

Healing Vietnam Veterans' Moral Injury: A Stress First Aid Toolkit for Hospice Teams

Karen Blackstone, Anca Dinescu,
Joy Laramie, Robert Morgan,
Sonika Pandey, Carol Ramsey-Lucas,
Patricia Watson

Washington DC VA Medical Center
Hospice and Palliative Care Program



WE HONOR VETERANS

Audience Poll



ARE YOU A
VIETNAM
VETERAN?



DO YOU HAVE A
FAMILY MEMBER OR
FRIEND WHO IS A
VIETNAM VETERAN?



ARE YOU A HEALTH
CARE PROVIDER
FOR A VIETNAM
VETERAN?



DO YOU WORK FOR
THE DEPARTMENT
OF VETERANS
AFFAIRS?



DO YOU WORK IN
A COMMUNITY
(NOT-VA)
SETTING?

Introduction

- In 2019, VA and NHPCO created a training program to improve wellness outcomes specifically for seriously ill and dying Vietnam veterans.
 - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
 - Suicide Prevention
 - Moral Injury
- https://www.wehonorveterans.org/resource-library/?fwpp_conflict=vietnam

Objectives

- Describe how Moral Injury affects Vietnam Veterans with serious illness
- Describe a tool to support hospice team “first responders” to identify, assess and palliate Vietnam Veterans’ Moral Injury

Washington DC VA
Palliative Care Team

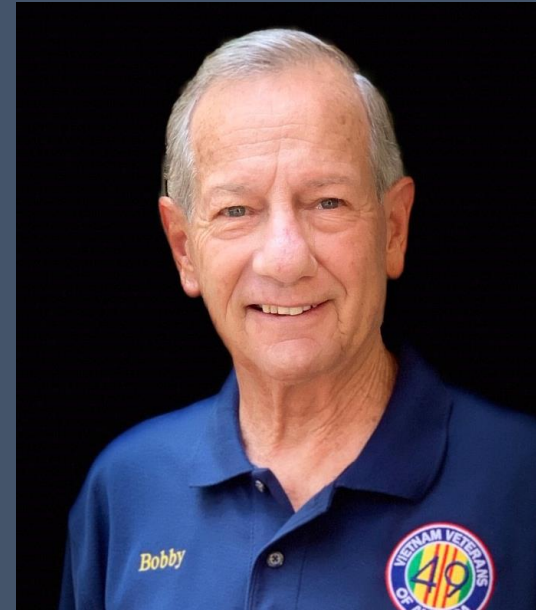
National Center for
PTSD

Nothing to Disclose

Karen Blackstone, MD



Robert Morgan, Veteran



Joy Laramie, MSN, NP, ACHPN



Carol Ramsey-Lucas, MDiv



Patricia Watson, PhD



Anca Dinescu, MD



Sonika Pandey, MD



- Approximately 2.7 million Americans served in the military in the Vietnam War (1961-1975)
- During the war, service men and women experienced unimaginable trauma and 58,000 died
- Soldiers returning home often faced scorn as the war became increasingly unpopular
- While the majority of Vietnam Veterans successfully readjusted, many Vietnam-era Veterans experienced post-war challenges and ongoing medical, psychological, and spiritual distress



- Today, the majority of Vietnam veteran survivors are age 65+
- Although Vietnam veterans may receive the same serious and life-threatening diagnoses as non-veteran older adults, the Vietnam Veteran's illness experience is even more difficult when post-traumatic stress and war-related moral injury are present
- The suicide rate for older veterans is higher than that of non-veterans, and the rate among older veterans further increases with age
- The majority of seriously ill Vietnam veterans receive medical care outside the VA health care system and 97% of veteran deaths occur outside VA facilities





Vietnam Remembered

NYC gives vets belated celebration

NEW YORK (AP)—New York threw America's Vietnam veterans a belated welcome-home party Tuesday with a ticker-tape parade that drew tears and cheers all along the concrete canyon.

"We love you," a woman shouted from her fifth-story office.

"Thank you, lady," a marching vet yelled back. "I needed that."

Leaning from office windows, standing on balconies, and precariously perched atop sending trucks, thousands cheered and waved American flags as groups of veterans from across the nation, some 25,000 in all, passed by.

As spectators applauded as two squadrons of men wearing the stars of their jungle gear, passed by, they cheered when Gen. William Westmoreland rode down from the viewing stand to shake with the men he led in Vietnam.

Some estimated the ad at 1 million, although some spots along route were nearly full. Yet even when full, their enthusiasm was uncontainable.

After lining the route, lined up the crowd's flags. "We should be proud of you," a man said. "Thank you," a woman said.

"Welcome home," a woman said. "Welcome home," a woman said. "Welcome home," a woman said.

from a house five in the Long Island City section of Queens, the Flax Department said. The group spotted the five in a three-story frame building at 34th and 35th, around the



Ticker-tape parade

Veterans from the Vietnam War march through Manhattan as crowds cheer them on during New York City's ticker-tape parade Tuesday. (AP Wirephoto)

Behan said. "The enthusiasm of the people was nice to see. They meant it when they said, 'Welcome home.'"

Koch called the event "a very special parade, probably one of the most emotional parades that we will have ever had."

"We should have done it a long time ago," he added.

Jeffrey White, 35, of Manhattan, a former Marine who said he served in Vietnam "12 months, 23 days and 6 hours," agreed and was bolder that the nation's approval was so long in coming.

Though dressed in a uniform adorned with sergeant's and captain's medals, White did not march. He said he came out of respect for those who did.

"I don't consider this a thank you, and it's not a parade. It's just a man. It's more like a political convention or something. Two years is too late for anything," he said.

Vincent Mondano, who did march, understood the bitterness some vets felt but said: "It's still a big step forward, the respect is finally coming and it makes me feel a lot better."

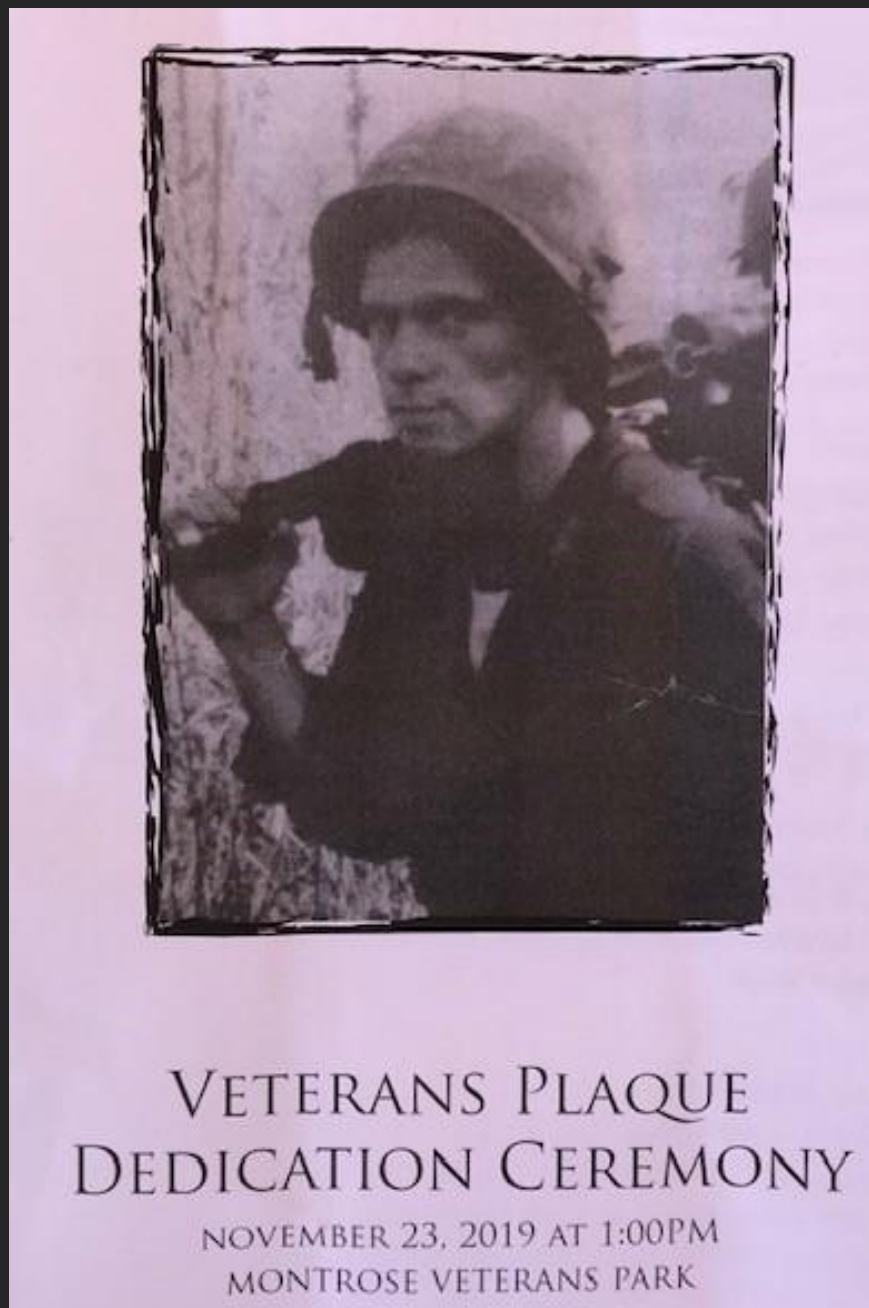
Marching with his 11-year-old son, Mondano wore a jacket that had a map of Vietnam on the back and this inscription: "When I die I'll go to heaven because we spent time in hell in Saigon."

For Angel Irlanda, a radio operator who served in Vietnam from 1967-68, the parade was bittersweet. "I'm happy in my heart for myself and all my buddies here today but sad about the money left behind. The sons and husbands who died."

thanked me. It made me feel so good... It's just my way of letting them know, thank God for each of them, and thank God they're home."

About 2,000 men attended Monday ceremonies to the 79-foot-tall glass is the Vietnam Memorial. Etched glass are letters of soldiers in Vietnam.





Vietnam Memorial Washington DC

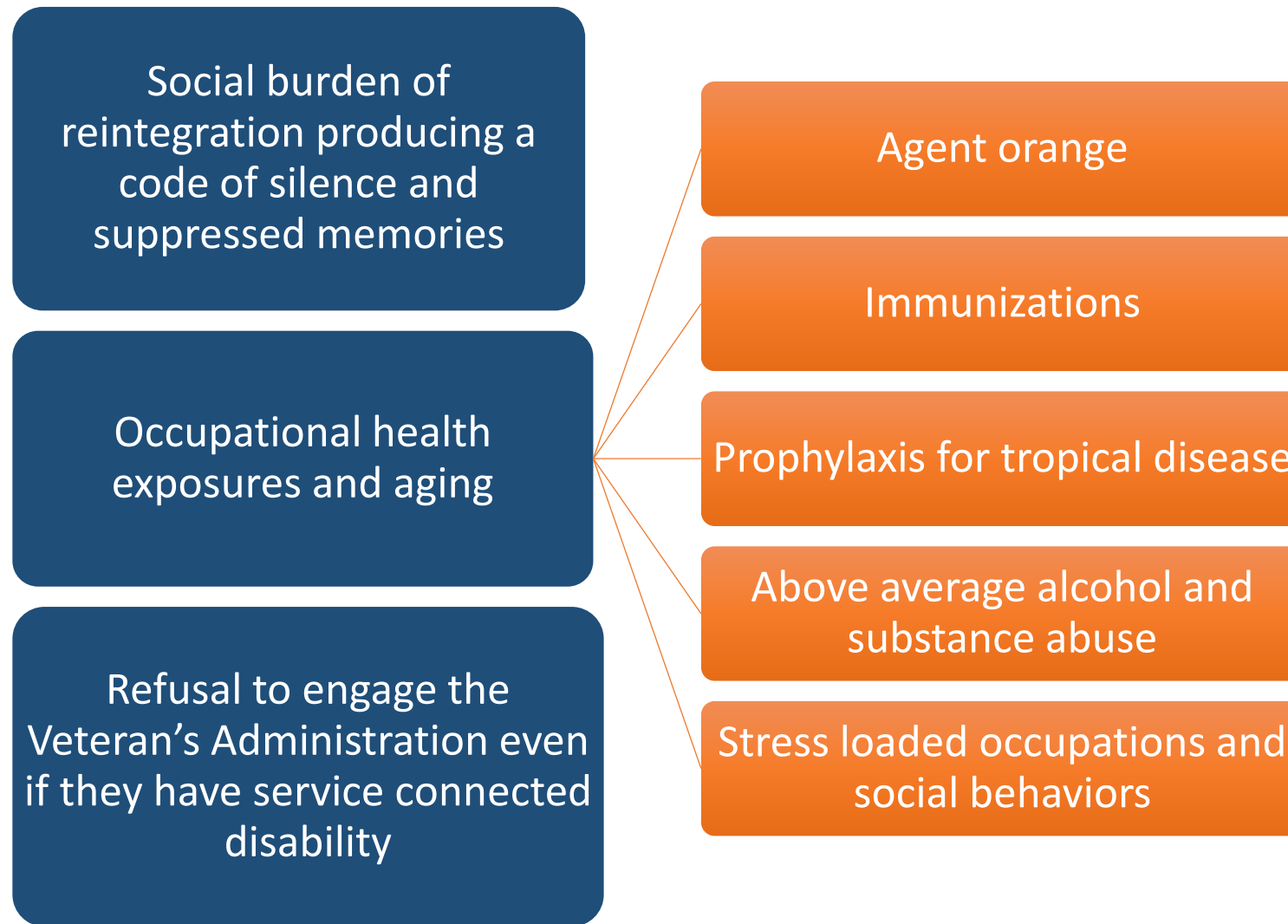
What is Moral Injury?



Events are considered morally injurious if they transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations which shatters moral and ethical expectations that are rooted in religious or spiritual beliefs, or culture-based, organizational, and group-based rules about fairness, the value of life, and so forth.



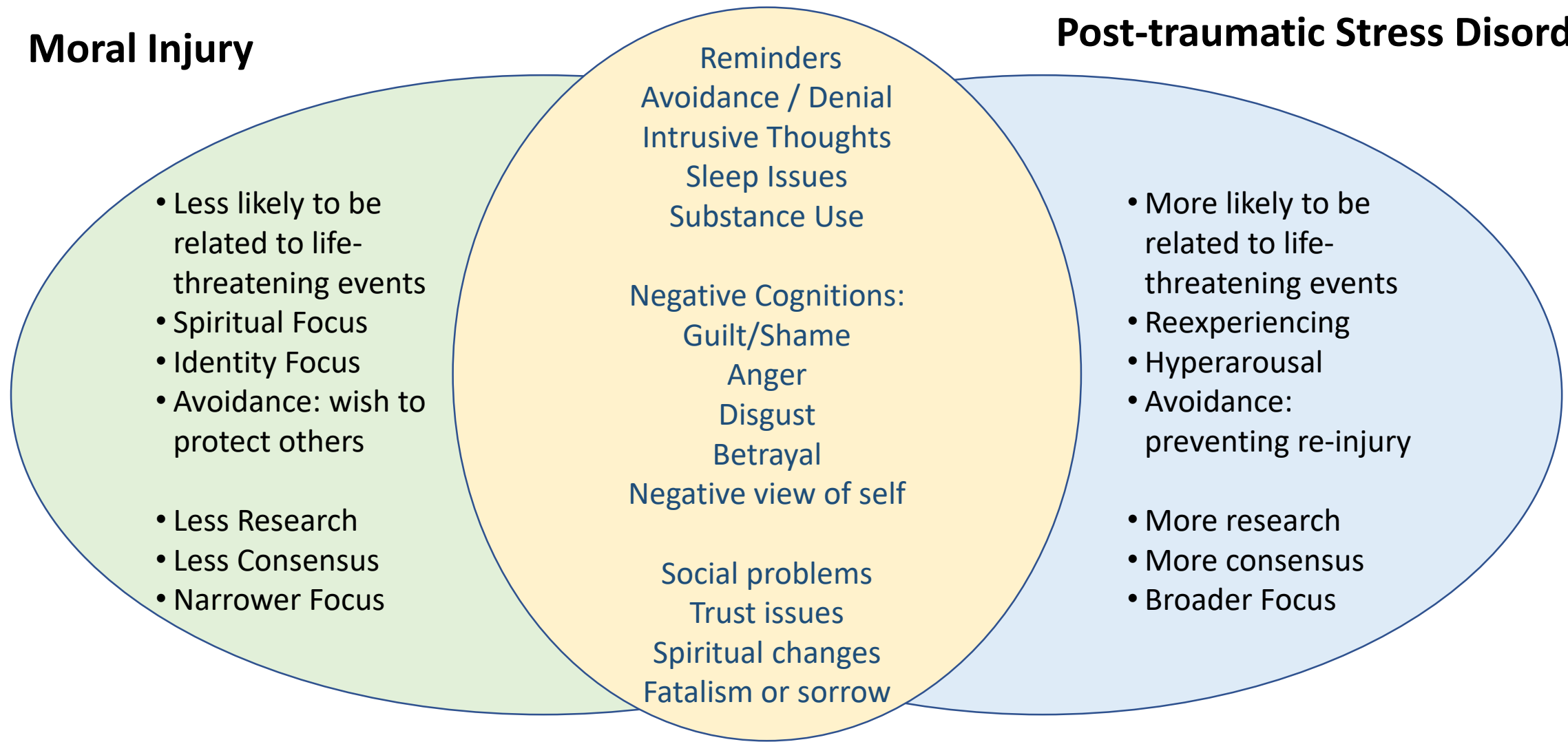
Moral Injury describes the harmful psycho-spiritual aftermath of exposure to such events.



Vietnam Veterans' Unique Risk Factors for Moral Injury

Moral Injury

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder



Moral Injury and PTSD Symptom Overlap

Veteran
Experiences
That Could
Create
Moral Injury



**Perceived betrayal
by peers,
leadership, civilians
or self**



**Acts of
disproportionate
violence inflicted
on others**



**Engaging in or
witnessing acts
that violated
personal moral
beliefs**



**Incidents involving
death or harm to
civilians**



**Within ranks
violence**



**Wishing one had
done something
that one didn't do**

Moral Injury & Seriously Ill Vietnam Veterans

Life Review reopens unresolved emotional and spiritual wounds

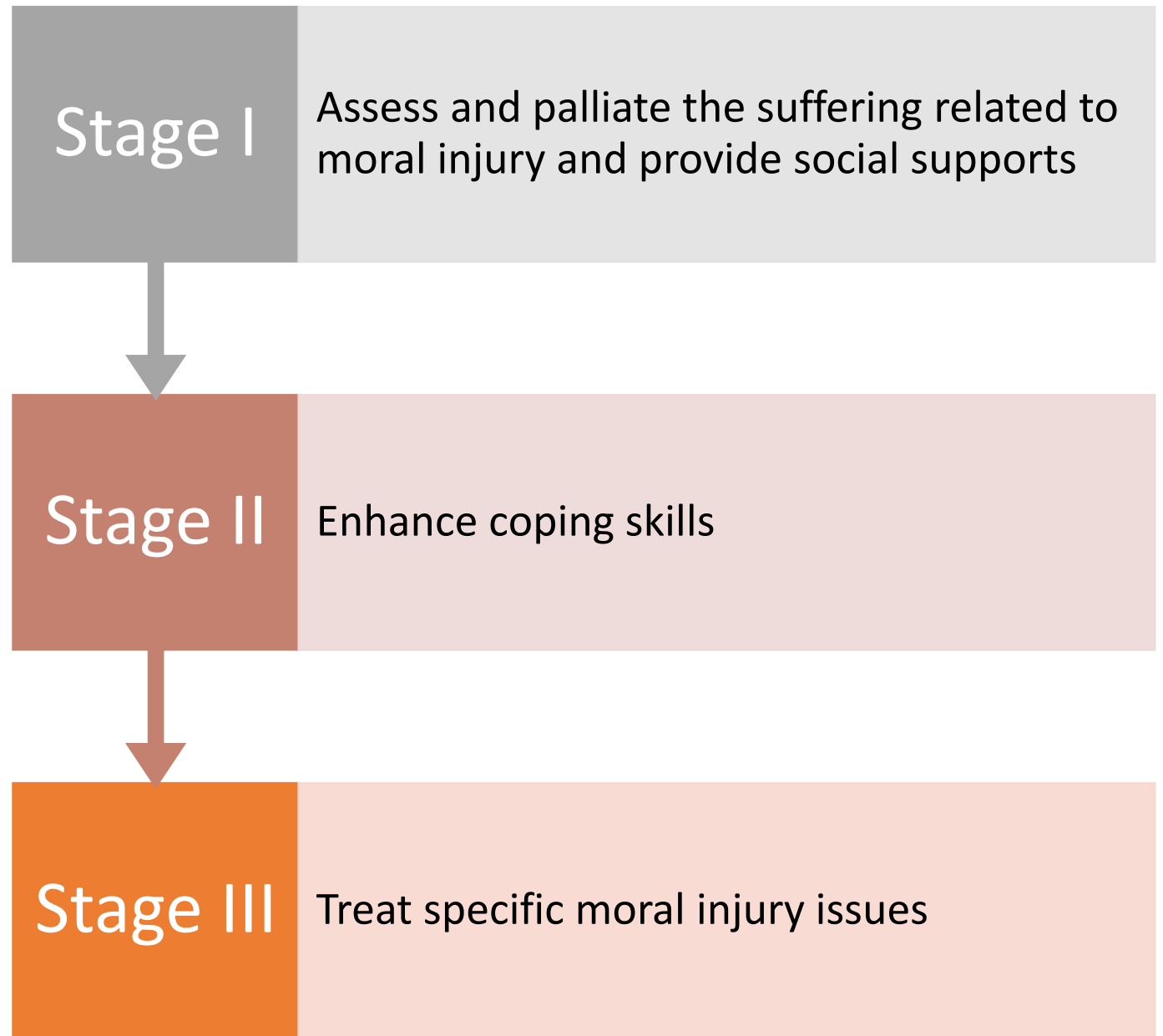
Feeling as if they are unable to forgive self or be forgiven

Fearing that they are not worthy of redemption

Unable to trust anyone to open up about experiences

Despair due to loss of life meaning and purpose

Stepped Care Approach to Address Moral Injury in Hospice and Palliative Care



STRESS FIRST AID: Stages 1 and 2 in Stepped Care Model



Seven Cs of Stress First Aid:

1. CHECK

Assess: observe and listen

2. COORDINATE

Get help, refer as needed

3. COVER

Get to safety ASAP

4. CALM

Relax, slow down, refocus

5. CONNECT

Get support from others

6. COMPETENCE

Restore effectiveness

7. CONFIDENCE

Restore self-esteem and hope

Objectives of Stress First Aid



Make a connection in a helpful/respectful way



Restore/support a sense of safety



Calm and orient distressed individuals



Connect individuals to their sources of support



Improve the ability of those affected to address their most critical needs



Foster a sense of hope/limit self-doubt and guilt

Check Actions: Make a Connection



Opening Questions

Culturally Sensitive Questions

Deepening Questions

Religion/Spirituality Questions



“What really matters to you in your life?”



What most concerns you?”



“What thought keeps coming back to you? What do you keep telling yourself?”



“How have you been feeling since...?”



“Have you been through anything like this before? How is this similar or different?”



“How is this affecting how you feel about yourself, your relationships, the world?”

Opening a Discussion

Deepening Questions to Ask a Vietnam Veteran

Do you think you were changed as a result of being in the military? Please describe the changes.

Do you think your experiences in the military are affecting you today?

Is there anything about your experiences in the military that is still troubling you today?

Do you have nightmares about the war?

What was your homecoming like? Is there anything about your homecoming that is still troubling you today?

Do you think your experiences in the military and your homecoming affected your relationships with family and friends?

Do you keep in touch with anyone you served with?

Do you think your experience in the military is influencing the way you are now coping with your illness?

Stress First Aid: Core Actions

1	Cover
2	Calm
3	Connect
4	Competence
5	Confidence

Cover Actions



Approach

- Treat the person with kindness, compassion, respect and nonjudgment

Information

- Ask about concerns
- Give simple, accurate information
- Convey that you are there to help and to keep the person safe
- Help create a sense of safety where Veterans can disclose their concerns, worries, and struggles about making sense of their life experiences

Direction

- Protect the person from unnecessary exposure to reminders
- Set boundaries to protect them and others
- If you have to act firmly or abruptly, moderate the impact at your first opportunity
- Reinforce compliance by promptly and positively acknowledging actions that follow your instructions

Cover Actions:

Examples

Have a conversation about how safe the Veteran feels, such as any concerns they might have about:

- Any feelings of loss of control
- Confidence level about getting adequate pain relief
- Fear of abandonment
- Any feeling of fear of death

Calm Actions



Approach

- Maintain a calm presence
- Respect needs
- Expect and show understanding of emotions
- Validate

Information

- Ask questions in calming or distracting way
- Use reflection, clarifying statements to communicate that you've heard correctly
- Provide information about services
- Give reassurance
- Convey that reactions are understandable without dismissing or minimizing

Direction

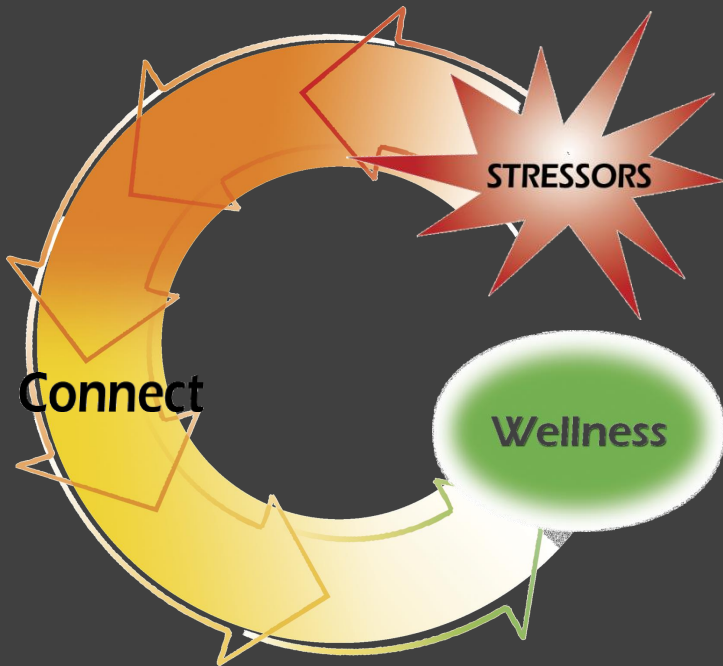
- Emphasize the present, and what's practical / possible
- Use distraction at times
- Direct to use simple self-calming actions
 - Writing
 - Guided breathing
 - Guided imagery
 - Progressive muscle relaxation
 - Prayer
 - Meditation
 - Mindfulness

Calm Actions:

Examples

- “What we do and what we say is not as important as what the Veteran says. And what they really want from us is to know that we can tolerate being in their presence as they try to figure out who they are now at the end of life.”
- “Be a witness and stand in non-judgment, and just be with them. Bear witness – the story does not need to be true. It is their story. You do not need to act on it if they talk about war crimes. It’s about not passing judgment.”
- “If you don’t know how to respond, say something like: “how very interesting. I’ve never heard that perspective before.” Or: “I’ve never thought of that experience in that way before.” Acknowledge what they’ve said.”
- “If you want more information, say something like: “You’ve had such an amazing experience, and it sounds like you’ve experienced some things that nobody should have experienced – help me understand how that's impacting you now.””

Connect Actions



Approach

- Connect people to trusted supports however possible

Information

- Get contact information
- Look for people in vicinity to connect individuals to
- Ask about who are most trusted supports (including pets)

Direction

- Foster reconnection with family, friends
- Encourage peer support with those available
- Solicit volunteers to provide support

Connect Actions: Examples

- “Educate families on what Moral Injury is and how it can affect Veterans at the end of life.”
- “Help the family have a connection at end of life if they have felt distanced or ostracized.”
- “If family members get jealous of the fact that the Veteran has never told them something that he told you, say something like: “Often it is difficult for Veterans to share their experience with the ones they love because they swore an oath to protect the ones they love. If its such a burden for them to bear, why would they do that to the ones they love?””
- “The family is often trying to figure out who are they in relation to a Veteran when that Veteran is dying. They might still be angry at him, but if they know his experiences, it can diffuse or redirect their anger to the war versus just to the Veteran.”

Competence Actions



Approach

- Approach the situation with an eye towards restoring a sense of control and improving the person's ability to deal with moral injury reactions

Information

- Determine people's needs, what your role is, and what else is needed
- Provide verbal and written information on coping skills:
 - Relaxation / breathing / sleep training
 - Thought-stopping skills
 - Mindfulness-based/acceptance skills
 - Communication/social-skills training

Direction

- Facilitate skills practice and trouble-shooting
- Get people connected to other resources:
 - Spiritual care
 - Clinical Care
 - Other Veterans (such as Veteran volunteers)
- Encourage use of resources

Competence Actions:

Examples

- “For the Veteran who feels “I’m dying and I’ve never done this before,” be prepared to have a conversation about it, about how they want to choose to die, and what their models of death and dying are.”
- “For the Veteran who may feel like he doesn’t know how to talk with his family about his sense of moral injury, help them to understand how to have a conversation that focuses on how that moral injury has affected them in their relationships and how it is affecting them now, rather than having to disclose the circumstances of the morally injurious events.”

Confidence Actions



Approach

- Keep a neutral or positive attitude
- Avoid judgment

Information

- Clarify misunderstandings and distortions
- Give information about treatment options
- Ask about how they would like to proceed

Direction

- Focus on the present moment or future
- Reduce guilt about actions with Confidence strategies



Make simple,
nonjudgmental
statements such as:

"I can understand why you're feeling this way, given your strong values,"

"I know this can be rough,"

"What can I do to help / What would be helpful?"



Help the individual to construct a timeline or narrative with room for personal strengths, positive relationships, spiritual change, appreciation for life, or what is helpful.



Help the person examine the double edged sword of their values and beliefs, and focus on the present.



Be willing to talk with them as many times as they need, give them relevant reading materials, and connect them to treatment or to people who have dealt with similar things, such as Veteran volunteers.

Confidence Suggestions: Moral Injury

Confidence Alert

Be careful about the following actions:



Statements that imply judgments about what the person could or should have done



Statements or questions that can be perceived as accusatory or incriminatory



Statements or gestures indicating that you think the person should be reacting differently now



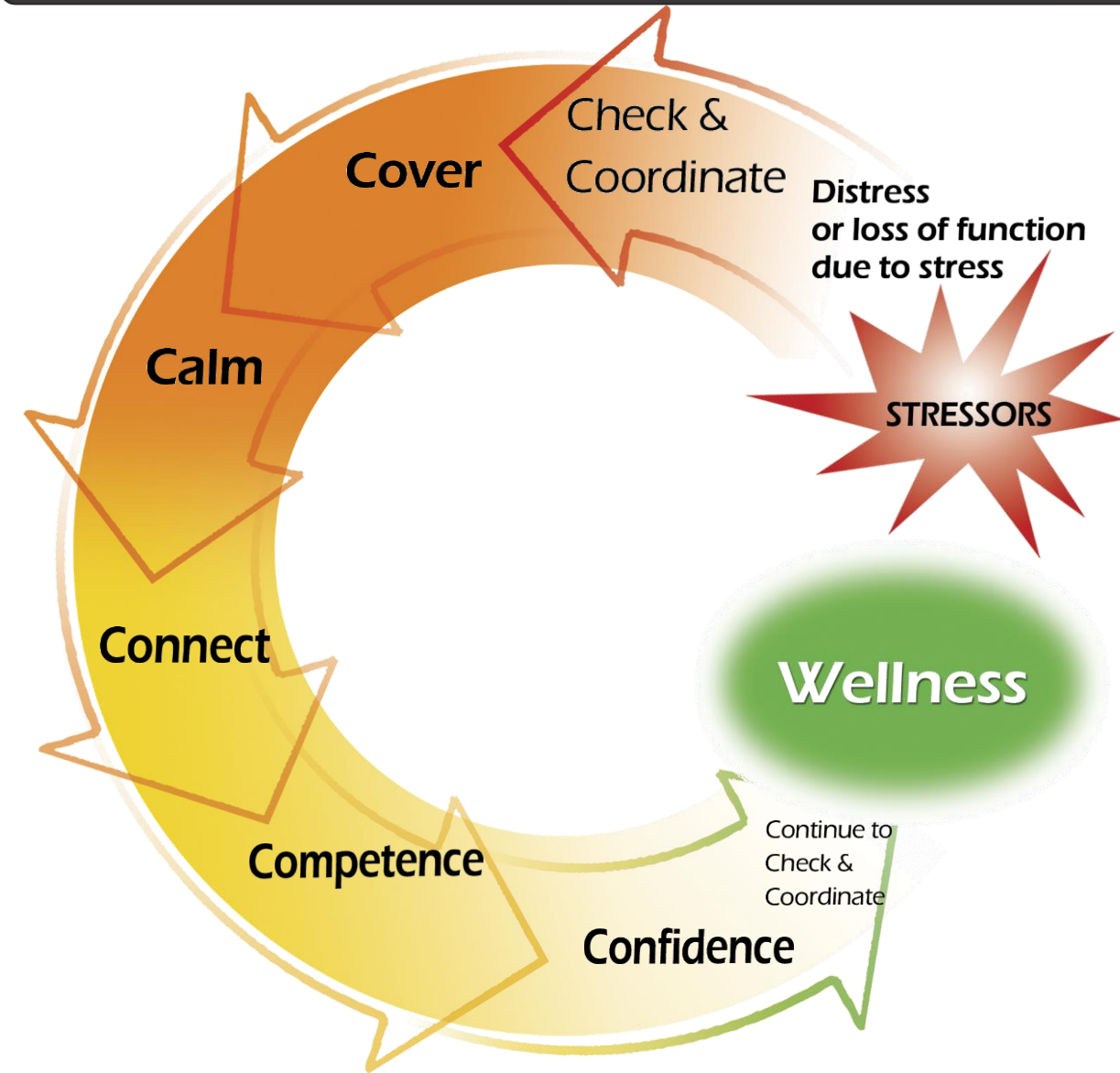
Offering possibly inaccurate information, or potentially false hope. If you cannot answer a person's question, do your best to learn the facts

Confidence Actions:

Examples

- “Talk about their strengths and vulnerabilities, and about the values they bring. Emotional pain is often an echo of a commitment to core values. Use core values as part of the discussion.”
- “If the Veteran speaks of guilt because of acts of omission, say something like: “It sounds like you’re sad about something you didn’t do?””
- “If you can’t tolerate bearing witness, be honest. Say something like: “I don’t know if I can hear this story, but I know someone who can. I can connect you with a Veteran Service Organization like the VFW, etc.””

Self-Care Strategies for Hospice and Palliative Care Providers



- Self-monitor and pace yourself daily
- Use a buddy system to share distressing stress reactions
- Take brief breaks for basic physical care
- Use consultation and supervision routinely
- Practice stress management during the workday
- Stay aware of your limits and needs
- Use vacation and personal time



Letter to All on the Frontlines in the Battle Against COVID-19 (4/18/20) <https://vva.org>

- In the midst of this pandemic, one the likes of which we have never before seen, we, as veterans, are transported back to memories of our service during the Vietnam War, the last time America witnessed this shocking loss of life. Although the environment and circumstances of our war are not precisely the same as yours, we see a direct correlation to the experiences, conditions, and fallout that we endured from our time in the “trenches.” We know from our wartime experiences the feelings of social isolation; little contact with family; the endless, incoming casualties; the stressful anxiety of making triage decisions; and the frustration of lacking critical medical equipment and personal safety items.
- We remember the sadness of our hearts in not having the time to do all we wanted to do for the patients in our care. We see on your faces and hear in your voices the profound weight and sense of grief that you carry. We know that, along with these feelings, you have the added fear and threat of dealing with this unpredictable virus and the burden of potentially exposing family and friends.
- We were not prepared for our war, just as you are facing situations unlike any you have experienced before. The daily chaos, anxiety, and stress of the shifts you work can be overwhelming at times with patients wherever you turn, all of whom need your care and attention. You are running a marathon with no finish line in sight, even though you are running as fast as you can.
- Your coworkers will be with you forever as you are sharing something that no one else will ever truly understand. This may well be the most intense experience of your life. This *will* change your life. Don’t forget to take care of each other, because you have each other. However, when all is said and done, on the other side of this national crisis, you need to pause, reflect, and get in touch with yourself. We spent too many years after we came home from the war dealing with the denial of our feelings and memories.
- One of the legacies of the Vietnam War is that society now accepts Post-traumatic Stress as a natural reaction to abnormal events. We discovered the importance of seeking professional help to explore the emotional residue created by our war. We had to take a deep dive into our feelings and search our souls in order to heal ourselves. We know this path—it is a life-long journey. Your loved ones are suffering and sacrificing in this fight. Don’t forget to include them in this process. Family and friends are your first line of support and are critical to healing.
- We write this letter because we believe we share a commonality of serving our nation in a time of uncertainty and need. You are the very essence of what make America great. Your courage, determination, strength, and selfless sacrifice give us hope. Our thoughts and prayers are with you all. We salute you. You are not alone. We stand with you.



WE HONOR VETERANS



https://www.wehonorveterans.org/resource-library/?fwp_conflict=vietnam

Karen.Blackstone@va.gov