

Moral Injury

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:16 (ESV)

As a veteran of both Vietnam and Iraq I can honestly say I never gave much thought to the fact that I might have had to kill someone. Fortunately, I never did. (This was before I became a member of a [Historic Peace Church](#)). While most military personnel are not in combative roles, our current prolonged wars and multiple deployments have created a large segment of a generation of men and women returning home with more than the expected physical and psychological injuries; many now suffer from a spiritual injury known as *Moral Injury*. The purpose of this article is to raise awareness of the problem of moral injury and explore resources for helping those victims. (read more)

What is Moral Injury?

We know or have heard of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in regard to combat veterans. *Moral Injury* is a fairly new classification of post-combat injury. Shira Maguen and Brett Litz, wrote a fine article, [Moral Injury in the Context of War](#) explaining this problem. And Clinical Psychology Review offers an insightful study, [Moral Injury and Moral Repair](#), by Brett T. Litz, et al.

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-based rules about fairness, the value of life, and so forth. The lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and

social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.

In the heat of combat soldiers are often forced to act to assure their survival, or the survival of others. Occasionally, those actions are contrary to the soldiers' fixed moral beliefs. leaving them in a moral quandary and with an unseen wound to their soul. A question that now haunts all persons of faith and compassion is: "What can we do to help those suffering with moral injury?" The answer defies simplistic platitudes. It demands a deep understanding of the complexity of this spiritual trauma.

Understanding

As in PTSD, what we often see in the Moral Injury victim are the outward symptoms -- drug abuse, acts of aggression, withdrawal, depression, and suicide. Too often the victim is often judged and condemned by those behaviors rather than recognized as suffering from a more formidable cause. The *Friends Journal* August, 2015 edition, "The Effects of War" is a commendable issue that exposes the devastating results of war to those sent to fight. Two articles in particular help us understand these two psychologically crippling war-related injuries. They are:

["What Is Moral Injury and Why Should Friends Care?"](#) by Kristen Richardson who offers the following queries:

- What are our feelings about war and militarism, pacifism, and those who serve in the military, especially in the era of an ~~all~~ volunteer army?
- Can we avoid being ~~triumphalist~~ about our antiwar or pacifist stance?
- Are we prepared to have a challenging and nuanced discussion among ourselves about the moral complexity of war and society's obligations?

- What would happen if a veteran appeared at our next meeting for worship? What might he or she experience? Does the physical environment of our meeting room meet the needs of some particularly vulnerable veterans? What might they think of the ministry typically offered on the issues of war and peace?
- Are we able to look for and recognize that of God in combatants?
- Those seeking clearness with a committee might ask themselves the following: Am I ready and able to put aside my own feelings about war and the military to listen deeply to the challenging experiences of veterans (and their families)? Am I open to being transformed by this experience and to letting go of some of my own certainty?

The other article is, [Supporting Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Victims: Lessons Learned from the Good Samaritan](#) by Jack Ciancio offers a detailed explanation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), including a brief explanation of the relationship between it and moral injury.

Proactive / Prevention

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. (Benjamin Franklin)

George Fox and the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) have a proven preventive measure for eliminating Moral Injury -- do not make war! This is expressed in their [Peace Testimony](#) "We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world." Unfortunately war goes on and as long as it does Moral Injury will be a result. So how do we deal with it?

Reactive

There are many resources available on treating moral injury, some of which follows at the end of this article. As stated before, there is no real preventive action that can be taken. There is perhaps a way of lessening the number of victims . Many young people enter the military with no thought that they may someday find themselves in situations that may require them to make choices that would cause them to set aside their personal morals. They must be indoctrinated to this fact when the recruitment process starts and it should be re-emphasized over and over again in the enlistment process and throughout their training.

Addition Resources:

[Religious Community Working Together to Combat. Moral Injury](#) is an excellent article written by an Army Chaplain for the Army's Website:

Apr 29, 2014 ... "Moral injury is that serious transgression that leads to a mortal conflict of the soul when one's experience is at odds with one's core ethical or moral beliefs," Waynick said in his presentation. "The transgression stands in opposition to the values of the soul and thus splits the self into a battle of competing parts which destroys a sense of wholeness and being. Soldiers have often reported 'my soul has fled.'" Caregivers including clergy have always helped service members manage moral injury as they continue to fight personal battles after returning ...

[The Department of Veterans Affairs](#) offers a comprehensive list of articles dealing with the various aspects of Moral Injury.

[Soul Repair: Recovery from Moral Injury After War: A Study Guide for Congregations](#) (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012) By Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, is a great tool to help congregations train their members on how to deal with moral injury.

Another useful resource from Brock and Littini is:

[Moral Injury and Soul Repair](#) -- Part 1: Definition and Causes, Part 2: Work of Soul Repair

[Insights Into Executive Morality and Toxic Organizations](#)

[Moral Injury in Veterans of War](#) - posted in PTSD Quarterly

[Moral Injury and Military Suicide](#)

God forgives all sin. The individual must learn to forgive themselves through God's grace.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9 (ESV)

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 2 Corinthians 12:9 (ESV)