

Ways to Help Military Veterans Heal from Moral Injury

Preview

This presentation will be in 3 parts:

1. Defining moral injury, and the role of killing in moral injury.
2. How post-traumatic stress and moral injury are often co-present in military veterans.
3. Several IVW (Interfaith Veterans' Workgroup) non-clinical activities found helpful for veterans with moral injury: meditation, hiking, writing, making art, photography and film making, community service.

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3 Learning Objectives for This Presentation:

1. In your own words define moral injury and describe two typical experiences that may cause moral injury in military veterans.
2. Explain how post-traumatic stress and moral injury often correlate with severe depression in military veterans.
3. Explain why "Thank you for your service" may not be the kindest and wisest greeting to honor a military veteran, and describe a better alternative.

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My dear brothers and sisters who are devoted to life saving, more specifically, to preventing military veterans from taking their own lives, thank you for paying attention to an ongoing suicide epidemic, for wanting to understand why more than 20 veterans kill themselves each day.

More than four times as many post 9-11 veterans have killed themselves than died in combat; and although the data for Vietnam veterans is somewhat sketchy because past suicides have not been well documented, the same might be said about them too: More have likely died by their own hands in the fifty plus years following the war than died during it.

The public considers warriors to be tough because they have endured rigorous training, and in some cases, terrifying duty. Many warriors see themselves that way too. When a warrior is discharged, he or she doesn't expect to encounter anything in civilian life quite so hard. I certainly felt that way coming home from Vietnam: I'd been through the worst that life could dish out, I thought. I could handle anything!

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After returning home in 1971 I had seemed all right. I had no flashbacks, no combat nightmares, and only a touch of hyper-vigilance. I was back in school, and doing just fine. But the war kept dragging on. Despite the fact that I myself had been out of harm's way for several years, a man whom I had come to regard as a brother, my counterpart officer, Nguyen Tuan, was not. When Saigon fell in April of 1975 I was wracked with guilt for having abandoned him.



Tuan and I, 1970

Logically that didn't make sense. It wasn't I personally who had abandoned Tuan. My country had. But it was I who knew him, and so I took the responsibility upon myself. Emotional distress may fail to follow the contours of logic. I started to have nightmares, not about battle, but about leaving Tuan behind. Was he dead, or in prison? I thought I would go crazy with remorse. Reluctant to see a shrink because of the stigma associated with mental illness, I went to see a fellow pastor instead. Presbyterians don't usually make confessions to a clergy person, but I thought it might unburden my conscience. I told Pastor David that I couldn't remember any specific things I felt guilty for except leaving Tuan behind. I just felt the deepest sadness and regret for having participated in the whole stinking mess. David spoke a prayer, I don't remember his words now, but he looked me in the eyes and said, "God has forgiven you already, Tom. Go in peace." An affirmation of pardon by another human being. What a simple remedy for an aching soul!

It worked, at least temporarily. My nightmares stopped. I called Camp Pendleton, where large numbers of Vietnamese refugees were arriving. After three weeks of searching intake records, they found Tuan. He and his wife and children, his mother and two brothers. They had all escaped out of Saigon on a reinforced concrete junk. The engine gave out and they drifted for two days without food or water in the South China Sea, and then were picked up by an American frigate and brought to the U.S. I learned all this later from Tuan. A Marine corporal put him on the phone. I wanted so much for him to know that I hadn't forgotten him. I offered to sponsor him and bring him to Pittsburgh.

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There was a pause on the other end. Then, “Where Pittsburgh?” he asked. I tried to explain, but he couldn’t picture the map. He was really interested in just one thing. “Snow there?” he asked. “Yes, sometimes,” I cheerily replied. “Thank you, Lieutenant,” he said, “I already get Lutheran sponsor in California.”

Would that all stories about moral injury could end so happily. The fact is that moral injuries sustained in war don’t go away. Combat veterans attest to that. What one did or failed to do while hunting and being hunted is done and cannot be undone. We cannot change the past. Some of us, in order to numb the pain, resort to booze or drugs, and then, of course, we just increase our suffering.

After I visited Tuan and his family in San Jose, I thought I had left the Vietnam blues behind. There was nothing but smooth sailing ahead, surely! I was wrong. I had just scratched the surface of the stinking mess I had confessed about. I had completely buried an incident of deeper moral injury, which surfaced as I was writing a memoir following my visit to the Mekong Delta as a tourist in 2012. As I look back on my life of 76 years, I see that 1970, the year I spent in that now mythic place, changed my life completely and irrevocably. I am still digesting the outcome, still peeling the onion, still living to atone. I can’t erase my past. I must just learn to live with scars, and do my best to shape a much different future.

I was asked to speak about moral injury. That’s something which has plagued warriors for millennia. Recently, owing to research with Vietnam veterans, we have a name for this affliction. **“Moral injury” is a deep wound to a warrior’s conscience on account of something he or she did or failed to do in the line of duty which violated a value which he or she held very dearly, for example, the sacredness of human life.** Moral injury usually relates to feeling personally responsible for a loss of life, either by commission or omission, such as inadvertently killing a civilian during a firefight, or failing to save a wounded comrade.

The Role of Killing in Moral Injury

Making war inherently involves the loss of life. The basic job of warriors is to kill the enemy. Most trainees receive at least rudimentary weapons training because the uncertainty of war may require them to perform that basic duty, even if their usual military assignments do not involve killing.

Not only military trainers, but indeed the whole culture of a military-industrial complex tries to desensitize trainees to killing. It’s a tough sell, persuading human beings to resist a natural inclination not to kill members of our own species. Video games condition young people to the thrill of killing enemies. Games depict them as demonic or sub-human. Drill instructors promote the dehumanization of enemies by labeling them slopes or gooks or rag-heads, and by calling any soldier who refuses to fall in line a coward.

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One day in the 'Nam I took a skiff upriver to get supplies from the Army depot, and there I saw a squad of South Korean marines in jungle camies. Each one wore a necklace of human ears, trophies of war resembling dried apricots. What makes a soldier collect ears? You may say that's beastly conduct. He's simply turned into a monster. He has left the human race! But what causes such conduct, I want to know. Is it fueled simply by adolescent machismo, the drive to be the toughest of the tough and boast about it? Is it to intimidate the enemy? Maybe a little of both? Let me suggest that such behavior is a self-protection against moral injury. I'll explain with a paragraph from my memoir:

Imagine that you have killed an enemy soldier. You rifle through his pockets, and you find there, bundled in a handkerchief, some rice, a photograph of a young girl, perhaps his sweetheart or his sister, and a carefully folded letter. This begins to remind you of the letter you have folded and carry always in your own pocket. Then quickly you slice off both his ears, to arrest the pull of strange compassion, which will make you—or so you fear—unable to make war efficiently anymore, and unable to make war efficiently anymore, you will surely die. Is it just anger and revenge that makes you slice off ears, or fear of feeling the pain of killing another being like yourself? Is wearing ear necklaces, or holding up the severed hand of an enemy corpse and smiling for the camera a twisted means of self-protection?

In his memoir, [*What It's Like to Go to War*](#), former Marine, Karl Marlantes, tells how he decided to discipline the men in his platoon who were desecrating corpses. He ordered them to bury the enemy whom they had killed. Two of his men, he writes, were crying before the job was finished. Those were the ones, I suggest, who were beginning to experience moral injury. There are many more steps of recovery after that, and they require considerable courage if one is to become a healthy human being. But crying in remorse for what one has done and who one has become, a beastly sort of person, is a first step.

Military training has pretty consistently sought to protect fighters from the moral wound that one may feel not just from inadvertently killing a civilian, but even from killing an enemy. One day in the 'Nam Marlantes was in a raging firefight on a steep hill. In a kind of maniacal rage he and several comrades charged up the slope and plopped down where they could find the slightest cover. He happened to plop down right below an enemy soldier, and the two of them chanced to rise up at the very same instant, looking at each other not much more than an arm length away. His adversary was a mere boy, and Marlantes had the immediate and stunning feeling that he mustn't kill him. But the boy raised his rifle to kill Marlantes, and Marlantes, a seasoned veteran, squeezed off his clip faster. The death of that boy haunted Marlantes. Soldiers are not supposed to feel morally culpable for killing an enemy. That may undermine their morale and keep them from being efficient killers; and that's their job after all, isn't it? The deep, deep pain of moral injury derives from a mixture of remorse and confusion. One feels profound shame for performing what a call of duty has required. After Marlantes's experience of moral injury for killing that enemy child he writes: Killing is wrong. And it may sometimes be necessary.

Here is another example of moral injury connected to the experience of killing an enemy. It is especially striking because the incident is related by a former German soldier, our enemy a generation ago. Look at U.S. propaganda posters of the time and you will notice that some depicted Germans as alien monsters. Does the following recounting dispel that stereotype?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XruYsAmKLyU>

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I hope I have adequately illustrated that moral injury involving shame for killing may relate not just to the inadvertent killing of civilians or failing to save lives, but even to killing enemies. Unless we come to grips with that realization, which undermines the myth that killing in war is always heroic and noble, we will not be ready to walk with war veterans who know otherwise; and we will likely be unable to keep many from killing themselves because their compatriots seem unable to understand what they have experienced, and they feel utterly alone in their grief.

Thus far I've covered point number one in this presentation: Defining moral injury, and the role of killing in moral injury.

Now we're ready to have a look at point number two:

How Moral injury and Post Traumatic Stress Are Often Co-present in Veterans With Severe Depression.

We need to examine how serving for lengthy periods in situations of extreme stress changes the bodies and brains of veterans. But before we do that we need to take note that the suicide rate among veterans who did not experience combat is actually higher than that of veterans who did. What's going on? What causes severe depression of veterans who did not serve in combat?

To be honest I don't know for sure, and I'm don't think anyone does yet, but I have a hunch after reviewing my own transition out of the military, and also, reading Johann Hari's book about what causes chronic anxiety and depression in a great many people. It's called [Lost Connections](#). Hari contends, contrary to the view that severe anxiety and depression are caused by biological factors, that they are brought on by lost connections in the ways we live. In other words, anxiety and depression are aspects of social dis-ease. They are temporary manifestations of lost connections which are essential to living healthily as social beings. For instance, the connection to a group of people who affirm us and support us and who expect from us affirmation and support in return; and also, connection to a strong purpose for living, one might say, connection to a mission. When a serviceman or servicewoman de-enlists, immediately these two connections are lost: the connection to a team of people who affirm and support and protect one another; and also, connection to a mission which gave one's daily life purpose. That purpose doesn't have to be grand or noble to satisfy a fundamental human need. It might simply be to pull through terrible hardship with one's buddies and survive. But for a precious time it gave one's life meaning. By contrast, civilian life may seem utterly meaningless, bland, unchallenging, indeed stultifying, and totally lacking in team commitment, perhaps even selfish. Lost connections would be my hunch for explaining the high suicide rate among veterans, even those who didn't experience combat.

Now, let's return to point number two: How moral injury and post traumatic stress are very often co-present among veterans with severe depression. We've examined moral

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injury. Let's now look at post traumatic stress. What causes post-traumatic stress and what are its symptoms?

In veterans returning from a theater of war it's manifest in symptoms like these: nightmares, insomnia, hyper-vigilance, explosive anger at the slightest provocation, inability to concentrate, hypertension, avoidance of situations that trigger intrusive thoughts and feelings.

All of these symptoms are related to the fact that the sympathetic nervous system, controlled by the hypothalamus at the back and bottom of the brain, is stuck in high alert. The sympathetic nervous system usually responds to fight or flight situations instantaneously, changing one's breathing rate to rapid and shallow, and secreting hormones to make one stronger than usual, and angry, in order to respond to an aggressor. This response happens automatically, and before one has time to think. Taking time to think would get one killed. When the fight or flight situation changes however, when the aggressor either has been killed or evaded, the sympathetic nervous system relaxes, and the bodily conditions which were altered dramatically return to normal. Breathing becomes slower, anger subsides, muscles relax.

I call the sympathetic nervous system our self-protective automatic pilot. The automatic pilot is not conscious, so if it is stuck in high alert it cannot be talked down. It must be tricked to relax, as it were. This is done by changing one's breathing. The body and mind have a reciprocal relationship. A change in one affects a change in the other. A veteran whose automatic pilot is stuck in overdrive doesn't know how make it come down. Often he or she uses drugs to numb the fear, anger, and hypervigilance that are symptoms of the automatic pilot being stuck in high gear. The best way to abate these symptoms, I'm convinced, is not to administer drugs, or try to relax a veteran with talk therapy, but rather, by training him or her to breathe slowly and deeply and rhythmically. Breath is the bridge between the conscious and unconscious mind. One can deliberately, and with practice, change one's breathing to simulate the pattern usually experienced in safe and calm situations.

Now, remember I said that the body and mind have a reciprocal relationship. So, when you use your breathing to change your bodily condition toward a calmer state, the mind changes too in the same direction. Over time and with practice a veteran with post-traumatic stress can diminish the mental and emotional symptoms which can lead to despair.

Treatments for Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress

Many treatments are being tried, some quite technical, involving the use of drugs, and others involving sophisticated psychological procedures. When the Interfaith Veterans Workgroup formed in 2015 we lacked such resources, so we first researched how other non-governmental groups across the country were helping veterans stay healthy. We rightly predicted that public service projects would help veterans recover some of that

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team spirit and sense of purpose I spoke of earlier. But, what could we do in addition without professional credentials?

We explored the talents of our members. As a person of faith I call such talents spiritual gifts. We had a writer among us, a very skilled poet, indeed one of Delaware's Twin Poets Laureate. He was suffering from post traumatic stress and moral injury from a combat tour in Iraq. Writing was helping him heal. So he became the captain of the IVW writers' team.

Another veteran was quite athletic, a tennis whiz, and a member of the Cherokee tribe. He was raised in the out of doors. He became our hiking leader. Hiking we learned, is good for the body and mind because it puts helpful stress on the body while calming the mind amidst the beauty of nature. Green growing things have a healing effect on the human psyche.

IVW has both civilian and veteran members. Why? Because one adjustment challenge of veterans in transition is to learn how to work alongside civilians. A civilian who was once married to a Vietnam veteran joined IVW and devoted her skills as a T'ai Chi instructor. You get the picture. We added programs as willing members put their unique talents, their spiritual gifts, to work, leading exploratory programs.

When we formed in 2015 we believed that veterans would heal best by working together on local public service projects. That would give our lives purpose and promote team spirit. However, we have performed just one such project. Several of our veterans provided the consultation and labor to paint the [Veterans Freedom Mural](#) on the side of the building at 901-903 Washington Street in Wilmington which now houses previously homeless veterans.

[IVW's present programs](#), led by either a veteran or a civilian, include:

- Hiking
- Writing
- Movement meditation: T'ai Chi Chih
- Other meditation methods usually done while seated:

SKY breathing (deep and slow breathing based on Hindu tradition. SKY is not a metaphor, but rather the abbreviation for Sudarshan Kriya, a type of yoga.)

Mindfulness Meditation (largely based on Buddhist tradition)

- Visual arts such as sketching, painting, and sculpting
- Photography and [filmmaking](#)
- Veteran to Veteran Hospice Patient Visitation

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Some members, according to their spiritual gifts, are individually devoted to forms of public service, such as [Habitat for Humanity](#) and volunteering for a pre-school educational program.

After a few years of launching and developing these programs I came upon a book which has helped me think about IVW's programmatic structure, namely, [The Deepest Well](#), by the Jamaican-American pediatrician, Nadine Burke Harris. She has been a leader in ACE research (Adverse Childhood Experiences). She writes that the best ways to help people heal from trauma, whether they be children or adults, is to encourage the essential activities that promote good health in human beings. They are:

1. Getting adequate nutrition. Easy on sugar and salt, plenty of fruits and vegetables. IVW member, Emily Moore, is an Associate Professor of Nutrition at Daytona College in Florida. She gives presentations via Zoom to IVW audiences.
2. Getting adequate sleep. Seven to eight hours a night is recommended. Establish a sleep schedule and stick to it.
3. Getting frequent exercise. Moderate exercise, don't overdo it. Hiking is IVW's way of addressing this need.
4. Meditating. Deep and slow breathing promotes a calm body and mind.
5. If and when you need it, getting professional mental health care.
6. Joining a group in which you find support and which gives meaning and purpose to your life. For many people a faith community serves this purpose. Partly because the military is interfaith, IVW is an interfaith organization. We encourage participation in a faith community and various activities that promote interfaith understanding and cooperation.

Finally,

An Addendum on the Importance of Meditation

Remember I mentioned that insomnia is a frequent symptom of post-traumatic stress. You may wonder how getting adequate sleep, can be achieved by a veteran with post-traumatic stress. My answer is threefold:

- a. Frequent exercise helps to make one relaxed and ready for rest.
- b. Sticking to a sleep schedule helps. Don't change your body's natural rhythm. Also, avoid caffeinated drinks.
- c. Meditate daily if at all possible, and frequently if not. Meditation can take two forms: Concentrating calmly on a particular subject; and also, using a breathing discipline to still the mind so profoundly that one is not thinking at all. One is aware of being aware, but there is no content to the awareness: no thoughts, no images, no nothing. Just awareness. You may believe this is not possible, but with practice it becomes possible. Developing the habit of reaching this level of consciousness has a very positive effect on one's physical and mental health. It

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lowers blood pressure, promotes concentration and creativity, helps one deal with anger, anxiety, depression. With a lot of practice it may even help one cope with chronic physical pain.

I never practiced this Eastern style of meditation before my work with IVW. However, I have been practicing SKY breathing daily for over three years now. I got trained by the [Welcome Home Troops Project](#). My blood pressure is now lower. I sleep better. I'm the iceman in heavy traffic. The movie, "[Almost Sunrise](#)", tells the story of two veterans with moral injury who tried to heal by walking across the country. This is a common tactic: Undergoing an ordeal to devote oneself to something difficult, and to get away from intrusive thoughts. They did get a little help by walking together and talking. But things didn't change too much in their minds until they discovered SKY breathing. Veterans call it "Power Breath." I have found that Eastern style of meditation to be a very practical and inexpensive treatment for both post traumatic stress and moral injury.

Recapitulating, we have defined moral injury and explored the role which the loss of lives plays in moral injury, even sometimes the killing of an enemy. Secondly, we have explored how moral injury and post traumatic stress symptoms are often co-present, and we have reviewed some practical and low-tech ways to treat moral injury and post-traumatic stress.

Bringing this presentation to a close, let me mention just a few things that are not helpful in an effort to heal veterans with moral injury:

1. Some researchers advise that a counselor reason with a veteran, pointing out that he or she was not really responsible personally for another person's death. While this may in fact be true, it may not be helpful, because as I said before, moral injury often does not follow the contours of logic. To put this another way, when a veteran is suffering from moral injury it's not so much his or her head that's hurts; it's his or her heart. The heart is the organ of the soul. One's very soul aches. And at least in the short term no amount of reasoning is likely going to relieve that pain. In fact, insisting that the sufferer need only think about what happened in a different way may even make the suffering worse, because it may leave the impression that the counselor is not perceiving what the sufferer does. I feel that we should not make judgments about logical warrants for moral injury symptoms, but rather, simply acknowledge the pain. Also, trying to discount a veteran's moral injury by showing how it isn't reasonable may be demonstrating one's own moral blindness. Perhaps the incident under review has provoked a moral insight in the veteran which is not acknowledged by the counselor because the counselor subconsciously is dealing with the anxiety of the possible erosion of his or her own way of perceiving rights and wrongs in the context of war. A paradigm may be in danger of falling. I suspect that military counselors may sometimes strive too hard to discount the validity of a veteran's moral reasoning

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because the counselor is intent on preserving confidence in Just War theory, or some other theoretical overlay.

In summary, when counseling a veteran with moral injury don't judge. Just listen and acknowledge the pain.

Finally, there's that kindly greeting offered to veterans with the best of intentions: "Thank you for your service!" Many veterans have heard that, and appreciate it as an expression of respect. But if a veteran is still grappling with moral injury he or she may be conflicted upon hearing it. The words are meant in a kindly way of course, but they may call to mind the dissonance between how the public views the service rendered, and how the veteran feels about what he or she did while serving, or what he or she failed to do. The veteran may not be proud of his or her service. So, in order not to presume how the veteran feels, it's perhaps better to say, "Welcome home!" And if you can take the time to linger and listen intently you might say, "What was it like for you over there?" And if the veteran is reluctant to respond you might say, "If you'd like to talk some other time about it, I'm available, and I'd really like to hear about your experience." Wow, that would be a refreshing surprise to a veteran who presumes that civilians cannot understand, and really don't want to understand, what veterans have gone through.

Enough said. I am leaving you with an annotated bibliography of books and films which I highly recommend for teaching about moral injury, and also that short list of ways to heal moral injury and post-traumatic stress in veterans which I covered previously. Thanks for listening!

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Rev. Tom Davis
Tcd123@gmail.com