

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

March 13, 2018

“My guilt will never go away,” the former Marine said, sadly. “There is a significant portion of me that doesn’t believe it should be allowed to go away, that this pain is fair.”

Even though I was on active duty during Viet Nam and a Navy Chaplain during Desert Storm, I had never heard of the term, “moral injury” until my friend, Dr. Brian Miller, a VA Chaplain and therapist, allowed me to read his research on the topic two years ago.



We humans have been killing each other—and feeling badly about it afterward—since the fourth chapter of Genesis, but we don’t seem to feel sufficiently badly about it . . . to stop doing it. We’ve known about PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) for some decades, now. The term, “moral injury,” is attributed to Dr. Jonathan Shay, who coined it in 1991 while a clinical psychologist with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

PTSD is a widely-acknowledged condition that can be identified on an MRI.¹ PTSD is more fear-based and more physical than moral injury, and generally results from *seeing* or *being the victim* of something terrible. Moral injury is shame-based and guilt-based, and usually results from *doing* something terrible.

Some of the military situations that can result in moral injury include:

- using deadly force in combat and causing the harm or death of civilians, knowingly but without alternatives, or accidentally;
- giving orders in combat that result in the injury or death of a fellow servicemember;
- failing to provide medical aid to an injured civilian or servicemember;
- returning home from deployment and hearing of the executions of cooperating local nationals;
- failing to report knowledge of a sexual assault or rape committed against oneself, a fellow servicemember, or civilians;
- following orders that were illegal, immoral, and/or against the rules of engagement or the Geneva Convention;
- a change in belief about the necessity or justification for war, during or after one’s service.

Most soldiers go into battle believing that “We are the Good Guys.” Moral injury results from life experiences that drown that conviction in a pool—or pools—of blood. One Sergeant who carried out drone strikes for the Air Force said that “In killing people halfway around the world with drone strikes, I also struck a death blow to part of my own humanity.”

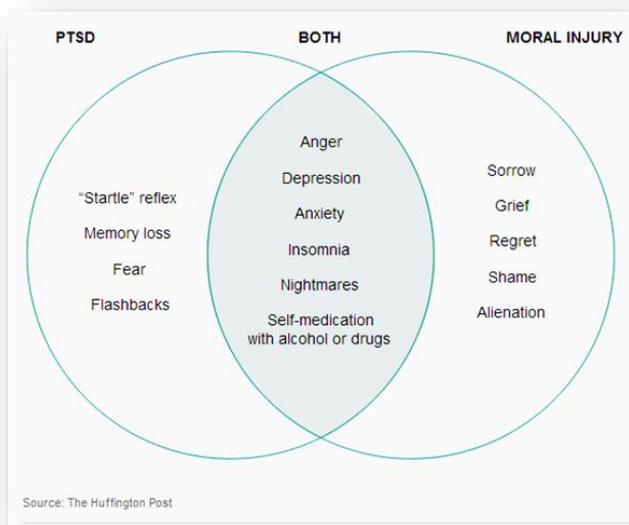
Suicide is never far from moral injury. **Twenty U.S. Veterans commit suicide EVERY DAY.** *Sixty-five percent of those suicides are persons older than 50 whose battles were in Korea or in Viet Nam.* When that drone Sergeant visited some of the villages where she had killed,

¹ PTSD and moral injury can—and do—occur in many sorts of life situations besides military combat.

some of the bereaved family members offered forgiveness, but she didn't ask for such forgiveness, noting that "What I did was unforgiveable."

Soldiers are trained with ideals that encourage black-and-white thinking: never leave anyone behind; bring everyone home; minimize collateral damage. But as missions get harder and conflict includes things like insurgency in civilian populations, one can't do all those things at once. One can't even do most of those things. So there are a lot of moral compromises that have to be made that soldiers may not have been prepared to make. A 2008 survey of soldiers deployed at the beginning of the conflict in Iraq found that nearly 30% of the soldiers encountered ethical situations in which they did not know how to respond.

But there are boundaries inside each of us that can't be crossed without a great price being paid. Though the term moral injury is fairly new, especially outside military circles, the idea is as old as war itself. When people sent into conflict find their sense of right and wrong tested, when they violate deeply held convictions by doing something (such as killing a civilian in error) or failing to do something (such as not reporting a war crime), they suffer an injury at the very core of their being.



Moral injury has to do with a soul in anguish, not with a psychological disorder. Most of us occasionally stray from what our moral code says is right, but military service – especially in combat – exposes soldiers to situations in which every available choice is morally fraught. One soldier who served in Afghanistan reported that he had shot and killed a child who was about to fire on his men. He knew he had made the "right" choice, but the responsibility for a child's death was still a heavy moral burden that troubled him every day.

A study published in 1991 identified combat-related guilt as the best predictor of suicide among the Vietnam veterans in the study. One man had shot and killed a woman

who was advancing toward his patrol and who did not heed his order to stop. She did indeed turn out to be wired with explosives, but the veteran ruminated about whether he could have stopped her by firing a warning shot or wounding her in the leg.

It has been reported that 32% of service members deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have been responsible for the death of an enemy, and 60% stated that they had witnessed women and children who were ill or wounded that they were unable to provide aid for. Another 20% reported being responsible for the death of a noncombatant.

Veterans report that no amount of training can prepare one's spirit for taking the life of another human being, and those who do kill in war are at far greater risk for PTSD or moral injury. Vietnam veterans who reported killing were twice as likely to report suicidal intention as those who did not.

Responses to moral injury include shame, guilt, anxiety, anger, alienation, withdrawal, substance abuse, and suicide. In addition to grave personal suffering, moral injury frequently leads to under- or unemployment, together with damaged or failed relationships with loved ones and friends.

The “soul repair” required for the healing of moral injury involves confession and forgiveness, together with rituals for reentering community (processes similar to Twelve-Step programs). The Good News of the Empty Tomb is that there is NO SIN for which forgiveness has not already been provided . . . but the faith community must treat such healing with the gravity it merits. If you know a combat veteran, reach out to them.

My friends, the price of endless war is beyond calculation. Our nation’s endless conflicts may have left our society—which seems unable to stop making war—as one of the casualties. And research has shown that the longer and more frequent deployments to which we have resorted tend to result in an increase in unethical behavior on the battlefield.

If America accepts the idea of fighting endless wars, we will have to come to grips with the fact that the costs of making war are also virtually without end. The trail of blood ends only at the Cross.

Dave

For further reading:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_injury

https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/co-occurring/moral_injury_at_war.asp

<http://moralinjuryproject.syr.edu/about-moral-injury/>

<https://www.stripes.com/opinion/why-distinguishing-a-moral-injury-from-ptsd-is-important-1.333520>

<https://theconversation.com/what-is-moral-injury-in-veterans-77669>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/07/healing-a-wounded-sense-of-morality/396770/>

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/haunted-by-their-decisions-in-war/2015/03/06/db1cc404-c129-11e4-9271-610273846239_story.html?utm_term=.0335977d89df

<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/05/whistleblowers-moral-injury-endless-war-iraq/>



Moral Injury Questionnaire (MIQ) – Military Version

Considering your active duty service during war zone deployment,
mark the box that indicates how frequently you experienced the following:

Response:	(1) Never	(2) Seldom	(3) Sometimes	(4) Often
1. Things I saw/experienced in the war left me feeling betrayed or let-down by military/political leaders.				
2. I did things in the war that betrayed my personal values.				
3. There were times in the war that I saw/engaged in revenge/ retribution for things that happened.				
4. I had an encounter(s) with the enemy that made him/her seem more “human” and made my job more difficult.				
5. I saw/was involved in violations of rules of engagement.				
6. I saw/was involved in the death(s) of an innocent in the war.				
7. I feel guilt over failing to save the life of someone in the war.				
8. I had to make decisions in the war at times when I didn’t know the right thing to do .				
9. I feel guilt for surviving when others didn’t.				
10. I saw/was involved in violence that was out of proportion to the event.				
11. I saw/was involved in the death(s) of children.				
12. I experienced tragic war zone events that were chaotic and beyond my control.				
13. I sometimes treated civilians more harshly than was necessary.				
14. I felt betrayed or let-down by trusted civilians during the war.				
15. I saw/was involved in a “friendly-fire” incident.				
16. I destroyed civilian property unnecessarily during the war.				
17. Seeing so much death has changed me.				
18. I made mistakes in the war zone that led to injury or death.				
19. I came to realize during the war that I enjoyed violence.				