

Identifying Coping Mechanisms for Veterans Suffering Moral Injury: Using the Roy Adaptation Model

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Structured Abstract

LOCAL PROBLEM

Suicide among United States military personnel has doubled since 2002, and in 2008, the military suicide rate topped the general population rate for the first time in history. Realizing the enormity of the problem, Congress appropriated over one billion to fund veteran suicide prevention programs between 2005 and 2016. Unfortunately, despite their best efforts, the suicide rate for veterans rose a staggering 80% during this timeframe, necessitating the need to explore innovative and forward-thinking approaches that might mitigate the crisis. Researchers are studying the clinical relevance between morally transgressive actions and the increase in self-harm. Moral Injury (MI) is a relatively new term, being used to explain the mental anguish created by the complex and chaotic environment of combat. Thus, validation of the concept of MI in veteran healthcare may lead to enhanced understanding, improved screening, and treatment for those affected.

PROJECT PURPOSE

The purpose of this project was to provide stakeholder validation and application of the concept of MI and to build provider and veteran awareness to reduce veteran self-harm. Additionally, the project was designed to help diminish the shame associated with veteran mental health and prompt the creation of improved therapies.

METHODOLOGY

The theory guiding this DNP project is the Roy Adaptation Model (RAM). The theoretical framework appears to be well suited for this project since it focuses on the coping processes and the external and internal stimuli that facilitate or prevent the person from successfully maintaining psychological, physiological, and social integrity. To promote this endeavor, the authors led focus group discussions utilizing a dual-moderator methodology, ensuring identification of critical issues and prompting recommendations from veteran stakeholders. Two focus groups were conducted, one to identify characteristics of MI and the other to refine the concepts and generate approaches to promoting adaptation. The project was approved by IRBs of both Samford University and Grayson College.

RESULTS

The authors used thematic analysis in identifying six themes, supported in the literature introducing the concept of MI. The themes of betrayal, breach of trust, spiritual/existential loss, social problems, self-depreciation, and psychological symptoms are captured in reactions to morally injurious events, as the veterans search for purpose and meaning and struggle to reconcile their thoughts and behaviors. The focus group sessions verified the existence of MI, recognizing that the concept is poorly understood. Still, the participants believed it exists as a separate and distinct condition from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The inability of the veteran to self-reflect is identified as a significant contributor to the maladaptive thought process, creating internal triggers based on violations of deeply held beliefs that may not be readily available to consciousness. General society is unaware and unprepared for self-reflection; today,

people's self-worth is dependent on how everyone else characterizes them. Social media appears to be a contributing factor to this issue since users are hesitant to portray a negative image. In the veteran population, the absence of experience in self-reflection manifests in the inability to control the thought process, which is revealed in maladaptive coping behaviors. Breaching moral boundaries in combat has created dissonance between the veteran's conscious and subconscious thoughts regarding right and wrong, resetting the individual's fundamental identity, impeding their ability to develop relationships, and maintain their group identity. This inner struggle may explain the previously determined feelings of betrayal, guilt, and irredeemability frequently seen in veterans with MI.

The focus group discussions also revealed the military culture as a complicating factor in recognizing and treating veteran mental health. Veteran communities consist of individuals who have altruistic qualities placing others above themselves. This population is stoic and hesitant to ask for outside help. Additional barriers to treatment include a reluctance to relive the experience, fear of being over-medicated, and a tendency to self-isolate.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The information obtained from the focus groups allowed the project team to dive deeper into the aspects of MI by discerning the common themes, behaviors, and defining variables. By associating these elements within the RAM components of physiological, self-concept, interdependence, and role-function, the project team developed an awareness campaign targeting veterans, families, and community veteran liaisons. In addition, the project team understands the need for the development of an assessment tool, which identifies the veteran's inability to self-reflect and the presence of harmful internal triggers. Current screening tools rely too heavily on the concept of betrayal within the active military population and fail to capture the self-reflective and internal triggering process.

The DNP project team created an awareness campaign centered on the term "Battle Buddies for Life," acknowledging the power of camaraderie. The term was first used in the 1970s, at the beginning of the all-volunteer force, in an effort to mitigate the social and behavioral factors affecting attrition. Every veteran understands the connectedness, which is captured in this term, and the strength it communicates. The authors wish to utilize this well-understood concept to provide support services focusing on community engagement, education, and reconnection, thus reducing self-isolation. It can be challenging for veterans to find purpose and perspective after ending their military service. The battle buddy system lays the groundwork in keeping fellow veterans safe by allowing them to share their struggles and recognizing that their life may never look the same. Throughout the process, they are building a new community, which fosters a sense of purpose, hope, and perspective. The use of a battle buddy is proven to save lives in combat. It is comforting to know that someone always has your back, even after your service has ended.

Keywords: moral injury, veteran, suicide, Roy Adaptation Model, battle buddies

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