

Helping Veterans Suffering Moral Injury After War

By Rita Nakashima Brock and Herman
Keizer, Jr.

r.n.brock@tcu.edu and h.keizer@tcu.edu

1. Moral Injury--definition & causes
2. Recovery of Moral Identity After War
3. Importance of Congregations and
Communities in Soul Repair

1. Moral Injury

Definition and Causes

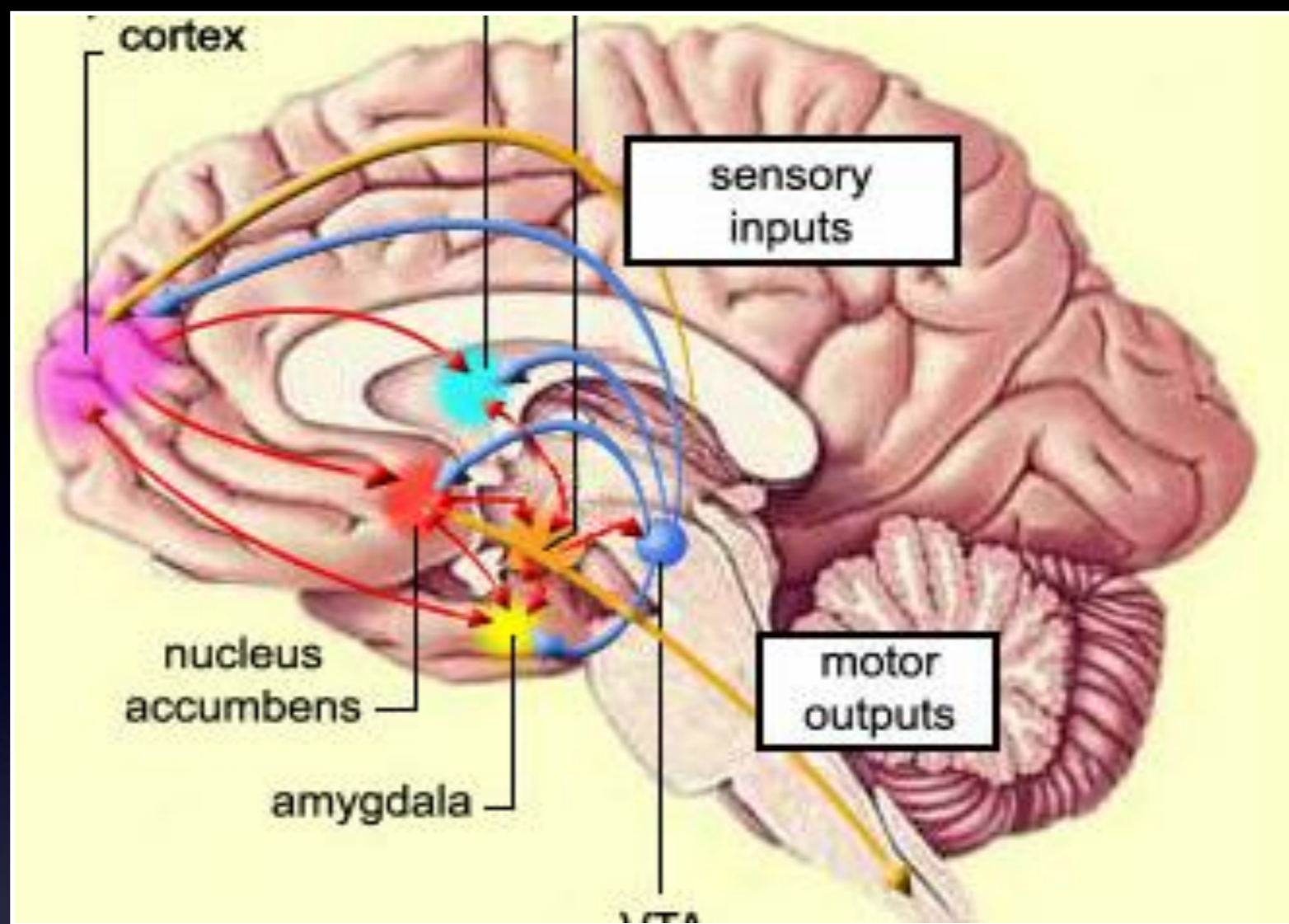
Moral Injury

An Ancient Wound of War with a New Construct

“Throughout history, warriors have been confronted with moral and ethical challenges and modern unconventional and guerrilla wars amplify these challenges.... [T]he lasting impact of morally injurious experience in war remains chiefly unaddressed.”

Moral Injury is disruption in an individual’s confidence and expectations about his or her own moral behavior or others’ capacity to behave in a just and ethical manner.

From “Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy,” B. T. Litz, N. Stein, E. Delaney, L. Lebowitz, W. P. Nash, C. Silva, and S. Maguen, (Dec. 2009) *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29, 695-706.



PTSD and Moral Injury

- PTSD is a fear-victim reaction to extreme conditions *that damage amygdala and hippocampus* (limbic brain)
- Moral Injury *requires a healthy prefrontal cortex* where empathy and moral thinking occur.

PTSD Can Result from Many Kinds of Exposure to Trauma

Has a consistent symptom profile for traumatic experiences:

- Nightmares

- Dissociative episodes

- Panic attacks

- Hypervigilance

- Lack of conscious memory or memory fragments

Aspects of Moral Injury Formation

- Participation in events that challenge core beliefs or have no clear moral choices, including violating moral codes of training in a closed system.
- Use of personal agency that violates core moral beliefs.
- Reflection on memories and extreme conditions of extremity
- Agony of inner judgment against oneself.
- Feelings of grief, anger, despair, guilt, shame, remorse, betrayal, contrition, depression, isolation, and loss of will to live.
- Collapse of moral identity and meaning system that supports it.

Disruption of Two Important Relationships

- PTSD disrupts relationship to world when it becomes unreliable
- Moral Injury disrupts relationship with self when inner moral core is doubted

Military Culture and Moral Injury

- Military culture fosters moral and ethical codes of conduct. In war, being violent and killing are normal. Troops expect and are prepared for violence and killing.
- Still, even prescribed killing or violence may have a lasting impact
- Most service members can assimilate what they see and do in war because they are trained for it.

Uniqueness of Combat as Traumatic Stressor

- Involves multiple events over an extended period of time (7-12 months) with multiple deployments
- Creates a tightly closed system, so actions considered immoral in other contexts are sanctioned and even celebrated (e.g. killing) within rules of engagement
- Requires abrupt transition from one closed system (combat) to a second open system (civilian) with little or no process or support for transition

Morally Disrupting Aspects of War

Reflexive Fire Training

Dehumanization of Enemy

Killing

Survivor Guilt

Grief

Encountering and Handling human remains--major factor

Participation in torture or atrocities

Betrayal by Authorities

Doubt (uncertainty about goals or mission)

Losses in Returning to Civilian Life

"War is the foyer to hell; coming home is hell."

--Tyler Boudreau, *Packing Inferno: The Unmaking of a Marine*

- Loss of closest friends; isolation
- Loss of unit and closed system
- Loss of role / identity / career
- Loss of home – relocate off base
- Financial losses – retirement – No job for returning reservists / National Guard
- Loss of family or capacity for intimacy– discord / divorce
- Loss of community of support – self /family
- Loss of faith and meaning
- Loss of reason to live

2. Recovery of Moral Identity After War

Individual/Social Dimensions of Recovery

- Writing personal narratives; externalizing inner struggle and telling story
- Integrating memory/story into larger picture
- Reconnection with estranged others; veteran support systems; community service
- Long-term support and accountability community

Moral Repair Process

From B.T. Litz, et. al.

- Dialogue with Benevolent Moral Authority
- Reparation and Forgiveness
- Fostering Reconnection
- Long-Term Planning

Dialogue with Benevolent Moral Authority

Important to practice deep,
nonjudgmental listening to experiences
that precipitated moral injury, and

- To offer benevolent understanding of moral struggle,
- To affirm core moral beliefs that emerge,
- To discuss how reparation might occur in the current context
- To offer support for self-forgiveness or forgiveness from others.

Reparation and Forgiveness

- Offer opportunities for service to others and ways to make a positive contribution to the lives of others.
- Accompany veterans in finding decency and goodness in working for others
- Model self-forgiveness and repair of harm—
process of making amends

Fostering Reconnection

Encourage discussions of current relationships

- Forming deeper connections
- Strategies for greater openness and sharing of vulnerability and struggle
- Personal coping strategies for inevitable stress and conflicts
- Reflection on broken relationships that can be repaired in some form

Long-Term Planning

- As making amends and self-forgiveness begin to take hold, encourage reflection on the future
- What would they like to see for themselves?
- Who will continue to matter to them and how can those relationships be supported and enhanced?
- What values, beliefs, communities, etc. will continue to sustain them moving forward?
- How will they cope with the challenges, setbacks, and revisiting of war experiences that will come?

3. Importance of Congregations and Communities in Soul Repair

Spiritual Recovery

- Lamentation for losses
- Forgiveness; amends
- Transformation; renewal
- Reconstruct moral core values and self-worth

Rituals of Loss

Liturgies for lamentation—dialogic in a monologic world; hold complex feelings; open doors to healing:

- Complaint against God
- Realization that conversation is with God
- Remembrance of divine love and faithfulness
- Restores God to soul

Support for Loss

- Amends
 - Ex. Disaster Relief, Refugee Work
 - Ex. Peace Missions
 - Ex. Neighborhood Service Projects
- Forgiveness and Discipleship
- Absolution (letting go and moving on)

Transformation and Renewal

- Rhythms of the liturgical year bring renewal
- Transformation via constant repetition of renewal
- Vicarious reliving of baptismal rebirth
- Sacramental structure of life
- Dramatic reenactment of sacred stories of redemption here and now

Reconstruction

- Recognition of existence of a moral order
- System of meaning where personal life fits
- Behavior and moral choices make sense
- Joining not withdrawing
- Participation in meaning-making in midst of moral ambiguity and difficult choices

Recommended Resources

Books:

Letters from a Fort Lewis Brig, Sgt. Kevin Benderman

Packing Inferno, Tyler Boudreau

Soul Repair, Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini

The Unfinished War, Walter Capps

Letters from Abu Ghraib, Joshua Casteel

On Killing, David Grossman

Shade It Black, Jess Goodell and John Hearn

What It Is Like to go to War, Karl Marlantes

Road from Ar Ramadhi, Camilo Mejia

Until Tuesday, Luis Carlos Montalvan

The Yellow Birds, Kevin Powers

Achilles in Vietnam, Jonathan Shay

The Untold War, Nancy Sherman

The Moral Treatment of Returning Warriors in Early and Modern Times, Bernard
Vercamp

Websites:

www.conscienceinwar.org

www.britesoulrepair.org

www.ivaw.org/operation-recovery

Films:

Soldiers of Conscience

The Ground Truth

The Invisible War

Lioness

Restrepo

Stop-Loss

Taxi to the Dark Side

Helping Veterans Suffering Moral Injury After War

Questions and Answers

For additional information on this topic
and to learn about upcoming events
please visit

www.britesoulrepair.org