

# Addressing Moral Injury Among Military Veterans

by Amy Blumenshine, DM, Coming Home Collaborative

Recent headlines of shocking crimes committed by veterans and a recent psychological study highlight the need for pastoral care providers to update their skills in helping veterans recover from moral injury.

Studies, such as the Stanford University Prison Guard Simulations, have documented that acting out on sadistic or vengeful impulses is an occupational hazard of ordering people to use force on others. The *Clinical Psychology Review* journal article, “Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy,” reviews studies of veterans who have incurred moral injury as part of their military experience. According to the article, moral injury can happen when a person acts in ways “that transgress deeply held beliefs, witness that in others or witness intense human suffering and cruelty.” In common parlance, we can talk of deforming or corrupting one’s moral compass.

As the *Review* article states, people can recover from moral injury. There is treatment. Church leaders may be interested to know that both the psychological profession and the military tend to relegate moral issues to faith communities. The Coming Home Collaborative seeks to provide a forum for pastoral care providers to learn from each other to become better prepared for this effort. Indeed one of the church’s core mandates is to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation.

The *Review* article recommends that would-be interveners should first de-sensitize themselves by learning some of the horrific accounts of what our troops encounter. Unfortunately, too often helpers give subtle nonverbal signs that they prefer not to hear shocking stories, and veterans obligingly keep silent.

Some examples of stories heard from veterans and their families include:

- Out of fear of ambush, many military convoys act as “king of road.” They are instructed to run over anyone who is in their way. In an effort to cope with this horrific experience, some troops joke about “road kill.” Some remain haunted by the experience of the bumps of running over bodies.
- A local service member risked his life to protect traffic on roads in Afghanistan. He knows that many of the trucks were transporting opium which is destined to bring destruction, possibly even to his hometown.
- Another local service member had the relatively low mortal danger task of guarding Iraqis while they



executed other Iraqis. The hangings were “poorly done,” resulting in regularly watching people being tortured to death. That was his job.

As one aunt said in commenting on the corruption of character of her veteran returned from war: “My nephew was made to do things no one should have to do and to see things no one should have to see.”

Another excellent resource to prepare pastoral care providers in understanding what happens to some troops is the award-winning radio documentary, “What Killed Sgt. Gray?” It is available in podcast and text at <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/vets/>.

Access the *Review* journal article through your favorite library or link on the synod Web site ([www.mpls-synod.org/programs/vets](http://www.mpls-synod.org/programs/vets)). Also recommended is the book, *Welcome Them Home – Help Them Heal: Pastoral care and ministry with service members returning from war*, which also can be accessed via the Minneapolis Area Synod Web site.

We of the Coming Home Collaborative know of many stories of recovery from moral injury. Many veterans can recall crimes they thought about committing in the time surrounding their military service. Today they are so thankful they did not act on those thoughts even though the crimes seemed appropriate to them at the time. It can be very difficult for people to keep their moral compass under military pressures.

Who else is better equipped than the faith community to help people returned from war have the corrective experiences necessary to heal their moral injuries?

*Bibliography information: “Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy” by Brett T. Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William P. Nash, Caroline Silva and Shira Maguen was recently published in Clinical Psychology Review 29 (2009) 695–706.*