

Helping veterans heal



posttraumatic spiritual disorder

Trauma often triggers a spiritual crisis. For veterans, especially war veterans, this spiritual crisis can be intensified and last for decades. The term “posttraumatic stress disorder” or PTSD, first diagnosed in 1980 by the American Psychological Association, is the most recent attempt to describe or identify what happens to human beings who experience trauma, whether the trauma is a single event or multiple events experienced in a short period of time, as is often the case with veterans of war. Prior descriptions include “combat neurosis,” “battle fatigue,” “shell shock,” and (following the American Civil War) “soldier’s heart.” Yet as notable psychiatrist, author, and veterans advocate for 20-plus years Jonathan Shay points out in his books, the nature of the condition was depicted as far back as the writings of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. So the symptoms of PTSD are nothing new.

Many people and groups, including the Veterans Administration, are looking for the best possible ways to help veterans who have experienced trauma. Cognitive therapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), exposure therapy, medications, and group therapy are just a few of the treatments being used today. All have shown to be helpful, but no one of them is complete. And the term “posttraumatic stress disorder” is not without its own controversy. Many of us working with veterans share Shay’s frustration with the name: “For years I have agitated against the diagnostic jargon, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, because transparently we are dealing with an injury, not an illness, malady, disease, sickness, or disorder.” He calls the condition “moral injury.” In the last couple of years this “new” idea of moral injury has begun to gain momentum. Even the most secular organizations, including the VA, seem to be taking a closer look at how trauma, particularly war trauma, affects a person’s moral or spiritual being.

In 1992, the International Conference of War Veteran Ministers (ICWVM) — formerly the National Conference of Vietnam Veteran Ministers — developed a program based on posttraumatic *spiritual* disorder. This came out of discussion among the organization’s ministers around their own experiences of trauma in war and the moral and spiritual wounds they suffered as a result of that trauma. The program was originally designed by Phil Salois, Alan Cutter, and Jackson Day, with supporting data from other resources such as the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, Jonathan Shay’s work, the Sidran Institute, and the National Center for PTSD.

As a member and first vice-president of the ICWVM, I introduced an adaptation of a posttraumatic spiritual disorder stress program to Mayslake Ministries in 2009. Mayslake Ministries is a Chicago-based not-for-profit Christian organization that offers free weekend retreats to military men and women dealing with the spiritual trauma of war. The spiritual disorder program was offered with the hope of reaching more veterans who might be struggling with the aspect of their trauma that no one else was addressing: the moral and spiritual injury of trauma.

The spiritual disorder retreat addresses spirituality, not religion. It is not about evangelization; it is about spiritual healing.

Trauma changes a person. It changes the way a person views the world and the way a person views himself or herself. Because of this, it also changes a person’s relationship with others and ultimately with God. For example, if a person grows up believing that if she follows all the rules

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and does all the right things, God will take care of her. Then in the course of a traumatic event, when she feels that God has let her down or abandoned her, her belief is no longer valid. She may feel confused, lost, and unsure about God in her life. When this belief is shattered, other beliefs may be called into question. The person might feel that since she cannot trust God, she cannot trust anyone.

One of the major issues for victims of trauma, then, is lack of trust. Providing avenues for veterans to feel reconnected to others, even in a small way, is important. The veterans' retreat weekend begins by providing a safe, nonjudgmental, comfortable environment allowing participants the space necessary to feel okay about just being themselves. Arriving veterans are greeted either by me, a U.S. Army Vietnam veteran, or by the co-facilitator, Augie Sisco, a retired U.S. Marine Corps Vietnam combat veteran. We help the veterans and their significant others (should they wish to attend) find and settle into their rooms while engaging in friendly chatter and using some military references to establish connection and credibility. Later, they join with other participants in a pizza supper, which allows them to interact and share basic information such as branch of military service, years served, and overseas deployments. This creates a sense of camaraderie before the actual retreat starts.

another issue for trauma victims is emotional numbing, which alternates with anger and sometimes rage. Frequently the veteran is unaware of what has triggered these feelings and then experiences guilt because of the feelings.

In the course of the retreat, these feelings of numbness and anger are addressed using sacred Scripture, particularly the psalms, to help legitimize feelings. A psalm that often opens meaningful conversation is Psalm 38:8: "I am benumbed and badly crushed; / I roar with anguished heart." Looking at anger as a cover for an anguished heart allows participants to address the sense of loss that has occurred because of their trauma. Many retreatants fail to realize that their anger masks intense sadness. In American society it is more permissible, especially for male veterans, to act out in anger than to cry or admit deep hurt and sadness.

Some veterans struggle with guilt or shame around things they have done in war. The reality of war is that a person's daily routine includes things that are contrary to the person's inner compass and are not acceptable in a normal civilized society. For example, from an early age, we are taught that it is wrong to kill. Suddenly soldiers are handed a weapon, taught how to shoot it, and told that in war it is okay — even expected — for them to kill. Yet it does not feel okay. Some may feel an adrenalin rush or a "high" followed by feelings of guilt because of the excitement. Others may experience a "tearing of the soul" — feelings of deep distress.

Some veterans are victims of military sexual trauma (MST). Sexual abuse and assault is the ultimate betrayal, perpetrated by someone who was supposed to "have their back." Time and again I have heard veterans say, "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Once they return home, most veterans have no one to talk to about their experiences. They are convinced (and rightly so in many instances) that family, friends, and ministers will be judgmental about or horrified by their actions while they were on active duty in military service. Responses such as "Oh, that couldn't have happened" or "What did you do to provoke it?" or "You would never do anything like that" add to feelings of guilt, shame, and being different or not okay, causing veterans to bury feelings deep inside. Feeling ostracized is very common. Shutting down, failing to communicate, and deliberately isolating themselves become the norm for many. A vast number turn to alcohol or drugs to cope with unbearably strong internal feelings.

Carrying guilt and shame often leads to a wounded *imago Dei* (image of God). People raised in a Christian belief are taught that humans are made in the image and likeness of God — that is, humans bear the image of God in their moral, spiritual, and intellectual nature. Humans mirror God's divinity. But after choices made and actions taken in the military, some veterans feel they are no longer able to reflect God's image, nor are they worthy to do so.

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Veterans' retreats like those offered at Mayslake address all of these issues in the course of the weekend.

Prayer starts the retreat, followed by an overview of what posttraumatic *spiritual* disorder is as compared to posttraumatic stress disorder. During this opening session, a major element of healing naturally occurs by sharing parts of the "sacred story": Scripture passages are read to point out people in the Bible who also showed symptoms of PTSD — people such as Peter, who betrayed his best friend, Jesus; Paul, who was knocked to the ground and blinded; warrior kings like David; and most of the prophets. Numbers 31 gives a detailed account of what ritual warriors were required to do on returning home from battle: they were compelled to stay outside the camp for seven days and purify and wash themselves before reentering society. (The ancients had a better handle on helping reintegrate returning veterans!)

After these Scripture passages are shared, veterans are invited to share their own stories in the safety of the group. An evening reconciliation ritual helps relieve some of the veterans' painful memories.

On the last day of the retreat, we talk about the resurrection story. This segment provides suggestions, ideas, and resources for minimizing the daily effects of living with PTSD. Participants are reminded that when Jesus appeared to his disciples in the upper room, he did so with his wounds showing. His wounds were part of his new identity, part of who he was. The group is encouraged to accept their own woundedness, realizing it is not something to be ashamed of but rather to be embraced as part of who they are. Most importantly, we try to convey comfort and assurance that they are unconditionally accepted, forgiven, and loved by God.

The Mayslake Ministries Veterans Retreat weekend weaves elements of prayer, ritual, scripture, and storytelling to help veterans recognize how trauma has altered their relationships with themselves, with God, and with others. It is a time for veterans to reflect on those changes and begin creating new, positive, loving relationships in a safe, caring

environment. The retreats have been well received by the veteran community, and those who have attended encourage other veterans to do the same. The response has been so positive that we have designed a second retreat, which creates space for a deeper relationship with God by looking at how God is found in the everyday things of life.

As a veteran myself, I know that any program that helps veterans and their families is worthwhile. Sharing the love and healing presence of Christ in veterans' retreats like those at Mayslake Ministries is a blessing and great gift to those who have loved and served their country.

Books by Dr. Jonathan Shay

Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and The Undoing of Character. New York: Atheneum, 1994.

Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and The Trials of Homecoming. New York: Scribner, 2002.

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Linda J. McClenahan, OP, MS, LPC, CADC, joined the U.S. Army in 1967 as a member of the WAC (Women's Army Corps) after graduating from Holy Names High School in Oakland, Calif. In 1969, as a sergeant, she volunteered and received orders for Vietnam. She was assigned to the 1st Signal Brigade in Long Binh. After leaving active duty in November 1970, she enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserve until 1976 and left at the rank of staff sergeant.

In 1992, after years of working in the private sector and teaching in San Francisco, she joined the Racine Dominican Sisters in Wisconsin. She completed her master's degree in counseling at the University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, and has been a licensed professional counselor since then. She works with those suffering from posttraumatic stress in both the veterans and civilian communities. She is a life member of the Vietnam Veterans of America, the Disabled American Veterans, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. She is the first vice-president for the International Conference of War Veteran Ministers. She has given numerous retreats and presentations on posttraumatic spiritual disorder as well as "Women in Service to America from the American Revolution to Afghanistan." She is an advocate for all veterans, especially women veterans. While working with homeless veterans throughout Wisconsin, she was given the nickname "Sister Sarge."