The Color of Tears: How Communities Can Care for Service Members with Moral Injuries

CH (COL) Douglas A. Etter
US Department of Veterans Affairs
United States Army
The views expressed in this presentation are those of the presenter and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Defense, the United States Army or the United States Government.
Presuppositions

• We see/understand through our own prisms
• Human beings have souls
• To be in combat is to change
• People genuinely want to help
• Faith communities possess unique skill sets, traditions, authority and connectedness
• Sometimes there can be an oxymoron of expression and practice
• Healing can be achieved
Moral Injury Definition

Harm caused by “perpetrating, failing to prevent, witnessing, or learning about actions that violate deeply held moral beliefs and expectations “


Phenomenon is considered by some to be “a signature wound of the wards in IZ and AF but with roots as old as war itself.”

(Masick, 2016, quoting Shay)
Other Definitions

• “Spiritual distress where damage is done to our relationship with God (the transcendent), self and others and alienates us from that which gives meaning to our lives.” (Berg, 1992)

• “Moral injury is present when (1) there has been a betrayal of what is morally correct; (2) by someone who holds legitimate authority or by one’s self; and (3) in a high-stakes situation. All three.” (Shay, 2014)

• “Disruption in an individual’s confidence and expectations about one’s own or others’ motivation or capacity to behave in a just and ethical manner, brought about by bearing witness to perceived immoral acts, failure to stop such actions, or perpetration of immoral acts, in particular acts that are inhuman, cruel, depraved, or violent, bringing about pain, suffering, or death of others.” (Drescher et al., 2011)

• Trauma characterized by guilt, existential crisis and loss of trust that may develop following a perceived moral violation. (Jinkerson, 2016)

• “Damage done to an individual’s core morality or moral worldview as a result of a stressful or traumatic life event.” (Yan, 2016)

• “MI is spiritual disequilibrium. It is the wound received when one’s belief system or expectations have been transgressed within a military context.” (Lee, 2017)
Moral transgression is subjective
Based on Veteran’s own moral standards, expectations, and interpretation
Are there dimensions of MI?
What are the differences if I am a witness or principle actor?
Signs and Symptoms

- Lack of forgiveness
- Anger: self, other, or God/higher power
- Deep demoralization/self-deprecation
- Reduced trust
- Relational/social difficulties
- Guilt/shame
- Loss of meaning/hope in life
- Loss or conflict of faith
- Belief that God is punishing them
- Fear of death
- No longer desire to live
- Question morality

They may say -

- I saw things that were morally wrong
- I am troubled by having witnessed other’s immoral acts
- I acted in ways that violated my own moral code
- I am troubled by having acted in a way or failing to do something I should have done
- I was betrayed by leaders in my chain of command that I once trusted
- Other – Balance the scales
Other Signs and Symptoms

- Self-loathing
- Self-condemning thoughts
- Self-harm
- Self-defeating behaviors
- Poor self-care
- Decreased empathy
- Preoccupation with internal distress
- Remorse
- Substance abuse
- Recklessness
- Hopelessness

(Litz, et al., 2009; Tangney, et al., 2007; Fisher & Exline, 2006)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PTSD</th>
<th>Moral Injury</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual’s role at time of event</td>
<td>Victim or witness</td>
<td>Perpetrator, victim or witness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predominant painful emotion</td>
<td>Fear, horror, helplessness</td>
<td>Guilt, shame, anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-experiencing?</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance or numbing?</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physiological arousal level?</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What necessity is lost?</td>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Potential Injurious Acts

- Acts of betrayal by peers, leaders, or self (Drescher et al., 2011, Jinkerson, 2016)
- Killing predictive of post-deployment suicidal thinking and desire for self-harm (Maguen et al., 2017)
- Disproportionate violence inflicted on others (Drescher et al., 2011, Jinkerson, 2016)
- Death or harm to civilians (Jinkerson, 2016 also cites Grossman, 2009; Maguen & Litz, 2012; Nash & Litz, 2013; Shay, 2003)
- Violence within military ranks (Jinkerson 2016)
- Exposure to body parts (McCarroll, Urgane & Fullerton, 1995)
- Inability to prevent death or suffering (Drescher, et al, 2011; Litz, et al., 2009; Nash & Litz, 2013; Stein, et al., 2012; Vargas et al., 2013)
Professional Treatment

- **Prolonged Exposure (PE)** - In PE one records the trauma story and listens to it daily. Views guilt as avoided and unexamined. Exposure increases context, details.

- **Adaptive Disclosure (AD)** – In AD the individual tells the trauma story once and processes it with the therapist.

- **Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)** - Focus on modifying dysfunctional thoughts, excessively negative appraisals, autobiographical memory, beliefs and expectations.

- **Spiritually-Oriented Cognitive Processing Therapy (SOCPT)** - Version of standard cognitive processing therapy for an individual service member but with an additional spiritual element.

- **Building Spiritual Strength (BSS)** - Spiritually-integrated model for treating PTSD designed to reach veterans who will not access conventional mental health services.
Healing Within the Community

- **WHO** – Communities of Faith, Veteran Service Organizations
- **WHAT** – Rebuilding:
  - ✓ Trust
  - ✓ Relationships
  - ✓ Self-Image
- **WHEN** – Veteran Centric Timetable
- **WHERE** – Sacred Space...or Not?
- **WHY** – To Offer an Opportunity of Healing
- **HOW** – Faith Traditions, Rituals, Small Groups
Recommendation: LALO

- Listen to the story:
  - Without judgment
  - Without moving quickly to relieve
- Accept the story:
  - Without agreement/affirmation of the guilt
  - Without disagreement/contradiction of the guilt
- Listen to discover:
  - Fact
  - Self imposed punishments
- Offer an Alternative:
  - Connection
  - Perception/percentage
Thank You