

Moral Injury: The Spirit's Unseen Wound

Veterans speak of losing their innocence and longing to regain it. They ask: "Why can't I just go back to the way I was?"

Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*¹



Cynthia Geppert

is Editor-in-Chief, Professor and Director of Ethics Education at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine in Albuquerque.

Correspondence:

Cynthia Geppert
(fedprac@mdedge.com)

Fed Pract. 2023;40(8).
Published online August 16.
doi:10.12788/fp.0405

On July 17, 2023, several media outlets covering military and federal news carried a story about the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) plan to conduct a major survey of moral injury in veterans.² This is not the first such survey: There have been numerous previous studies conducted by both VA and non-VA investigators.³ Moral injury has been increasingly recognized as the signature wound of service members, especially those who fought in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.⁴ This new VA survey can provide crucial information because we know so little about moral injury or how to help those with the condition.

At the time of this writing, there has been no official VA public statement about the study. At face value, this seemed to be strange, given that the groundbreaking research could improve the diagnosis and therapy of moral injury. According to a June 2023 VA Office of Research and Development internal announcement, the primary goal of the study is to determine the prevalence of moral injury among US veterans. The secondary goals of the study are to (1) compare those who develop moral injury and those who do not after exposure to similar traumas; and (2) conduct interviews about thoughts and experiences from 20 veterans who identify as having moral injury and 20 who do not but who have similar exposure to morally injurious events.

Data for the study will be collected through an extensive online survey from a nationally representative sample of 3000 post-9/11 war veterans. The sample will include at least 950 who served in a war zone and at least 400 who are aged 18 to 54 years. The respondents will be paid \$20 for the 30 to 45 minutes survey. The collection and analysis of data are expected to take 3 or more years.

The modern version of moral injury is often associated with Jonathan Shay, MD, a

VA psychiatrist.⁵ Shay wrote about the origin of moral injury found in Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and how the poems offer ancient echoes of his therapy with modern-day combat veterans.¹

There is no universal agreement on the definition of moral injury. A working definition of moral injury used in the VA suggests that it describes the difficulties that people face after doing high-stakes actions that violate a sense of what is right and just or after being forced to experience others' immoral actions.⁶

Two conditions are necessary for moral injury to occur. First, an individual acts or witnesses an action that contravenes their core ethical principles. Secondly, that occurrence is experienced as a breach of the person's moral barrier. Military personnel killing civilians to protect their lives and those of their fellow troops is a tragic example of moral injury. The translation of this for health care professionals may be the inability to save severely wounded service members in the combat theater due to the exigencies of war.⁷

Experts in moral injury emphasize the importance of distinguishing the phenomenon from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Unlike many psychiatric disorders, both moral injury and PTSD have known etiologies: traumatic events. An individual may have 1 or both conditions, and each can manifest anger, guilt, shame, and loss of trust in others. One way that moral injury can be distinguished from PTSD is that it goes beyond the psychological to compromise the moral and often spiritual beliefs and values of the individual. One of the characteristics that makes us human is that we have a conscience to guide us in navigating the moral field of human life, but moral injury scrambles the internal compass that discerns right and wrong, good and bad. When an individual commits an action or witnesses the perpetration of an action that

crosses their personal moral boundary, their integrity is shattered, and they may lose faith in their intrinsic worth. These beliefs prevent many service members from disclosing their distress, leading some commentators to refer to moral injury as a silent or invisible wound.⁸

The timing of the VA's launching of a study of moral injury of this size and scope may reflect 3 recent developments: Not unexpected in VA matters, one is political, another is benefits, and the last pertains to health care.

First, August marks the second anniversary of the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. Many Afghans who assisted US forces during the war were not evacuated. For some of the troops who served in the country, these events as well as the chaotic end to the long war were experienced as a contravening of an ethical code, resulting in moral injury.⁹

Second, many of those service members are now calling on the federal government to recognize and respond to the detrimental impact of the withdrawal, including the high prevalence of moral injury in troops who served in Afghanistan.¹⁰ Moral injury at this time is not considered a psychiatric diagnosis; hence, not eligible for VA benefits. However, many of the psychological manifestations of moral injury, such as depression and anxiety, are established service-connected disorders.

Third, several VA studies have demonstrated that moral injury either alone or combined with PTSD substantially elevates the risk of suicide.¹¹ Since preventing suicide is a major strategic priority for the VA, the importance of learning more about the epidemiology of moral injury is the necessary first step to developing therapeutic approaches. At a time when organized medicine is becoming increasingly technological and fragmented, launching this unprecedented survey demonstrates the VA's commitment to delivering holistic and humanistic care of the service member: body, mind, and spirit.

This project also sends a strong message to those who lobby for shifting funding from the VA to community care or call for privatization. Veterans are different: They experience unique disorders borne of the battles they fought

for our freedom. The VA has the specialized knowledge and skills in research and health care to develop the knowledge to ground innovative treatments for conditions like moral injury, PTSD, and traumatic brain injuries. VA chaplains and mental health professionals have pioneered assessment instruments and promising therapies for moral injury. Their distinctive expertise unrivaled in the civilian sector benefits not only veterans but also the wider community where there is a growing awareness of the devastating impact of moral injury, particularly on health care professionals.¹² And there may have been no other time in history when this broken, violent world was more in need of moral healing and peace.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of *Federal Practitioner*, Frontline Medical Communications Inc., the US Government, or any of its agencies.

References

1. Shay J. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*. Simon & Schuster; 1994.
2. Seck HH. VA lays groundwork for first major survey of moral injury in Veterans. *Military Times*. Accessed July 24, 2023. <https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2023/07/17/va-lays-groundwork-for-first-major-survey-of-moral-injury-in-veterans>
3. US Department of Veterans Affairs, MIRECC/CoE. Moral injury bibliography. Updated July 28, 2022. Accessed July 26, 2023. <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/vsn17/moralinjury/bibliography.asp>
4. National Public Radio. Moral injury is the 'signature wound' of today's veterans. <https://www.npr.org/2014/11/11/363288341/moral-injury-is-the-signature-wound-of-today-s-veterans>
5. Shay J. Moral injury. *Psychoanalytic Psychol*. 2014;31(2):182-191. doi:10.1037/a0036090
6. US Department of Veterans Affairs. Moral injury. Accessed July 24, 2023. <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/vsn17/moralinjury.asp>
7. Norman SB, Maguen S. Moral injury. Accessed July 24, 2023. https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral_injury.asp
8. Svoboda E. Moral injury is an invisible epidemic that affects millions of Americans. *Scientific American*. Accessed July 24, 2023. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/moral-injury-is-an-invisible-epidemic-that-affects-millions>
9. Lawrence JP. Diagnoses of moral injury are a growing part of Afghanistan legacy for U.S. personnel. *Stars and Stripes*. Accessed July 24, 2023. https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle_east/2022-08-12/moral-injury-afghanistan-6862738.html
10. Kheel R. Vet group asks Biden to recognize moral injuries caused by Afghan's war. Accessed July 24, 2023. <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2022/08/30/vets-group-asks-biden-recognize-moral-injuries-caused-afghan-wars-end.html>
11. Nichter B, Norman SB, Maguen S, Piertrzak RH. Moral injury and suicidal behavior among U.S. combat veterans: results from the 2019-2020 National Health and Resilience in Veterans study. *Depress Anxiety*. 2021;38(6):606-614. doi:10.1002/da.23145
12. Dean W, Talbot S, Dean A. Reframing clinician distress: moral injury not burnout. *Fed Pract*. 2019;36(9):400-402.