



Moral Injury

SHAUNA FULLER, PH.D. | CHRISTINA HOVE, PH.D.
VETERANS AFFAIRS HEALTH CENTERS
APRIL, 2026

“In the end, war does not transform men into heroes nor monsters, but amplifies the human condition – in all its ugliness, ambiguity, and beauty.”

“The only truth of war is no one is left untouched.”

Sebastian J. Bae served six years in the Marine Corps infantry, leaving as a Sergeant.

Heroes & Monsters: War's moral injury

Today we'll cover:

What is moral injury?

How moral injury differs from PTSD

Treatment approaches and challenges

Case Vignette: Moral Injury in a Combat Veteran

Background

- ▶ 46-year-old Veteran, three deployments (2005–2010), Infantry
- ▶ Early life included instability, abuse, and involvement in gang activity
- ▶ Entered military through plea deal; found early service reparative and meaningful

Traumatic Experiences

- ▶ Childhood trauma
- ▶ Military losses and morally injurious events
- ▶ These experiences disrupted earlier feelings of repair and belonging

Case Vignette: Moral Injury in a Combat Veteran

Clinical History

- ▶ Longstanding mental health treatment during service
- ▶ Diagnoses included PTSD with psychotic features and Alcohol Use Disorder
- ▶ DUI in 2007 led to mandated program to remain active on base

Presentation

- ▶ Longstanding mental health treatment during service
- ▶ Diagnoses included PTSD with psychotic features and Alcohol Use Disorder
- ▶ DUI in 2007 led to mandated program to remain active on base

Early Definitions of Moral Injury

- ▶ A betrayal of what's right; By someone who hold legitimate authority (leader); In a high stakes situation (Shay).
- ▶ “A deep sense of transgression including feelings of shame, grief, meaninglessness, and remorse from having violated core moral beliefs”
- ▶ The “who” of the violator has expanded to include not just the powerholder but the self.
- ▶ Psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations (Litz).

Huffington Post – Moral Injury

- ▶ A warrior's moral dilemma....I'm a good person, and yet I've done bad things.
- ▶ A sense that their fundamental understanding of right and wrong has been violated, and the grief, numbness or guilt that often ensues.
- ▶ Rooted in moral and ethical ambiguities of war

Source: David Woods



Changes to Military Training

World War II:

- ▶ Of every 100 men along the firing line only 15 to 20 “would take any part with their weapons.”
- ▶ Followed-up with thousands of interviews with soldiers in more than 400 infantry companies to determine why with consistent results

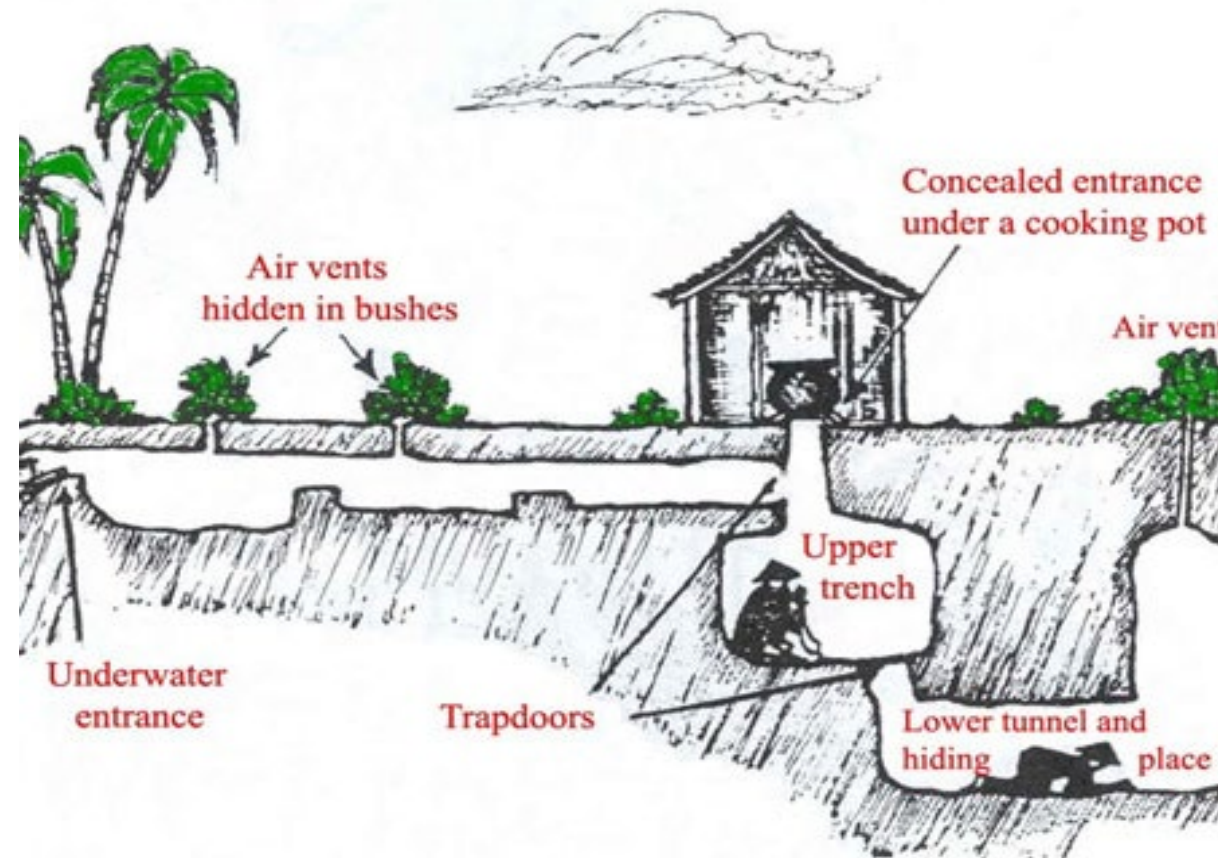
Vietnam:

- ▶ Nonfiring rate went from 80-85% in WWII to about 5% in Vietnam
- ▶ This shift resulted from 3 foundational alterations to training: desensitization, conditioning, and denial defense mechanisms



Contextual Dynamics that Contribute to Moral Wounding

- ▶ Civilian threats
- ▶ Ambiguity of the enemy
- ▶ Guerrilla and urban warfare
- ▶ Multiple deployments – cumulative anger about losses, sacrifices and adversities
- ▶ Witnessing vs. perpetrating
- ▶ Reflexive Fire Training – shooting without thinking
- ▶ Rage, elation, or vengeance killing
- ▶ Doubt about goals or mission



	Psychological Trauma	Moral Injury
Precipitating Event	Threat of death or injury	Act that violates deeply held moral beliefs and/or values
Individual's Role at Time of Event	Witness or victim	Perpetrator, witness, or victim
Predominant Painful Emotions	Fear, horror, helplessness	Guilt, shame, anger
What is lost?	Safety	Trust



Albright, Currier, and Hemmer, "Post-Service Identity: The Role of Moral Injury on the Military to Civilian Transition," CIMVHR Annual Forum, 2016.

Differentiating Trauma from Moral Injury

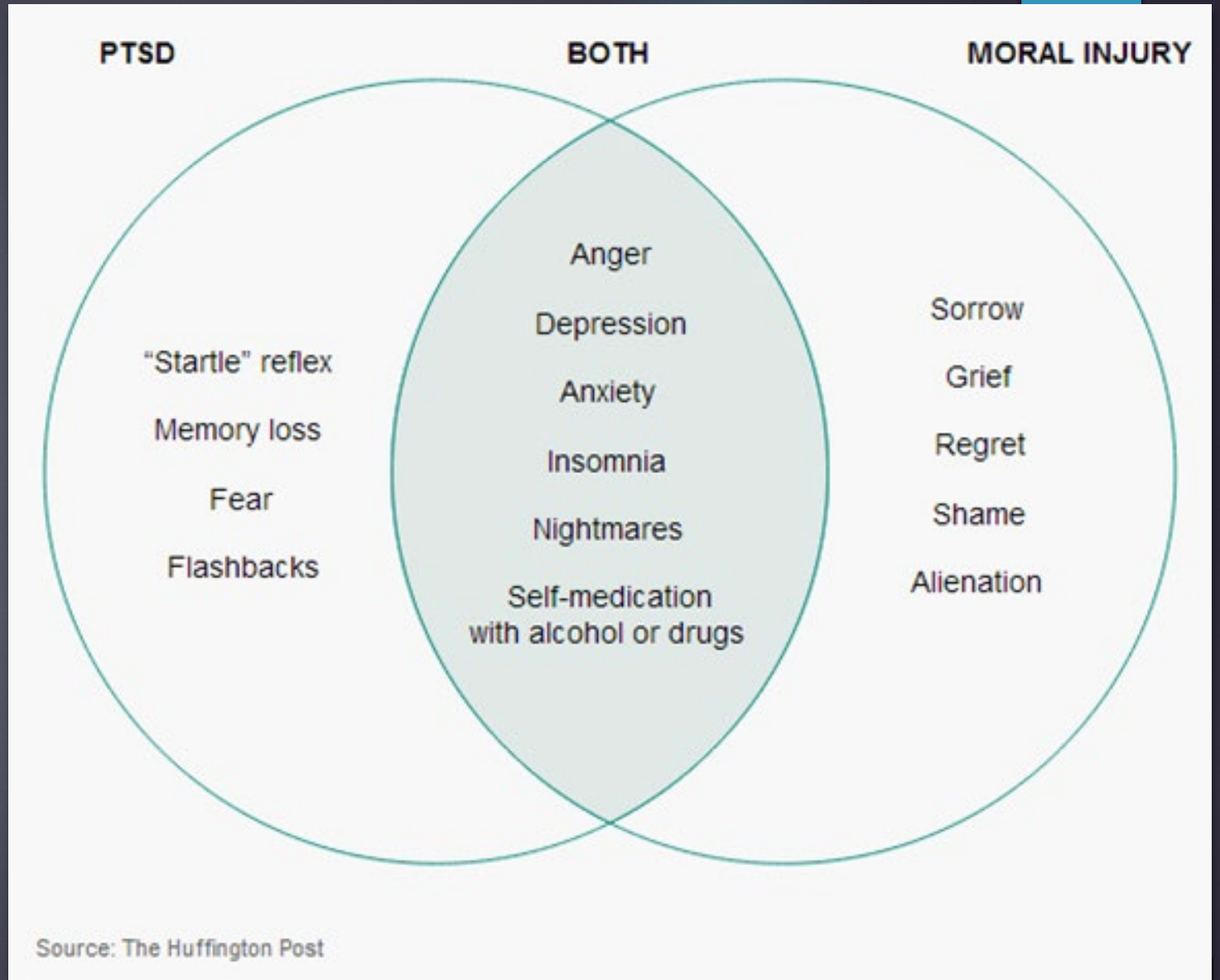
Distinct Manifestations

- ▶ **PTSD** is a fear response to extreme conditions often resulting in damage to amygdala and hippocampus
 - ▶ Terror-related symptoms
 - ▶ Thinking cortex loses tissue and weakens
 - ▶ Fear compromises memory processing – memories are scattered/disorganized
 - ▶ Present is often hijacked by traumatic memories
- ▶ **Moral Injury** is a reaction of one's conscience
 - ▶ Disruption in confidence in self about one's own moral behaviors or the capacity of others to behavior in ethical ways
 - ▶ Agony of inner judgment of self



PTSD vs Moral Injury

“Once the symptoms of PTSD are relieved, the moral questions emerge.”



Emotions Involved in Moral Injury



- ▶ Embarrassment
- ▶ Guilt—guilt for being afraid, survivor guilt, sense of being punished
- ▶ Failure— unable to save friend, complete mission
- ▶ Shame—comprehensive self-condemnation, isolating, self-loathing
- ▶ Alienation—hiding inner self, feeling unworthy of love or fearing that others will judge, feeling divided within oneself
- ▶ Humiliation—when shame is made public
- ▶ Remorse—regret and urge to make amends
- ▶ Grief—inability to process massive losses, can present as anger
- ▶ Despair—no way to become decent self again, depression

Treatment Considerations

PTSD

- ▶ Why might clinicians be inclined to tackle this first?
- ▶ Clinical feel?



Moral Injury

- ▶ Clinical feel?
- ▶ Challenges?
 - ▶ Veteran-specific (defense structure/projection)
 - ▶ Clinician-specific (countertransference)
 - ▶ System-specific

Treatment Considerations: Veteran Specific

Veterans *want* to explore moral injury

▶ Theme 1

- ▶ Moral injury is often not identified during therapy or discussed enough.

▶ Theme 2

- ▶ Therapeutic relationships can promote or inhibit discussion of moral injury

▶ Theme 3

- ▶ Short-term treatment has limited impact on moral injury

▶ Theme 4

- ▶ It's difficult to cope even after short-term treatment

Moral Repair

“We don’t try to dispute, minimize or explain away a morally questionable action. We try to help the person understand that this action or inaction need not be destiny.”

-Matt J. Gray, psychologist

- ▶ Writing personal narratives; externalizing inner struggle and telling story to others
- ▶ Revealing in presence of another human being
- ▶ Veteran support systems; finding community
- ▶ Reconnection with estranged others
- ▶ Rehumanization of enemies
- ▶ Companions for Support and Conversation
- ▶ Integrating memory/story into larger picture
- ▶ Long-term accountability community
- ▶ Reparation and Forgiveness
- ▶ Fostering Reconnection

References

- Borges, L. M., Bahraini, N. H., Holliman, B. D., Gissen, M. R., Lawson, W. C. Barnes, S. M. (2019). Veterans' perspectives on discussing moral injury in the context of evidence-based psychotherapies for PTSD and other VA treatment. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 76*(3), 377-391.
- Griffin, J. et, al. (2019). Moral Injury: An Integrative Review
- Grossman, D. (2009). On killing. The psychological cost of learning to kill in war and society. Back Bay Books, NY.
- Litz, B. T. et, al. (2009). Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: a preliminary model and intervention strategy. *Clinical Psychological Review, 29*, 695-706.
- Shay, J. (1992). Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character. New York, NY: Scribner.
- Shay, J. (2014). Moral injury. *Psychoanalytic Psychology, 31*, 182–191.