Moral Injury

What is Moral Injury?
Like psychological trauma, moral injury is a construct that describes extreme and unprecedented life experience including the harmful aftermath of exposure to such events. Events are considered morally injurious if they "transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations." Thus, the key precondition for moral injury is an act of transgression, which shatters moral and ethical expectations that are rooted in religious or spiritual beliefs, or culture-based, organizational, and group-based rules about fairness, the value of life, and so forth.

Moral Injury in War
In the context of war, moral injuries may stem from direct participation in acts of combat, such as killing or harming others, or indirect acts, such as witnessing death or dying, failing to prevent immoral acts of others, or giving or receiving orders that are perceived as gross moral violations. The act may have been carried out by an individual or a group, through a decision made individually or as a response to orders given by leaders.

Examples:

- Unintentional errors: military personnel are well trained in the rules of engagement and do a remarkable job making life or death decisions in war; however, sometimes unintentional error leads to the loss of life of non-combatants, setting the stage for moral injury.
- Transgressive acts of others: Servicemember’s can be morally injured by the transgression of peers and leaders who betray expectations in egregious ways.

What is the Aftermath of Moral Injury?
In terms of the aftermath of moral injuries, transgressive acts may result in highly aversive and haunting states of inner conflict and turmoil. Emotional responses may include:

- Shame, which stems from global self-attributions (for example "I am an evil terrible person; I am unforgivable")
- Guilt
- Anxiety about possible consequences
- Anger about betrayal-based moral injuries

Behavioral manifestations of moral injury may include:
Anomie (for example alienation, purposelessness, and/or social instability caused by a breakdown in standards and values)
Withdrawal and self-condemnation
Self-harming (for example suicidal ideation or attempts)
Self-handicapping behaviors (for example alcohol or drug use, self-sabotaging relationships, etc.)

Additionally, moral injury has been posited to result in the re-experiencing, emotional numbing, and avoidance symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In addition to grave suffering, these manifestations of moral injury may lead to under- or unemployment, and failed or harmed relationships with loved ones and friends.

Can the Act of Killing Cause Moral Injury?
Several studies demonstrate an association between killing in war and mental and behavioral health problems, which may be proxies for moral injury.

For example:

- Across eras (for example Vietnam, Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield, Operation Iraqi Freedom [OIF], Operation Enduring Freedom [OEF]) those who kill in war are at greater risk for a number of mental health consequences and functional difficulties, including PTSD, after accounting for a number of demographic variables and other indicators of combat exposure.
- In returning OIF Veterans, even after controlling for combat exposure, taking another life was a significant predictor of PTSD symptoms, alcohol abuse, anger, and relationship problems.
- Vietnam Veterans who reported killing were twice as likely to report suicidal ideation as those who did not, even after accounting for general combat exposure, PTSD and depression diagnoses. In OIF Veterans, the relationship between killing and suicidal ideation was mediated by PTSD and depression symptoms.
- Killing in war may be an important indicator of risk for developing frequent and severe PTSD symptoms. Three-quarters of individuals who killed were in the two most severe PTSD symptom classes, and those who killed had twice the odds of being in the most symptomatic PTSD class, compared to those who did not kill. Those who endorsed killing a non-combatant or killing in the context of anger or revenge were more likely to belong to the most symptomatic PTSD class, compared to those who did not kill.

Although killing may be a precursor to moral injury, it is important to note that not all killing in war results in adverse outcomes for military personnel. As noted earlier, certain elements need to be present for moral injury to occur, including a perceived transgression that goes against individual or shared moral expectations.

For example, a military member who kills an enemy combatant in self-defense may perceive that the death was justified. If however, a civilian was perceived to be armed and consequently killed, with
military personnel later discovering that the individual was in fact unarmed, this may set the stage for the development of moral injury.

Are Moral Injury and PTSD the Same?
More research is needed to answer this question. At present, although the constructs of PTSD and moral injury overlap, each has unique components that make them separable consequences of war and other traumatic contexts.

- PTSD is a mental disorder that requires a diagnosis. Moral injury is a dimensional problem - there is no threshold for the presence of moral injury, rather, at a given point in time, a Veteran may have none, or mild to extreme manifestations.
- Transgression is not necessary for PTSD to develop nor does the PTSD diagnosis sufficiently capture moral injury (shame, self-handicapping, guilt, etc.).

Consequently, it is important to assess mental health symptoms and moral injury as separate manifestations of war trauma to form a comprehensive clinical picture, and provide the most relevant treatment.

If you are looking for treatment options visit your local health care provider or the nearest USDVA mental health service by using the facility locator or call 1-877-222-VETS (8387).

Find a USDVA Facility
Use the facility locator or call 1-877-222-VETS (8387).

Contact Your County Veterans Service Office
The County Veterans Service Offices (CVSO) are locally-funded agencies established to assist Veterans and their families in obtaining benefits and services accrued through military service. These County Veteran Service Offices promote the interest and welfare of Veterans, their dependents, and their survivors by enhancing their quality of life through counseling, education, benefits assistance, and advocacy. They connect Veterans to their benefits by assisting in their interactions with the USDVA.

- Visit the CalVet website for more information, OR
- Find the CVSO closest to you, OR

CalVet strongly recommends you to work with the CVSO nearest you. Your CVSO can guide you through the benefits and services available as well as help connect you with other local resources.

eBenefits
Apply for compensation, pension, housing, education and training, healthcare, insurance, and burial benefits through www.ebenefits.va.gov.
Questions/Comments
Email us at CalTAP@calvet.ca.gov

Sources
https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/co-occurring/moral_injury_at_war.asp