Moral Injury - The Insidious Infliction of Veterans and First Responders

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What Does It Mean To Be Moral?

- **Definition of moral (Merriam-Webster)**
  - **1a:** of or relating to principles of right and wrong in behavior: ETHICAL moral judgments
  - **b:** expressing or teaching a conception of right behavior - a moral poem
  - **c:** conforming to a standard of right behavior - took a moral position on the issue though it cost him the nomination
  - **d:** sanctioned by or operative on one's conscience or ethical judgment - a moral obligation
  - **e:** capable of right and wrong action - a moral agent
So, Where Does The Disconnect Happen?

- Lieutenant Colonel S.L.A. Marshall
  - <25%  WWII
  - 60-70%  Korean War
  - 85-90%  Vietnam War

- “The combination of active and contemplative virtues is one of the most enduring themes in three thousand years of experience of what it means to be a man.”  --Waller Newell
What is Moral Injury?

- Moral Injury is the result of reflection on memories of war or other extreme traumatic conditions, where individuals transgressed on their basic moral identity and violated core moral beliefs.

- Moral Injury results when individuals violate their core moral beliefs, and in evaluating their behavior negatively, they feel they can no longer live in a reliable, meaningful world and can no longer be regarded as decent human beings.
What is Moral Injury? (cont.)

- Moral Injury can result from myriad situations:
  - Committing what is valued as an immoral act (or even preparing to do so)
  - Failing to act in a morally correct way due to cowardice or being ordered not to act
  - Failing to prevent others’ seriously immoral acts
  - Seeing and/or hearing about someone else violating core moral values
  - Failing to report knowledge of a sexual assault or rape committed against oneself, a fellow service member, or civilians
What is Moral Injury? (cont.)

- Feeling betrayed by persons in authority
- Giving orders in combat that result in the injury or death of a fellow service member or civilians
- Witnessing a friend get killed
- Survivor’s Guilt
- Handling human remains and...
Abandonment and Disillusionment of Mission

- Being removed from service due to injury
- Acting in Tribal ways
  - Acting in a tribal way simply means being willing to make a substantial sacrifice for your community – be that your neighborhood, your workplace, or your entire country.
Tribal Warriors

“Soldiers experience this tribal way of thinking at war, but when they come home they realize that the tribe they were actually fighting for wasn’t their country, it was their unit. It makes absolutely no sense to make sacrifices for a group that itself isn’t willing to make sacrifices for you. That is the position American soldiers have been in for the past decade and a half.”

-Sebastian Junger, Tribe
A Warrior’s Worry-

• Will I be able to stand up to combat when bullets begin to fly?
• Will I survive?
• Now that I have been through the Heart of Darkness, will I ever again be the person that I used to be like?
The Warrior Code

“There is an inherent contradiction between the warrior code, how these guys define themselves, what they expect of themselves – to be heroes, the selfless servants who fight for the rest of us – and the impossibility in war of ever living up to those ideals. It cannot be done. Not by anybody there. So, how do they forgive themselves, forgive others, for failing to live up to the ideals without abandoning the ideals?”

--William Nash, M.D, USMC (Ret.)
Genesis of Moral Injury:

“We all feel occasional guilt or shame for something we did, but war can require extreme actions that violate the very basis of moral identity. The life-or-death urgency of war forces untenable actions that can elicit profound guilt or shame. When we feel that what we did was wrong or unforgivable and that our lives and our meaning system no longer make sense, our reason for living is in tatters. This shattering of the soul challenges what holds life together and the anguish of moral injury begins.”

--Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock, Soul Repair
Consequences of Moral Injury

- Overwhelming Moral feelings of guilt, shame, despair, angst, remorse, anger, outrage, grief, disgust, worthlessness, demoralization, self-condemnation, and betrayal

- Feel as though they lost their soul and are no longer who they once were

- Abandon the values and beliefs that gave their lives meaning and guided their moral choices.

- Decide no one can be trusted and isolate themselves from others

- Take their own lives in order to eliminate the shame and guilt and despair:

  “Its torments to the soul can make death a mercy.”

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Moral Injury vs. Post Traumatic Stress

- Moral Injury is not the same as PTS. Some symptoms may overlap and look similar but there are very large differences and they are managed differently.
Moral Injury is Different than PTSD

PTSD

- “Startle” Reflex
- Memory Loss
- Fear
- Flashbacks
- Hypervigilance

Moral Injury

- Anger
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Insomnia
- Nightmares
- Self Medication
- Sorrow
- Grief
- Regret
- Shame
- Alienation

Intense Fear Reaction

Core Moral Beliefs Violated

Self Determination Theory

• George Washington Law Review
  ▫ Self-determination theory;
    • Human beings need three basic things in order to be content:
      • They need to feel competent at what they do,
      • they need to feel authentic in their lives; and
      • they need to feel connected to others.
  ▫ Veterans with Moral Injury oftentimes feel none of these very basic needs
How Do We “Cure” MI?

- The veteran must confront the moral issue head-on. Outward expressions of an intense inner struggle

- Must face the injury – “I realized that moral injury is not something I carry with me, like a backpack I can strap to my body and drop at anytime but something that shapes an important part of who I am as a human being.”

- Take accountability for his/her actions or non-actions

- Taking responsibility for the pain of war. Feelings of guilt, shame, meaninglessness, and alienation come from knowing that one transgressed one’s most deeply held beliefs and moral values, and therefore, one’s core sense of self.
How Do We “Cure” MI? (cont.)

- Veterans who struggle with moral injury are struggling to recover their lost sense of humanity, which one HAS to have in order to re-integrate into the human community.

- Must have relationships that are authentic...can share their “demons” and their “deeds”

- “This will be, first and foremost, a war waged within myself, one where my fears and doubts would come face-to-face with my conscience, a war to reclaim my humanity and my spiritual freedom.”

- Veterans let their conscience and their guilt battle for years...can feel it in their gut. Only way to stop it is to own the responsibility. “If I own it, I can disown it. The only way to truly unload your pack.”
How Do We “Cure” MI? (cont.)

- Healing proceeds by small stubborn steps forward that replace the battle camaraderie of soldiers with life-sustaining love.

- Jobs with meaning and worth

- The Arts, Equine Therapy, Yoga, Service K9, Holistic and Medicinal Modalities, talk therapy, religious dialogue, writing, discussion & talking circles, spiritual gatherings, and Making amends...letters of apology, acceptance, and understanding

- Developing a sense of **Life Purpose**, **Connectedness**, and **Service to Others** – The Mission Continues (Eric Greitens)
How Do We “Cure” MI? (cont.)

- Don’t FORGIVE too fast. Safe havens of parades, “thank yous”, and expressions of admiration. CAREFUL: these offer anesthesia for the pain and can create an addiction to relief, not reinforcing a need to tell horror stories, enact guilt, and solicit forgiveness

- Need to WANT to understand and listen carefully without judgment and without a personal agenda. It is not up to us to be their key to redemption. It’s not for us to forgive them but to help them find ways to forgive themselves and to let them know their lives mean something special to us and others.
Some Routes to Consider:

• “You sound sad/depressed/ashamed/etc.”

• “I seem to hear shame/guilt/remorse/despair/a sense of worthlessness in your words.”

• “What was your experience over there like?”
Some Routes to Consider (cont.):

• “Were you happy to come home or did you want to stay there? Why is that?”

• “Did you feel closer to the folks in your unit when you were there than you ever have to anyone else? What does that feel like?”

• “It sounds like there are a lot of things you are holding inside of your heart that hurt.”
Some Routes to Consider (cont.):

- “Did you ever have to do something over there that you didn’t want to do—maybe felt it was wrong? What happened? How did that make you feel?”

- “Did you ever see or hear of anyone doing things over there that went against the way you were raised or contradictory to your beliefs? What happened? How did that make you feel?”
Some Routes to Consider (cont.):

• “What was it like when you came home? How did people treat you?”

• “How does it feel when someone says, “Thank you for your service,”?”

• “Do you have any one you trust that you can talk to about your experiences over there or do you feel like you’re isolated and have no one to talk to?”

• Don’t say it’s, “OK”, because it’s not OK – that will just make him/her mad
Some Routes to Consider (cont.):

• “Do you feel that your life has more or less worth or value after you served in the war?”

• “Do you feel like you’re the same person now as before you went to war? Do you like who you are now? Why?”

• “Has anyone ever thanked you for the sacrifices you endured while in the military? What did that feel like?”
What About Us?
Final Statement:

“Remember that moral injury is not a disorder, but a normal human response to extremity and the disruptive impact on the human soul of violence and moral failure. Respect for veterans means we must be willing to listen and learn from them, to accept our responsibility for what they were asked to do on our behalf (whether or not we agreed with it) and to befriend them, rather than thinking that we are taking care of or saving them.”

--Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock
Questions, Comments, Concerns???

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