

Moral Injury and Recovery Strategies:

A Unit in Group Module: *Ways Veterans Process the Stress of Military Service*

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Readings:

Boudreau, Tyler, "The Morally Injured," *Massachusetts Review*, July 2010.

<http://www.massreview.org/sites/default/files/Boudreau.pdf> and Testimony for the Truth Commission on Conscience in War, March 21, 2010, Riverside Church, New York City, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5uaMwZVhwQ>.

In his 2008 memoir *Packing Inferno: The Unmaking of a Marine*, Boudreau chronicles his twelve years in the Marine Corps, four of them as enlisted and eight as an officer, a career that he was compelled to end at the rank of Captain after a deployment to Iraq. His final assignment was as a casualty officer, which involved calling parents or spouses if their Marine was wounded. His struggle to return home from his deployment and write his memoir is described in his Truth Commission testimony. In the essay, Boudreau notes differences between earlier generations of veterans and his generation as they struggle to describe the traumas of war. He insists that moral injury—the collapse of one’s moral foundations because of what one did, witnessed, or failed to do—is not a clinical or psychological disorder, but a normal response to war. He insists that respect for those harmed, the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, must be acknowledged for moral injury to be authentic.

Casteel, Joshua, "To Love One’s Enemies," excerpt from the 2008 documentary, "Soldiers of Conscience," Gary Weimberg, Director, Luna Productions, Berkeley, CA, <http://lunaproductions.com/to-love-ones-enemies-joshua-casteel/>.

During the two months that his Conscientious Objector status request was being processed, Joshua Casteel guarded a toxic materials burn dump because he was removed from his assignment as an interrogator at Abu Ghraib. After his service, he enrolled in the Iowa Writer’s Workshop and became a playwright. In August 2012, he died after a year-long battle with lung cancer. The VA is now examining the elevated cancer rates of those who guarded toxic burn sites.

Litz, Brett T., et al., "[Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy.](#)" *Clinical Psychology Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 243-250.

This essay was the first to distinguish moral injury from PTSD and to suggest it may be a greater factor in poor veteran mental health than post traumatic stress. It offers a definition for moral injury and a provisional protocol for treatment using "adaptive disclosure" conversations that include a conversation with a "benevolent moral authority."

Mejia, Camilo E., "Healing Moral Injury: A Lifelong Journey," *Fellowship of Reconciliation*, Winter, 2010, <http://web.archive.org/web/20160420012701/http://forusa.org/fellowship/2011/winter/healing-moral-injury/11606> and "Killing Changes You," excerpt from the 2008 documentary, "Soldiers of Conscience," Gary Weimberg, Director, Luna Productions, Berkeley, CA, <http://lunaproductions.com/camilo-mejia-killing-changes-you-a-soldiers-of-conscience-vignette/>.

After deploying to Iraq, Mejia, an immigrant from Nicaragua, went AWOL rather than redeploy and spent eight months in military prison, a story he tells in his memoir, *Road From ar Ramadi: The Private Rebellion of Staff Sergeant Camilo Mejia*, New York: The New Press, 2007. In this essay, he reflects on his delayed awareness of moral injury as the lingering struggle with his war service. He draws a clear distinction between his PTSD diagnosis and his understanding of moral injury. In the process of learning to accept ways he violated his moral conscience, he explains why he decides he would not be a moral person if he ever felt OK about killing another human being.

Yandell, Michael, "Testimony about Moral Injury," Oct. 14, 2014, Midland, TX. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ex_2pS6Ekkk, with background story about Yandell's service in Iraq by C. J. Chivers, "The Secret Casualties of Iraq's Abandoned Chemical Weapons," New York Times, Oct. 14, 2014: A1, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/10/14/world/middleeast/us-casualties-of-iraq-chemical-weapons.html?_r=0.

Yandell, M. Div., who enlisted at 17 and trained as an ordinance disposal specialist (EOD), reflects on his understanding of moral injury a decade after he became one of only two military service members to survive exposure to sarin gas in Iraq. Chivers' front page NYT story exposed the Pentagon secret about hundreds of American troops injured by chemical weapons left behind by Saddam Hussein. An ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Yandell is pursuing a doctorate in theology and ethics at Emory University. A short excerpt of his testimony was published January 3, 2015, in the *Christian Century*.

Discussion Questions:

In considering answers to these questions, it is important to keep in mind that the current symptom profile for PTSD is based on a fear reaction to threat. Moral injury is characterized, however, by negative moral emotions, such as guilt, shame, remorse, despair, outrage, self-condemnation, and loss of meaning.

1. As you reflect on the definitions and discussions of moral injury in Boudreau, Litz, Mejia, and Yandell, what common elements do you find? What tensions or differences? Is moral injury a disorder or normal response of moral conscience to extremity and moral ambiguity? Is moral injury an individual problem or a responsibility shared by a society that sends its military to war?
2. Moral injury currently has no formal diagnosis in the psychiatric manual, the DSM-5, (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed.) used to validate payments for treatment, whereas PTSD does. Do you think it should have one? Why or why not, based on the readings and videos?
3. Based on these materials, how does recovery from moral injury happen, and what is the role of society in relation to veterans with moral injury? What uses are there for a psychiatric treatment model for moral injury?