Moral Injury in the Aftermath of Afghanistan

Wyatt R. Evans, PhD, ABPP

VA North Texas HCS, Plano, TX
UT Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas, TX
Private Practice, Dallas-Fort Worth, TX
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Moral Injury

• **Morally Injurious Events**: Perpetrating, failing to prevent, or witnessing actions (or inactions) that violate deeply held moral values (Drescher et al., 2011; Farnsworth et al., 2017; Litz et al., 2009; Shay, 2014).

• **Moral Pain**: Dysphoric moral emotions and cognitions (Farnsworth et al., 2017)
  - Guilt, shame, contempt, disgust, anger
  - Condemnation, judgment, denunciation, disapproval, blame

• **Moral Injury**: Biopsychosocial-spiritual suffering stemming from costly attempts to avoid or control moral pain (Farnsworth et al., 2017).
“Moral injury is a harrowing experience of failing to transition, readjust, and reintegrate in which one’s needs—to share stories, to sort through dissonances, to confess and lament, to practice rituals of grief, reconciliation, and renewal, and to learn new ways of thinking, feeling, working, and loving within the contexts presented by one’s life—are not adequately met by one’s social-relational worlds…”

Rev. Zachary Moon, PhD
# An Analog: Combat-related Posttraumatic Stress

**PTSD**
- B: Intrusive Thoughts/Emotions
- C: Avoidance
- D: Negative Thoughts/Mood
- E: Hyperarousal/Reactivity

**Contextual Adaptation**
- Contingency planning
- Reactivity to recognized cues
- Suppression of burdensome or impairing emotions/thoughts
- Restricted trust/bonding
- Narrow focus, interests, affect
- Vigilance
- Guardedness
- Reactivity
- Aggression
### An Analog: Combat-related Posttraumatic Stress

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Mapping Moral Injury

- Pre-military Moral Values
- Training & Indoctrination
- Military Life: Combat & Culture
- Reintegration: Suddenly Civilian
- Withdrawal & Fall: What was it all for?
Aftermath of Afghanistan

### Meaning Made...Unmade
- Shattered stories of the value, righteousness, and (moral) success of the war
- Confirmation/exacerbation of beliefs about wrongness, inconsequentiality, etc.

### Novel Moral Pain
- Contempt replaces content (or even pride)
- Shame arises from the ashes of a “failed” war

### Coping Skills Insufficient & Inflexible
- Intra-personal cognitive, emotional, behavioral strategies breakdown
- Narrow understanding of essential processes (i.e., forgiveness)

### Social Support Shortfall
- Disconnection from military community
- Civilians “don’t get it” or “don’t care”
- No space to grieve or lament
Personal, Professional, & Systemic Outcomes

Depression
Anxiety
PTSD
Alcohol/Drug Abuse
Suicide
Relationship Issues
Parenting Issues
Religious/Spiritual Struggles

Burnout*
Compassion fatigue
Disengagement
Poor performance
Disinclination toward promotion (to leadership)

Recruitment & Retention
Morale
Cohesion
Productivity
Absenteeism
Increased spending
Moral Healing
Professional Care

- **Prolonged Exposure** (Evans et al., 2021; Held et al., 2017; Rauch et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2013)
- **Cognitive Processing Therapy** (Held et al., 2017; Koenig et al., 2017; Wachen et al., 2020)
- **Adaptive Disclosure** (Gray et al., 2012; Litz et al., 2016; Litz et al., 2021)
- **Impact of Killing** (Burkman et al., 2021; Maguen et al., 2017)
- **Acceptance & Commitment Therapy** (Borges, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Farnsworth et al., 2017)
- **Spiritual & Pastoral Care** (Harris et al., 2011; Kopacz et al., 2017)
- **Integrated Care** (Antal et al., 2019; Cenkner et al., 2020; Smigelsky et al., 2020)
- **Trauma Informed Guilt Reduction** (Capone et al., 2020)
Family & Friends

- Awareness
- Knowledge
- Skills
- Compassion
- Forgiveness
- Psychological, social, and spiritual support
Community Connection & Care

- Faith communities
- Veteran support groups
- Social events
- Volunteering
DoD Policy, Procedures, & Practices

- The military invests a great deal of money, personnel, and time into training recruits but only provides a fraction of such resources to reentry and reintegration (Moon, 2019).

- Revise resilience training programs that foster context sensitivity, values awareness, and flexibility in action (Evans et al., under review).

- Accelerate the culture change around behavioral health, psychological suffering, and help seeking.

- Prioritize social connection, support networking, and community during the separation phase.
• Humans are deeply connected, social, and even compassionate. For as long as humans harm one another, moral pain will remain.

• For as long as the dominant culture remains one of emotional avoidance, moral injury will remain. Avoidance of moral pain will continue to disconnect us from our values and from each other.

• 90% of the psychosocial-spiritual weight of war cannot fall on less than 10% of the population. Those who have not served in the military must lament, grieve, show compassion, and grant forgiveness in community with those who have served.
Resources

Addressing Moral Injury in Clinical Practice
Edited by Joseph Currier, Kent Drescher, Jason Nieuwsma

The Moral Injury Workbook: Acceptance & Commitment Therapy Skills for Moving Beyond Shame, Anger & Trauma to Reclaim Your Values
By Wyatt R. Evans, Ph.D., Robyn D. Walser, Ph.D., Kent D. Drescher, Ph.D., Jacob K. Farnsworth, Ph.D.

Warriors Between Worlds: Moral Injury and Identities in Crisis
By Zachary Moon
Foreword by Kent D. Drescher
Questions!

Answers?

WyattREvans@gmail.com