



Moral Injury and the Role of Faith Communities

Background

As part of its initiative to engage faith communities of all faith traditions to serve and support service members, veterans and their families in their communities, the Coalition for Military Families created a Faith Based Initiative Advisory Committee. The committee membership includes representatives from a wide range of faith traditions. In addition to working on ways of outreach to faith communities the committee has identified resources to assist faith communities that would like to start or enhance the services they provide to this set of members of their faith communities.

One of the resources identified by the committee was the development of a paper to be provided to faith communities to give them direction and assistance on dealing with what has been called “moral injury” that many veterans suffer from when they do or are forced to do things in the service that are in conflict with their moral or spiritual values.

This paper is being provided to faith community leaders to provide guidance to them in addressing the needs of veterans in their communities who are suffering from moral injury.

Moral Injury Defined

The Veterans Administration recently provided the following definition of moral injury:

Like psychological trauma, moral injury is a construct that describes extreme and unprecedented life experience including the harmful aftermath of exposure to such events. Events are considered morally injurious if they “transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations”. Thus, the key precondition for moral injury is an act of transgression, which shatters moral and ethical expectations that are rooted in religious or spiritual beliefs, or culture based, organizational, and group related rules about fairness, the value of life and so forth. (Source: Veterans Affairs: National Center for PTSD)

Here is a simpler definition:

Moral injury results from committing, witnessing, imagining, or failing to prevent acts or events that can be judged as evil or harmful & that violate foundational social and ethical taboos.

Although Moral Injury has some of the same symptoms as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), it is not the same. Where PTSD originates from having or seeing experiences that are life threatening, resulting in feelings of intense fear, Moral Injury is a “soul wound” that results in feelings of guilt and shame.

Here are some real-life experiences that can cause Moral Injury:

- Towards the end of WWII, a veteran in the European Theater approaches a farmhouse from which hostile fire is coming. He tosses a hand grenade into the farmhouse and the shooting

stops. After a while he cautiously looks into farmhouse and sees several old men and young boys dressed in shabby enemy uniforms lying dead on the floor. For years he has nightmares about this.

- A Vietnam veteran medic, who does not normally carry arms, is awakened by a slight sound. He looks up to see a Viet Cong soldier aiming at him. He rolls out and grabs one of his fellow soldier's weapon. The Viet Cong soldier and he face one another, both shooting at the same time. The Viet Cong soldier misses but the veteran does not. Years later he begins to have dreams with the face of the Viet Cong soldier clearly present.
- A US Army forward observer and air artillery spotter, who is one week from the end of his one-year tour of duty, uses his seniority to avoid going on to a plane flown by a new, hot dog pilot. He completes his mission and as he is having his breakfast, there is an explosion on the runway. He runs out to find a burning plane with no survivors. He realizes that the crashed plane is the one he was supposed to have been on. To his horror he finds out that one of his best friends has taken his place and has died in the crash.
- An Army medic in Iraq is out on a mission with his team. They walk into an ambush. His whole team is under fire and some of them fall. Without thinking he picks up a weapon, climbs up on a hill and unloads on the enemy, killing most of them and dispersing the rest. He saves a number of his teammates, but later is troubled not so much by the fact that he was forced to use a weapon but that while he was shooting he experienced a great deal of pleasure. He wonders who this person is who was very religious and now has enjoyed killing other human beings. People have hailed him as a hero but deep down inside he knows he is a killer.
- A US soldier in Afghanistan is told by his commanding officer that his mission is not only to neutralize the enemy but to ingratiate the local citizens. He carries candy bars to give to the local youths. One day he extends his hand with a candy bar in it to a young boy across the street. The boy comes across the street and triggers an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and is instantly killed. The veteran is haunted by the image of this young boy.

“Most people enter military service with the fundamental sense that they are good people and that they are doing this for good purposes, on the side of freedom and country and God,” said Dr. Wayne Jonas, a military physician for 24 years and president and CEO of the Samuelli Institute, a non-profit health research organization. “But things happen in war that are irreconcilable with the idea of goodness and benevolence, creating real cognitive dissonance – ‘I’m a good person and yet I’ve done bad things.’” Most veterans with moral injury, he said, “self-treat or don’t treat it at all.”

Symptoms of Moral Injury

What should faith community leaders or members look for to detect the possibility of moral injury in the veterans in their communities? The symptoms of moral injury include: sorrow, grief, regret, shame, alienation, betrayal and loss of purpose.

The Role of Faith Communities

Faith communities can play a major role in helping veterans who are experiencing moral injury. As we know true healing encompasses mind, body, and spirit. The Veterans Administration Health Care System (and their partner organizations) can deal with the mind and body, but there is natural role for the faith communities to deal with the healing of the spirit.

Although many veterans experiencing moral injury have such a high degree of guilt that they do not feel worthy of being forgiven and avoid joining a faith community, many join so that they and their families can have a welcoming and supportive community for their other needs. They feel especially

welcomed if the faith community has an active veteran ministry or at least is visibly helping veterans. As time goes on, the veteran may feel comfortable approaching a pastor or other member of the community such as another veteran and describe the symptoms mentioned above.

If this happens, it is important to be a good listener to people who are affected by moral injury. Storytelling and good listening have been shown to have positive affects in healing. In order to be effective that people listen non-judgmentally. Fear of not being respected is avoided by this and people do not shut down as much if they feel they are not being judged.

Moral Injury Resources for Faith Communities

Here are some resources available to faith communities to help them assist veterans suffering from moral injury:

1. It is important for those who want to assist veterans with moral injury to become knowledgeable about moral injury, its symptoms and how to address it. There are several ways to get this knowledge:
 - a. The Arizona Coalition for Military Families (www.arizonacoalition.org) has created a Faith Based Network that a faith community can join to receive training not only on moral injury but also to help them understand the military culture and also help them serve their veterans in other ways. This network also connects faith communities to allow them to share their best practices in serving veterans.
 - b. There are a number of books that can give people insight on moral injury and ways to deal with it:
 - i. *God's Word for Warriors* by Tom Seals
 - ii. *War and the Soul* by Edward Tick
 - iii. *Nam Vet* by Chuck Dean
 - iv. *What Have We Done* by David Wood
 - v. *Soul Repair* by Dr Rita Brock
 - vi. *Killing from Inside Out* by Robert Meagher
2. The CRU organization has created materials and programs to help faith communities serve veterans (<https://www.cru.org/communities/military.html>). One of these that has been very successful is called the Combat Trauma Healing Program. This is a spiritually based support group program guided by the CRU Combat Trauma Healing Manual.
3. The American Bible Society has created resources to help serve veterans (See <http://www.armedservicesministry.com/>)
4. Military chaplains can be a good source of guidance for faith communities in helping veterans dealing with moral injury. Here is the link to the Military Chaplains Organization <https://www.mca-usa.org/about/>. Here is the link to contact them <https://www.mca-usa.org/contact-us/>. Locally, the Arizona National Guard has chaplains who would be happy to assist local faith communities.
5. Healing retreats for veterans can be helpful in dealing with moral injury. Here is a list of those available locally:
 - a. Healing of Memories for Veterans Workshop Retreat is conducted locally at the Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale, AZ and at the Spirit in the Desert Retreat Center in Carefree, AZ. Email to healingmemories@gmail.com for information

- b. St. Francis Journey of a Wounded Warrior and Beyond the Wounded Warrior Retreats are conducted at the Franciscan Renewal Center. For information email to casaveteransministry@gmail.com
- 6. Crosier Community of Phoenix – The Crosiers offer CrossWalk, a unique program that serves as a spiritual resource for veterans seeking healing from combat stress during military service. It opens the door to spiritual healing by helping veterans find lasting answers and peace in their civilian roles. Program participants meet monthly to share and support each other. As they follow Christ’s progression to Calvary and consider their own lives, the multigenerational group is encouraged to realize that they do not journey alone—Christ always accompanies them at every point along the way. Veterans capture the insights they gain from the journey with Christ on the Way of the Cross to create their own journal for use during Lent. For more information, please call 602-443-7115. www.crosier.org
- 7. Mission Continues Veteran Volunteer Organization – At the appropriate time in their healing journey, many veterans are helped by being able to volunteer to work with other veterans on community projects. This gives them not only sense of having provided service but also, they enjoy the comradery with other veterans. One organization that provides this opportunity is an organization called Mission Continues. They are organized in “platoons” with each one focusing on different types of community projects. Here is their website: <https://missioncontinues.org/>