest and research
• It is not a psychiatric or mental illness. No DSM-5 diagnostic criteria
• Not officially recognized by DOD or the VA. Does not qualify for VA disability compensation
• Not PTSD
 Definitions

• Jonathan Shay:

• Bret Litz:
  • “Perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.” [5]

• VA:
  • “An act of serious transgression that leads to serious inner conflict because the experience is at odds with core ethical and moral beliefs...” [3]

• Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini:
  • “…souls in anguish, not a psychological disorder.” This occurs when veterans struggle with a lost sense of humanity after transgressing deeply held moral beliefs. [6]
Definitions

• A syndrome of shame, self handicapping, anger, and demoralization that occurs when deeply held beliefs and expectations about moral and ethical conduct are transgressed. [7]

• Psychological injury which results from transgressions of deeply held moral and ethical beliefs and expectations. [8]

• A sense that their fundamental understanding of right and wrong has been violated, and the grief, numbness or guilt that often ensues. [9]
Examples of Events That Can Cause Moral Injury

http://youtu.be/aUOWZAXYhPs
Examples of Events That Can Cause Moral Injury

• Vietnam Combat Soldier
• Vietnam Combat Marine
• Marine Sniper in Fallujah
• Marine in Afghanistan
Examples of Events That Can Cause Moral Injury

- Killing the enemy
- Killing innocent women, children, elderly
- Collateral damage
- Friendly fire
- Not preventing/stopping atrocities
Moral Injury

• Can emerge long after events or experiences

• Creates Isolation

• Can affect many professions (medical, protective services, social work, ministry)

• Family members and friends may also suffer from secondary moral injury and secondary trauma from the sharing of the Veteran’s story
Moral Injury

• ‘Veterans need to understand this guilt, shame, and depression are not because they are “bad” or “immoral” people, but specifically because they are so inherently good in a world that sometimes isn’t.’ [10]

• “Moral injury is a perfectly normal reaction to a perfectly abnormal situation.” [6]
Symptoms

• Guilt
• Shame
• Self-condemnation
• Demoralization
• Betrayal (leaders, self, peers)
• Self-handicapping behaviors (e.g., alcohol or drug use)
• Self-harm (e.g., suicidal ideation or attempt)
• Anger
• Outrage
• Grief
Symptoms

• Social problems
• Trust issues
• Spiritual/existential issues
• Psychological issues
• Embarrassment
• Humiliation
• Remorse
• Despair
Treatment

• Medical-mental health directed therapy
• Spiritually directed
• Spiritual/community healing
Medical/Mental Health Treatment Model

San Diego Naval Medical Center Moral Injury/Moral Repair Program

Multidisciplinary and Group Therapy
Most effective treatment method
San Diego Naval Medical Center Moral Injury/Moral Repair Program

• Participants become comfortable with each other and develop trust before
• Sharing their story
• Participants provide non-judgmental support without excusing what was done
• Accept the wrong that was done
• Letter writing to self from a benevolent figure (or imaginary conversation with compassionate moral authority) to develop self-compassion
• Community service projects
• Random acts of kindness
• To feel acceptance back into the community
PTSD

- A psychiatric diagnosis with a DSM-5 code
- Has a mental health treatment model
- Recognized by DOD and VA
- Acceptable for VA disability compensation
PTSD

• PTSD and moral injury are often conflated. One can have PTSD without moral injury, and moral injury without PTSD. [10]

• Existing PTSD treatment frameworks may not sufficiently target moral injury. [5]
PTSD vs Moral Injury

http://projects.huffingtonpost.com/moral-injury/the-grunts
PTSD vs Moral Injury

• PTSD often experienced by Veterans who were the target of an attack or who were close to the target by proximity or through personal relationship

• Moral injury occurs when an individual experiences guilt, shame, and/or a feeling of betrayal following a transgression of their deeply held beliefs, which can result from actions taken or witnessed in combat. [11]
References


3. VA PTSD Research Quarterly, Volume 23/#1


References


Moral Injury

A Spiritual Perspective
“The Soul”

Much like the subconscious in psychology, you can’t see it, prove it, disprove it—it “just is.”

The soul is not divorced from but manifested through the mind and body.

Most traditions teach that our Soul is holy and pure—it is within this arena that chaplains work to facilitate reconciliation of and reconnection with the soul amidst trauma, reclaiming inherent worth/value/purity.
The Soul & Spirituality

“The deeper reality is not that you have a soul but that in your essential nature, you are a soul” (Alan Morinis)

*Spirituality* is a path toward discovering one’s soul

Spirituality cultivates a *way of being* vs. a *way of doing*

All of the world’s religions strive to move practitioners to a deeper place of existence – beyond the mind and to the heart
Warrior Archetype

Based upon warrior narratives, which focus on:

- courage,
- self-sacrifice,
- loyalty,
- fidelity,
- respect,
- and love of comrades
Warrior Ethos
(Warrior beliefs and creeds)

“Soldiers Creed”
“Airmen’s Creed”
“Sailor’s Creed”
“Creed of the U.S. Marine Corps.”
I am an American Airman.
I am a Warrior;
I have answered my nation’s call.

I am an American Airman.
My mission is to Fly, Fight, and Win.
I am faithful to a Proud Heritage,
A Tradition of Honor,
And a Legacy of Valor.

I am an American Airman.
Guardian of Freedom and Justice,
My Nation’s Sword and Shield,
Its Sentry and Avenger.
I defend my Country with my Life.

I am an American Airman.
Wingman, Leader, Warrior.
I will never leave an Airman behind,
I will never falter,
And I will not fail.
Warrior Identity

Peacemaker
Enforcer/Avenger

Comrade
Protector

Photo Credit Michael Yon, 2005

U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Chris Willis
Connection Between Spirituality and War

“War, which is inherently about destroying and killing, is the ultimate irreligious act. We break divine commandments and appropriate divine responsibilities, taking life when we cannot give it back. When in hell and becoming its servant, we most need spiritual and religious teachings for support and practice to guide our actions, to protect and heal our souls, and to bring peace to victims and reconcile with the dead.”

(Ed Tick, *Warrior’s Return*)
Effects of War on the Soul

“Legitimate Authority:”
- Relationship with Self
- Relationship with the Community (local and global)
- Relationship with the Divine

Credit:
AP photographer Eddie Adams
Spirituality and Trauma

Trauma and spirituality are inextricably connected.

Spirituality is a healing path; it necessitates taking an inward journey to work through all places which distract [trauma]... in order to rediscover the Soul, and to reconnect with meaning and purpose.

“Suffering ceases to be suffering . . . at the moment it finds a meaning.”

(Viktor Frankl)
Spiritual Interventions for MI

Historic Role of Chaplains
• “Keepers of the Cloak”
• A Reminder of the Holy

Steps in Assessment:
• Build rapport
• Identify spiritual/religious needs
• Facilitate ministry support
• Anxiety reduction, grief work, forgiveness, reconnection to community and self
Spiritual Interventions for MI

“Veterans with moral injury have souls in anguish, not a psychological disorder . . . many veterans do not believe their struggles are psychological illnesses needing treatment. Instead, they experience their feelings as a profound spiritual crisis that has changed them, perhaps beyond repair.”

_Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War_, Brock and Lettini
Spiritual Interventions for MI

Spiritual Counseling

*Calibrates*

the moral compass of warriors who have been authorized to use lethal force in increasingly complex situations.

*Facilitates*

soul repair – moves warrior from lamentation towards reconstruction of core values and self worth.
Spiritual Interventions for MI

Religious and cultural therapies are not only possible, but may well be superior to what mental health professions conventionally offer.

Jonathan Shay, *Odysseus in America*
The survival story is central to recovery from severe trauma. It’s not simply the telling of the story, it is the whole social process. If I have suffered some terrible experience, I have to be socially empowered to tell the story. You have to be empowered to hear and to believe and to remember it.

Jonathan Shay, *Wartime*, 2005
Spirituality and Trauma

“Spirituality is an arena that always involves healing, but only sometimes includes curing” (Gerald May)

— a crucial differentiation when working within the arena of the Soul.
Contributions of the Chaplain

- Ritual/Worship
- Confession/absolution
- Developing and/or reconnecting to sacred rhythms
- Connecting to community
- Religious texts
- Responding to questions about religion
- Stories of redemption and hope


“Alethes”

Truth That Cannot Be Denied
“Sentiment Without Action is the Ruin of the Soul”

Edward Abbey
“I am not a human being having a spiritual experience; I am a spiritual being having a human experience.”

Tielhard de Chardin
SPIRITUAL BEINGS WITH A HUMAN BODY

Archetypes - characteristics that transcend time and space - Truths about our nature. We are spiritual beings with a human body conditioned by the culture in which we exist.
SOUL & SPIRIT

SOUL AND SPIRIT ARE INTERCHANGEABLE TERMS WITH NEGLIGIBLE DIFFERENCES

• Metaphorically:
  • Spirit is represented by wind & fire
  • Soul is represented by earth & water
Ancient Greeks understood that a body without a soul was not living.

The soul/spirit animates the living organism
Veterans speak of when they lost their soul
They felt as if their soul left their body
Cain and Able
Saul & David
Psalms & PTS Injury

SOUL LOSS
“COMING HOME CAN BE THE HARDEST PART OF GOING TO WAR”

Sebastian Junger asserts in the June 2015 Vanity Fair that “PTSD is a crisis of connection and disruption, not an illness that you carry with you”
THREE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR WELLNESS

Model for healing:
Listen-Speak-Heal
Participants enter a healing circle with the sacred intention of healing.

WARRIORS’ JOURNEY HOME
FORGIVENESS MEANS….

…..ABANDONMENT OF ALL HOPE OF A BETTER PAST.

Reconciliation
Restitution
SUPPORT TROOPS SUFFER FROM PTS(D)

- 10% of all military are involved in direct ground combat
- Brett Litz, Boston VA uses the phrase “moral injury”, often is foundational to PTSD
When airman Brandon Bryan first began work as a drone operator, he thought he was part of a force for good. After six years of working from a base in Nevada, sitting at a console with vivid and violent scenes of Afghan and Pakistan villages 7,000 miles away, he changed his mind. His views about the morality of the operation changed when he saw a child vaporized on the screen and saw hundreds of people blown to bits. He walked away from $109,000 bonus with a severe case of PTSD and a final kill count of 1,626. “The number made me sick to my stomach”, he said.
“TRAUMA IS WHAT REMAINS AFTER THE EVENT.”

Dr. Shelly Rambo, author of “Spirit and Trauma”
PTSI is not remembering but reliving events
Time between Death and Resurrection
Hell is the god-forsaken place.
STORY TELLING...

...in community allows and encourages the past to become a Teacher rather than allowing the past to be the Master. Within the ritual of community derives meaning from horrific events.
WAR IS...

A force beyond our imagination. Unspeakably horrible. Not romantic or pleasant. Destructive and affects all facets of our society.
STEPS ON THE JOURNEY HOME:

- Isolation & Tending
- Acceptance of the Warrior Destiny
- Purification & Cleansing
- Storytelling & Confession
- Restitution in the Community (Han)
- Initiation
Resources:

Questions ???