

Spiritual Injuries of War

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Why discuss spiritual issues?

- Spirituality is an area of disconnect between health providers and patients – an under researched area
- A growing body of evidence indicates that trauma exposure and spirituality interact
 - Trauma affects spirituality in both positive and negative ways
 - Spirituality may affect recovery from trauma
- We are only beginning to examine psychological/spiritual interventions that address these issues



Disclaimers

- Little research to date has addressed spiritual trauma among active-duty soldiers

Patient Differences by Era

- Vietnam
 - military cohort
 - **relatively homogenous**
 - **enlisted and drafted**
 - average age 18-22
 - not married
 - no children
 - no career developed
 - adolescents— early stages of development
 - typically one tour (12-13 months)
 - communications via phone, mail
- OIF / OEF
 - not homogenous--- heterogeneous
 - Active duty
 - Reservists/Guard-
 - **joined for variety of reasons**
 - **likely did not expect to be deployed**
 - wide age range: 18-60+
 - married
 - parenting/grandparenting
 - job/career
 - financial responsibilities (e.g. mortgage, family)
 - instant communication



Unique Features of OIF/OEF

- Personnel characteristics
 - Age / gender diversity, demographic
- Context of service
 - All volunteers, extensive use of Reserve/National Guard, experience levels may be higher
- Officers vs. enlisted differences
- Repeated deployments / uncertain duration
 - Particular hardship on families / careers / finances



Unique Features of OIF/OEF

- Concerns about differences in post-deployment support / health-care coverage
- Homecoming experiences may differ from Vietnam
- Trauma Exposure – less direct combat more IED / suicide bombs
- Personnel once considered non-combatants have higher trauma exposure

OIF / OEF Patients

- Polytrauma injuries from medical to psychological, including a significant number of blast injuries





Clergy & Mental Health

- 4 of 10 individuals with mental health problems seek counseling from clergy. This is greater than the number that seek help from mental health providers.
- Mental health providers tend to differ from their patients in spirituality
 - 93% of general population “believe in God”, while only 40-45% of psychologists / psychiatrists.
 - Few mental health providers receive training in how to address spirituality with clients



Key Definitions - Spirituality

- Spirituality

- *an individual's understanding of, experience with, and connection to that which transcends the self*
- Connecting to **something outside myself**
 - God, Higher Power, Nature, Family, Friends

- Inward and Outward focus

- Inward reflection – improving self-esteem, enhancing motivation, commitment to change
- Outward – increasing healthy social network and sense of meaning, purpose and value



Key Definitions - Forgiveness

- Forgiveness
 - *“process of letting go of negative thoughts, feelings, and reactions toward the offender (and often toward oneself), as well as seeking to gain a more compassionate understanding of the offender.”*
 - (Thorsen, Luskin, & Harris, 1998)
- IS:
 - A choice / my opportunity to transform my suffering
 - a process – not overnight
- IS NOT:
 - same as forgetting
 - condoning wrong
 - reconciliation



Key Definitions - Meaning

- Meaning at it's most basic is the story we tell ourselves and others about our sensory experience
- Meaning = perception + interpretation
 - Both are subject to distortion – especially during trauma
- We choose our meaning
 - “The last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way” Victor Frankl
- Meaning through being meaningful
 - Service and involvement in the lives of others as a source of meaning



Hostility vs. Forgiveness

- Often we think of forgiveness as having to do with specific wrongdoing. We are trying to present it as an attitude, a way of living
- **Hostility** – an attitude involving harsh judgment, expecting the worst, and being closed to new experiences
- **Forgiveness** – welcoming attitude, withholds judgment, looks for the best, and is open to new experiences



Spiritual Injuries of War

- Who Am I now vs. who I was before?
 - Some Warriors may question do I love myself?
 - Do I like myself?



Spiritual Injuries of War

Patient could exhibit or express notable feelings

- Spiritual injury or pain
- Guilt
- Grief
- Confusion
- Fear/Anxiety
- Resentment/Anger
- Shame
- Humiliation
- Hopelessness
- Loneliness/Isolation
- Needs for Reconciliation
- Loss of meaning (despair)
- Struggles with peace about self and others



Spiritual Injuries of War

- Veteran quotes of Spiritual Injuries:
 - “I was totally alone”
 - “I was not myself”
 - “I saw myself dead”
 - “I lost my innocence, sanity and faith”
 - “Time stopped”
 - “Did I die there?”
 - “I became mean and cold”
 - “I was afraid”
 - “I never talked about it”
 - “I reject religion”
 - “Nothing prepared me”



Wounded Healers

- Disturbing Questions
 - Why?
 - Who Am I?
 - What Am I doing here?
- Decisions and actions



Evidence for relationship between trauma & spirituality

- Studies support relationship between these issues across several trauma types
 - Warzone trauma
 - Domestic violence
 - Death of a child
 - Sexual abuse / assault
 - Traumatic medical procedures

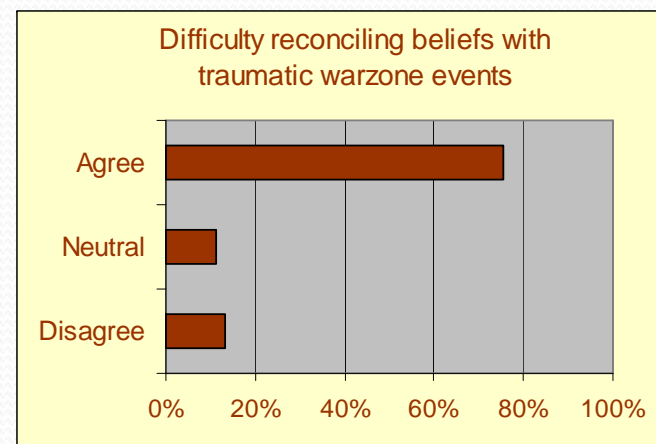


Evidence for trauma leading to increased resiliency

- Trauma leading to positive changes including increased spirituality
 - Post-traumatic growth studies
 - Medical studies

Evidence trauma may lead to negative/ harmful aspects of spirituality

- Loss of faith in the warzone
- Difficulty reconciling faith with warzone experiences





Aspects of spirituality associated with worse PTSD / Depression

- Witvliet, C. V. O., Phillips, K. A., Feldman, M. E., & Beckham, J. C. (2004). Posttraumatic mental and physical health correlates of forgiveness and religious coping in military veterans. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 17*(3), 269-273.
 - Lack of forgiveness, and religious coping (- positive / + negative) are related to more severe PTSD and depression in outpatient veterans treated for PTSD



Aspects of spirituality associated with worse PTSD / Depression

- NCPTSD Data
- Drescher, K.D. Ramirez, G., Romesser, J., Rosen, C. S., Foy, D.W. (Unpublished manuscript). Spirituality in veterans with PTSD: Comparison with a national representative sample
 - N=923 males (269 PTSD, 654 General population (GSS))
 - PTSD group strong differences on spirituality measures after controlling for demographic differences and hopelessness
 - Within PTSD group **lack of forgiveness**, is associated with worse **PTSD severity**, and **worse depression**. Negative religious coping associated with worse depression.



Aspects of spirituality associated with increased service utilization

- Fontana, A., & Rosenheck, R. (2004). Trauma, change in strength of religious faith, and mental health service use among veterans treated for PTSD. *J Nerv Ment Dis*, 192(9), 579-584.
 - N=1,385 (554 – outpatient, 831 – inpatient) treated in specialized PTSD programs
 - Veterans' warzone experiences (killing, losing friend) **weakened their religious faith**, both directly and as mediated by **feelings of guilt**.
 - **Weakened religious faith and guilt** each **contributed independently to more extensive current use of VA mental health services**.



Evidence for unhealthy spirituality

- View of God as wrathful & punitive
 - Linked to increased substance use
 - Gorsuch, R. L. (1995). Religious aspects of substance abuse and recovery. *Journal of Social Issues*, 51(2), 65-83.
- Anger at God & God is punishing me
 - Associated with poorer health outcomes
 - Pargamant, K. L., & Brandt, C. R. (1998). Religion and Coping. In H. G. Koenig (Ed.), *Handbook of religion and mental health* (pp. 112-128). San Diego, CA.: Academic Press.



How Could Spirituality Help?

Possible Healing Pathways

- McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman (1993) Religion's role in adjustment to a negative life event: coping with the loss of a child. *J Pers Soc Psychol*
 - Spirituality may improve health / well-being through:
 - Supportive healthy social network
 - Cognitive processing – new ways of thinking
 - Making meaning from the event



What are the chief obstacles for a soldier seeking treatment for PTSD?

- Asking for help is counter intuitive for a soldier
- Former Senator Max Cleland (D., Ga.) lost his legs and one arm in the Vietnam War
- More than 30 years later , he returned to Walter Reed to be treated for PTSD
- Has a new book called, “Heart of a Patriot” – he urges American soldiers to seek help when they need it



What can the military do to help?

- When we send young Americans to war, we have to be responsible for them in every way. That means counseling.
- If we keep sending soldiers back on their 4th or 5th tours, there **is no time to heal** or for introspection



What do you want veterans to know?

- You may never get over the war in which you served, but **do not give up hope**
- The scars will be there, but a freshness of life will begin to emerge.



Spiritual Injuries of War

- The problem of evil:
 - What I have done or not done ?
 - How do I make sense of the evil?



Spiritual Injuries of War

- Warriors may not feel comfortable talking about these Spiritual Injuries
 - Families
 - Clergy
 - Congregations



Spiritual Injuries of War

- When despair increases to a significant level there is greater risk for:
 - Substance Abuse and Dependence
 - Marital and Family Conflict
 - Estrangement and Isolation from friend and family
 - Estrangement and Isolation from Faith Communities and God
 - Greater potential for physical violence against self/others
 - Greater potential for Suicidal or Homicidal ideation



Spiritual Injuries of War

- What are ways to repair Spiritual Injuries? What type of intervention is needed?
 - The need for forgiveness of self and others
 - Atonement for what one has done during combat
 - Commitment to reparations regarding behavior, especially violent behavior during combat



Spiritual Injuries of War

- Specific Intervention Available
 - Prayer/Contemplative Prayer/Fellowship Groups
 - Worship Services
 - Exercise (aerobic – 3 times per week)
 - Spiritual Journalism
 - Spiritual Confession with someone who will hold you accountable
 - Acts of Penance, what you can do to make the situation better



Spiritual Injuries of War

- Body Movement Interventions
 - Tai Chi
 - Qui Gong
 - Yoga
 - Mindfulness meditation
 - Reparations work (Habitat for Humanity, Volunteer at homeless shelter)



Spiritual Injuries of War

- Communal Healing
 - Going with a group of other Veterans (i.e. returning to Vietnam/OIF/OEF)
 - Joining a group of Veterans and doing a service project (i.e. helping an orphanage)
 - Become a part of a Spiritual Support Group for Veterans/ Soldiers
 - Become a part of a Peer Support Group



Spiritual Injuries of War

- Veterans Spiritual Coping Skills:
 - I was preserved for another purpose
 - Prayer and the prayers of others
 - Pursued a deeper spirituality
 - I had a sense of God's protection
 - I went to chapel
 - I met a chaplain
 - I started thinking for myself
 - I expanded my faith
 - I talked to other veterans



Spiritual Injuries of War

- **QUESTIONS**