The Importance of Spirituality in Healing Returning Warriors/Veterans

“Caring for Our Returning Combat Veterans”

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Objectives:

- Provide an understanding of returning Service members spiritual despair, and recognition of spiritual questions.
- Gain knowledge of key issues that can affect the spiritual health of a returning warrior/Veteran and their family.
- Examine the spiritual reactions to trauma.
Defining Abbreviations

- **OEF/OIF** = Operation Enduring Freedom/ Operation Iraqi Freedom (Conflicts in Afghanistan & Iraq)
- **WIA** = Wounded In Action
- **IED** = Improvised Explosive Devise
- **WTU** = Warrior Transition Unit
- **TBI** = Traumatic Brain Injury
- **PTSD** = Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
- **GWOT** = Global War on Terror
Basic Overview

- Military produces highly trained men and women.
- These individuals had HUGE responsibilities while deployed and return to no jobs or relatively trivial responsibilities in comparison.
- Service members are our family members, neighbors, religious congregation members, friends, co-workers, patients. Thousands upon thousands have served in the military.
- **All** who have served come home changed. For a few individuals these changes can be debilitating and life-altering.
Challenges in Returning Home

A returning soldier is not the person he or she was before leaving home for war.

The return home is disorienting and can represent an absence of social community.

This feeling is upsetting for friends and family who awaited the soldier’s return.

The enormity of the experience shatters the individual’s basic sense of safety.

Even the most well-adjusted will re-experience a total lack of safety when triggered.
Spiritual Reactions to Trauma

1. Confusion about God
2. Altered sense of meaning in/of life
3. Grief and loss issues
4. Questions of Theodicy
5. Feelings of ineffectiveness, shame, despair, hopelessness

6. Feeling permanently damaged

7. Loss of previously sustained beliefs

8. Feelings of guilt

9. Confusion about core ethical beliefs.
What is Spirituality?

Spirituality can be defined as the essence of our humanity.

Frankl
Spirituality

Spirituality is a capacity and tendency that is innate and unique to all persons.

Spiritual tends to move individuals toward knowledge, love, meaning, peace, hope, transcendence, connectedness, compassion, wellness, and wholeness.

Spirituality includes one’s capacity for creativity, growth, and the development of a value system.

Spirituality encompasses a variety of phenomena including experiences, beliefs, and practices. While spirituality is usually expressed through culture, it both precedes and transcends culture.

Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling
Spirit is the animating life force. Spirituality is the drawing out and infusion of that spirit in one’s life.
Spirituality and Meaning

Spirituality leads one to search for and discover meaning in life, a meaning that goes beyond a merely material experience. May
Spirituality and Meaning

He who has a **why** to live for can **bear** almost any **how**.

Nietzsche
Spirituality and Meaning

The deeply personal search for meaning can bring a person to inner peace even in the presence of adverse circumstances.
Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality is not the same thing as religion. While religion may be one way in which persons express or experience their spirituality, it is not the same as spirituality itself.

Religion can be thought of as the organization of belief which is common to a culture or subculture, “the codified, institutionalized, and ritualized expressions of peoples’ communal connections to the Ultimate

Kelly
Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality lights the way

Religion interprets the steps
Spirituality and Religion

Religion illumines

Spirituality warms
Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality is the dance

Religion is the steps
Spirituality and Religion

Religion sets the table

Spirituality enjoys the feast
Spirituality and Suffering

- It is our responsibility to listen to people as they struggle with their life experiences.
- We need to be willing to listen to their anxieties, their fears, their unresolved conflicts, their hopes and their despair.
- If people are stuck in despair, they will suffer deeply.
- It is through spirituality that people become unstuck from despair.
- Viktor Frankl wrote that man is not destroyed by suffering; he is destroyed by suffering without meaning.
- Spirituality helps give meaning to people’s suffering. It helps people find hope in the midst of despair.
- We as caregivers need to engage with our patients on the spiritual level.

Christina M. Puchalski
Suffering and trouble belong to life as much as fate and death. None of these can be subtracted from life without destroying its meaning.
Spirituality and Suffering

To subtract trouble, death, fate, and suffering from life would mean stripping life of its form and shape. . . .
“Red Flag” Spiritual Issues

Spiritual struggle
- Punitive spiritual appraisals (Godpunishing), Anger at God
- Associations with worse PTSD/Depression (Witvilet, 2003)

Loss of Faith
- Predictor of increased use of mental health services (Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004)

Guilt/Shame & Un-forgiveness
- Guilt mediated by negative appraisals at time of trauma (Kubany, 2003)
- Un-forgiveness associate with worse PTSD/Depression (Witvilet, 2003)

Grief & Loss (Wortman & Park 2008)
- Complicated Grief-Trauma increases risk
Spirituality: Inspiring Hope in Healing
We All Need Help Sometime in Life!
Veteran’s Use of Clergy

- Veterans feel more comfortable approaching their pastor than they do a mental health professional.

- Research shows that 4 of 10 individuals with mental health challenges seek counseling from clergy.

- Individuals seek council from ministers more than all other mental health providers combined.

- Often seeing a member of the clergy is less threatening and has less stigma attached. Is viewed as engaging a known community resource.

- Negative reasons... Magical thinking, avoiding truth of diagnosis, etc.
Pastoral Care Approaches

- Safe Haven
- Listening
- Grounding
- Accepting
Coordination and Collaboration with Community Clergy

- Chaplain Service Veteran’s Community Outreach Initiative (VCOI)
  - Approximately 800,000 veterans have left military since January 2002 and are now readjusting to civilian life.
  - Community Clergy will be the first contact for many veterans and their spouses or family members when the veteran experiences distress related to combat experiences.
  - Local Chaplain Services sponsor **clergy educational day events** all around the country to help clergy to understand the needs of returning warriors and how to make referral to the VA when needed. (Education Packets)
Moral Injury
Moral Injury Occurs…

- When actions in battle contradict moral beliefs
- When individuals violate core moral beliefs
- When your brain tells you to do what your heart tells you is wrong
When one feels betrayed because others are violating core values. Death of friends and of innocents. Interrogating “correctly” by building trust then manipulating.
Moral Codes in Conflict

What we were taught . . .

“Thou shalt not kill.”

What we experienced in combat . . .

“I killed a human being.”
Moral Codes in Conflict

What we were taught . . .

“Love one another.”

What we experienced in combat . . .

“I no longer feel love.”
Moral Codes in Conflict

What we were taught . . .

“God is Love.”

What we experienced in combat . . .

“I have faced evil and been lessened by it.”
Common Symptoms of Moral Injury

- Guilt
- Shame
- Grief
Guilt & Shame

How we feel about ourselves affects:

• Our relationships
• Decision-making
• What we do
• How we act
NATIONAL CHAPLAIN CENTER
HAMPTON, VIRGINIA
Resources

3. www.ncptsd.va.gov