

# Helping Veterans Suffering Moral Injury After War

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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

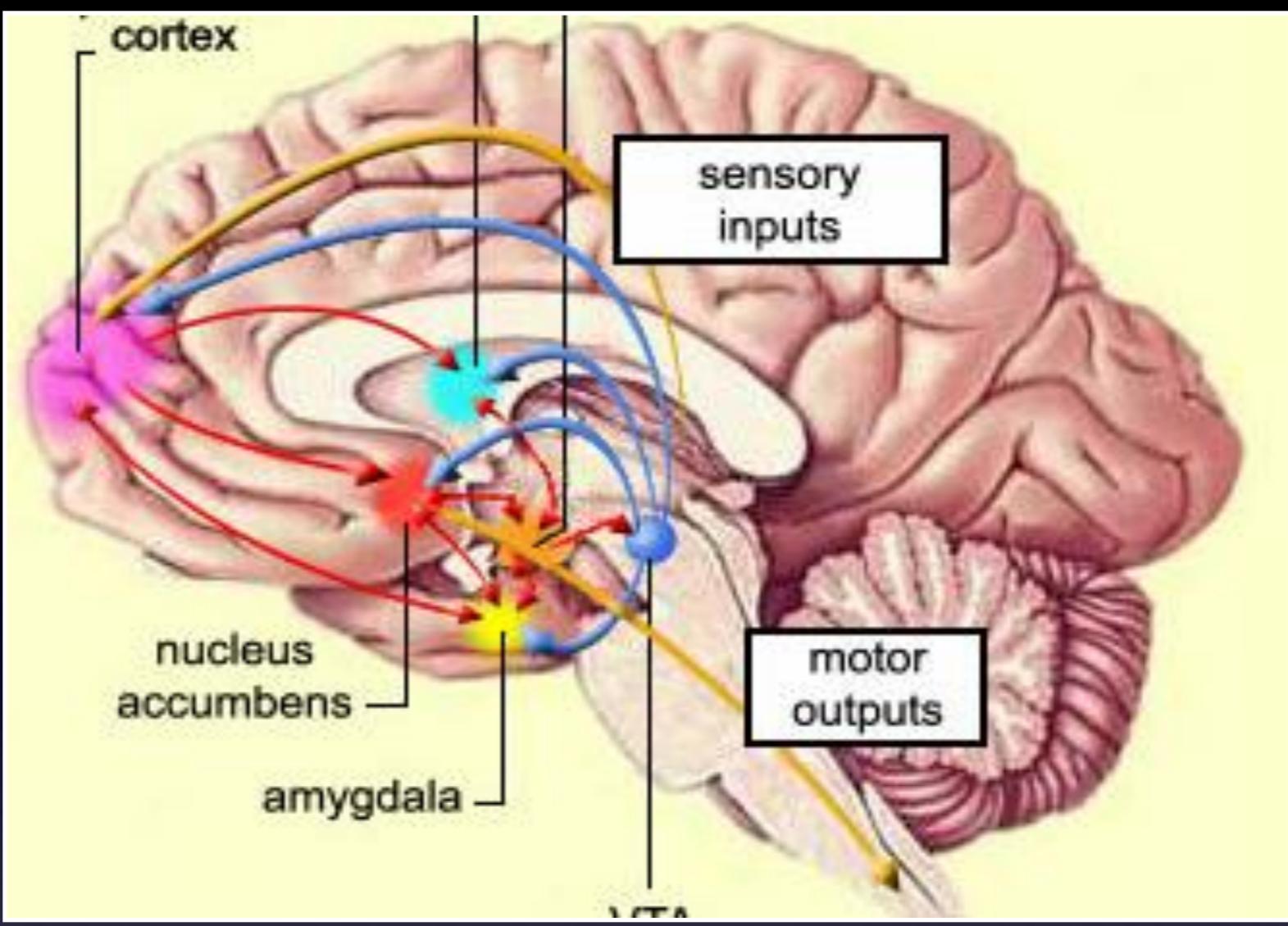
# Moral Injury

## 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 or 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 Ramadi*, 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](http://www.conscienceinwar.org)

[www.britesoulrepair.org](http://www.britesoulrepair.org)

[www.ivaw.org/operation-recovery](http://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](http://www.britesoulrepair.org)**