

COUNTY OF LEHIGH
Office of Veterans Affairs

Thomas L. Applebach, MPA
Director



Committed to Serving Veterans and Their Families



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Who We Are

- **County Employees, not the VA**
- **Three VA-accredited VSO's**
- **No fee for any of our services**

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What We Do

- **Federal, state, and county benefits**
- **Anything else a veteran needs ...**
- **“Every call is a new adventure”**

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How Many Veterans?*

- **Pennsylvania: 840,258**
- **Lehigh County: 21,071**
- **Northampton County: 20,242**
- **Schuylkill County: 12,810**
- **Monroe County: 10,758**
- **Carbon County: 5,846**

** U.S. Census Bureau - 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate*

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Department of Veterans Affairs

- **National Cemetery Administration**
 - National Cemeteries (Not Arlington National)
 - Support to State Veterans Cemeteries
 - Headstones and Markers
 - Presidential Memorial Certificates
- **Veterans Health Administration**
 - All VA health care services
 - Administered by VA Medical Centers, Ambulatory Care & Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs)

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Department of Veterans Affairs

- **Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)**
 - All non-medical VA benefits: Compensation, Pension, Home Loan Guaranty, Vocational Rehabilitation, and Life Insurance
 - Administered by VA Regional Offices

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Federal Benefits

- **Disability Compensation (D2D)**
- **Pension / Pension w/Aid & Attendance**
- **FY18 (7/1/2017 – 6/30/2018)**
 - **\$4.3M Awarded**
 - ***\$694,000 .Accrued to one vet***

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State Benefits

- **Real Estate Tax Exemption**
- **Wartime Service**
- **100% P&T Disabled by VBA**

County Benefits

- **Grave Markers & Flags**
- **Burial Benefits & Gratuities**

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Other Stuff We Do

- **DD-214 / Military Records (DPRIS)**
- **Clothing/Toiletry Collection**
- **Assistance Grants**
 - **2016: 16 @ avg. \$1,310**
 - **2017: 20 @ avg. \$1,545**
 - **2018: 21 @ avg. \$1,144***

* PA reduced assistance amounts due to funding

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Other Stuff

- **Lehigh County Veteran Mentoring Program (DA's Office)**
- **Lehigh Valley Homeless Veteran Task Force**
- **Governor's Advisory Council on Veteran Services (GAC-VS)**
- **South East Veterans Center Advisory Council**

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My Issues

- **State Level**
 - **Veteran Treatment Courts (# and uniformity)**
 - **Mental Health for Veterans**
 - **MHFA (\$10,000 grant)**
 - **Yellow Ribbon Program (Pre-deployment MH Briefings)**
 - **Post-conviction reviews**
- **County Level**
 - **Record Expungements**

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Lehigh County Veterans Affairs
17 S. 7th Street, Allentown
610-782-3295
veteransaffairs@lehighcounty.org

Northampton County Veterans Affairs
2801 Emrick Boulevard, Bethlehem
610-829-4877

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Moral Injury and War

Thomas L. Applebach, MPA

With special thanks to Jason J. Kamora, MS

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“War is a religious matter”

- Geronimo

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The Beginning

The Oath of Enlistment

“I, _____, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign or domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God.”

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Before we start, let's answer some questions:

- **Have you ever done something that you felt was morally right, but also felt that it challenged you emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually?**
- **Have you ever done something that is at odds with your core code of ethics and values? How?**

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- **Have you ever witnessed an act that challenges your ethical beliefs or values?**
- **Have you ever been affected by that experience for a long time afterward?**
- **How has your sense of self and your outlook on life been shaped by your own or other's moral choices?**

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Moral Injury

- **Moral injury has been defined as “perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” (Litz et al., 2009)**
- **Moral injury is a slow progressive event**



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“Moral injury is not officially recognized by the Defense Department. But it is ‘moral injury’, not PTSD, that is increasingly acknowledged as the signature wound of this generation of veterans: a bruise on the soul, akin to grief or sorrow, with lasting impact on the individuals and on their families.”

David Wood, author of “What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars,” 2016

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Examples of Moral Injury in War

Unintentional Errors: caused by the fog of war resulting in the loss of life of non-combatants, such as mistakenly taking the life of a civilian or seeing dead or ill bodies of women, and children.



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Examples of Moral Injury in War

Transgressive Acts of Others: Actions of being betrayed by peers or leaders who betray expectations in egregious ways.



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Examples of Moral Injury in War

Perceived Moral Transgression: Asking oneself if a decision was the correct one. I.e., “Monday-morning quarterbacking”

Uncommunalized Grief: “A major reason why there are so many severe, long-term psychological injuries from the Vietnam War.” *Dr. Jonathan Shay, author of “Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character,” 1995*

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What does moral injury look like?

- **Shame, which comes from how we see our self. As an example “I can never be forgiven for what I have done.”; “I am an evil person.”**
- **Feelings of guilt**
- **Anxiety about possible consequences**
- **Anger about betrayal-based moral injuries**

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Behavioral manifestations of moral injury

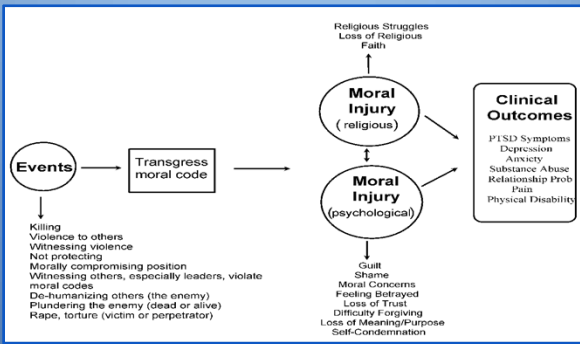
- **Anomie (ex: alienation, purposelessness, and/or social instability caused by a breakdown in standards and values)**
- **Withdrawal and self-condemnation**
- **Self-harming (ex: suicidal ideation or attempts)**
- **Self-handicapping behaviors (ex: alcohol or drug use, self-sabotaging relationships)**
- **A highly aversive and haunting state of inner conflict and turmoil**

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Moral Injury Progressive Model



```

graph LR
    Events[Events] --> Transgress[Transgress moral code]
    Transgress --> MI_religious((Moral Injury (religious)))
    Transgress --> MI_psychological((Moral Injury (psychological)))
    MI_religious <--> MI_psychological
    MI_religious --> Clinical[Clinical Outcomes]
    MI_psychological --> Clinical
    
```

Events

- Killing
- Violence to others
- Witnessing violence
- Not protecting
- Morally compromising position
- Witnessing others, especially leaders, violate moral codes
- De-humanizing others (the enemy)
- Plundering the enemy (dead or alive)
- Rape, torture (victim or perpetrator)

Transgress moral code

Moral Injury (religious)

- Religious Struggles
- Loss of Religious Faith

Moral Injury (psychological)

- Guilt
- Shame
- Moral Concerns
- Feeling Betrayed
- Loss of Trust
- Difficulty Forgiving
- Loss of Meaning/Purpose
- Self-Condensation

Clinical Outcomes

- PTSD Symptoms
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Substance Abuse
- Relationship Prob
- Pain
- Physical Disability

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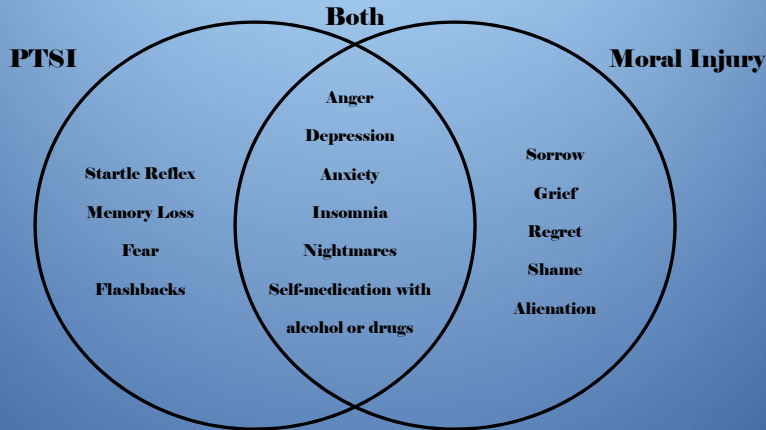
Are Moral Injury and PTSD the Same?

- **More research is needed to answer this question, however there is an overlap**
- **PTSD is a mental disorder that requires a diagnosis, whereas moral injury is a dimensional problem**
- **Transgression is not necessary for PTSD to develop nor does the PTSD diagnosis sufficiently capture moral injury (shame, self-handicapping, guilt, etc.).**

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What we now call **PTSI** is the social and psychiatric construction of this human universal as a mental illness. It burdens the individual veteran with the moral consequences of our political decisions requiring lethal violence.

Our moral burden is carried by the veteran, leaving him or her frequently isolated, doubly traumatized, angry, in behavioral distress, and seen as a criminal or mental health “case.”

*Roger Brooke, Ph.D., ABPP
Professor of Psychology at Duquesne University*

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Unintended consequences of PTSI as a psychiatric diagnosis

1. The stigma of “mental illness.”
2. Social isolation and a downward spiral.
3. Constructing “PTSI” as a professional matter disempowers the civilian community, including the family.
4. It leaves the veteran with neither *dignity* nor *direction*.

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It would be better to understand the combat veteran's suffering and resilience not primarily psychiatrically but

- **as an initiation onto the warrior's path**
- **as a community responsibility**

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The Warrior's Path



“Being able to pull the trigger through muscle memory is not the same as being able to reconcile the act afterward.”



- *Phillips, David. Lethal Warriors. New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010*

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Consequences?

**“Be too careful and you could die...
Be too aggressive, and you might
not be able to live with yourself.
Mistake the foe for a friend, and
perhaps die...Mistake a friend for a
foe and die inwardly.”**



- *Phillips, David. Lethal Warriors. New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010*

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Why Is All of This Important?

- **Moral injury can lead to:**
 - **Under- or unemployment**
 - **Interpersonal problems**
 - **Depression**
 - **Suicide**
- **Veteran suicide is 50% higher than civilian rates.**
- **We have lost more veterans to suicide than to OIF/OEF.**

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Important Figures

The rate of suicide was **1.8** times higher among female Veterans compared with non-Veteran adult women.
*after accounting for differences in age

The rate of suicide was **1.4** times higher among male Veterans compared with non-Veteran adult men.
*after accounting for differences in age

Male Veterans ages **18-34** experienced the highest rates of suicide.

Male Veterans ages **55 and older** had the highest count of suicide.

69% of all Veteran suicide deaths resulted from a firearm injury.

Source: https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/data.asp

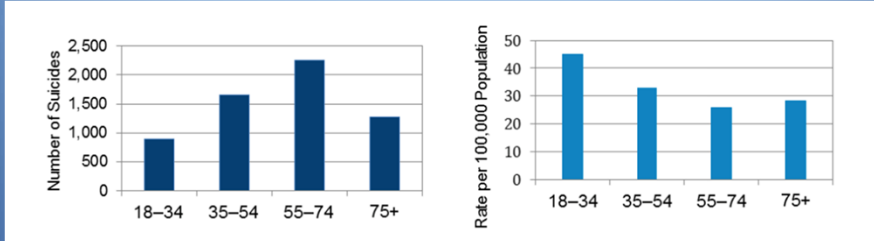
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Veteran Suicide Deaths: Count vs. Rate Veteran Suicide Deaths in 2016



Older Veteran population accounts for the bulk of suicide deaths due to population size.

Younger Veteran population includes more recently transitioned Veterans and has a higher rate of suicide.

Source: https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/data.asp

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Let's Reflect

- **Have you ever done something that you felt was morally right, but also felt that it challenged you emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually?**
- **Have you ever done something that is at odds with your core code of ethics and values? How?**
- **Have you ever witnessed an act that challenges your ethical beliefs or values?**
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“The moral core of the trauma is why so many veterans say they have lost their souls – soul as the sustaining foundation of their morality, esthetics, spirituality, and capacity for intimacy.”

*Roger Brooke, Ph.D., ABPP
Professor of Psychology at Duquesne University*

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*The descent to Hell is easy;
Death's gate stands open night and day;
But to retrace our steps, to climb to the air above,
This is our life's work, this is our labor.*

Virgil: *Aeneid*
circa 19-29 BCE



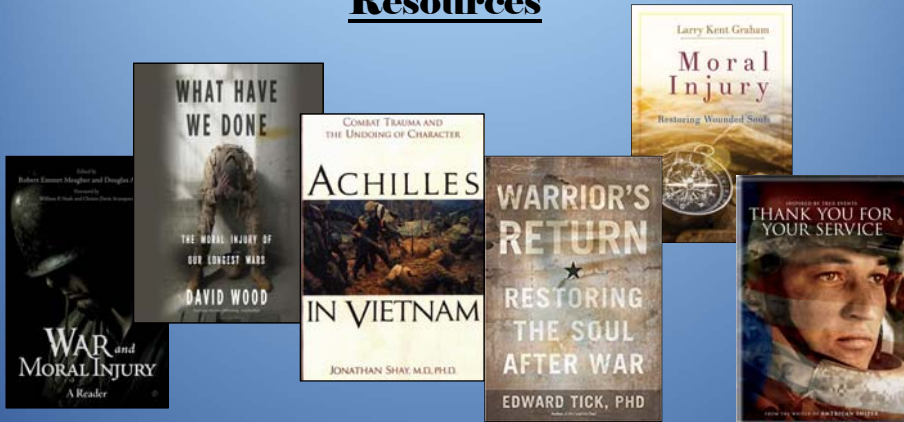
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Resources



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Veterans Crisis Line

- **Dial 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1 to talk to someone**
- **Send a text message to 838255 to connect with a VA responder**
- **Start a confidential online chat session at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat**

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