

Book Review

***Help for Moral Injury: Strategies and Interventions.* By Cecelia Yocum, PhD. Quaker Press, 2016.**

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Only a handful of psychodrama practitioners work exclusively with veterans—people who have served in the military, especially during wartime. Yet because we are a country at war, there is great need for clinicians, educators, and other professionals to understand the specific trauma of war and how they can respond effectively to these unique treatment challenges.

Moral injury is not an actual diagnosis and does not respond to medication. Rather, it is a spiritual condition that haunts the hearts and souls of many men and women who have served in the armed forces. It is the invisible wound to the soul and spirit that happens to people who experience grief, shame, and guilt about taking part in morally damaging events that they cannot forget, and it often obstructs successful treatment.

The term “moral injury” was coined by Dr. Jonathan Shay, a clinical psychiatrist who worked with veterans for many years at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Boston. It refers to the fact that people who serve in the military greatly suffer when they perpetrate, observe, fail to prevent, or learn about actions that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. One such example might be the soldier who saw a child in what he thought was a suicide vest and shot the child without knowing if the child was actually wearing a suicide vest.

Now this concept is the topic of the book *Help for Moral Injury: Strategies and Interventions*, written by Cecelia Yocum and published in 2016 by Quaker Press. In the book, the author offers not only information to understand the concept of moral injury but also a number of experiential interventions to address and heal this wound.

Yocum suggests that the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and moral injury are distinct yet overlapping. For example, typical symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder may include the startle reflex, memory loss, fear, and flashbacks; symptoms of moral injury may include sorrow, grief, regret, shame, and alienation. Experiences of anger, depression, anxiety, insomnia, nightmares, and self-medication with alcohol and drugs are common with both.

Obviously, active military personnel and veterans suffer greatly, although Yocum notes that moral injury knows no boundaries. Civilians, ex-combatant victims, and others who have experienced political atrocities often feel similar pain. Some of the exercises use methods that are grounded in psychodrama, gestalt, alternatives to violence, cognitive therapy, and other methods.

Some of the suggestions include the well-known practices of deep and slow breathing, progressive relaxation, journaling, and therapeutic letter writing. Other activities are more complex: adaptations of the techniques that are familiar to psychodramatists and psychodrama trainees, such as the spectrogram, the empty chair, concretization of strengths, and surplus reality scenes of how the veteran can begin to image a future healed self.

Careful listening for a person's facts, feelings, beliefs, values, and morals is emphasized, as is the importance of not brushing off the person's guilt with platitudes or minimization. Ultimately, says Yocum, the veteran must find a way to take responsibility for his or her part in the perpetration or lack of action. This journey also involves reconnecting with personal, spiritual, and moral resources and making amends, while finding deep compassion for the human self.

One particular exercise is identifying the role of what is called the "Forgiving Spirit," a supporting and forgiving figure that can be helpful in seeking forgiveness, forgiving someone else, acting as a witness for forgiveness, and helping the person learn that he or she has the answers within the self. The protagonist dialogs with the Forgiving Spirit in the empty chair, role reversing back and forth, but does not take the role of the person or entity that he or she wants to forgive. There are also suggestions for the director or others to take the double role during this dialog.

The author, a psychologist, has more than 35 years of experience working with people and groups with trauma and has worked internationally with community-based trauma-healing programs in Rwanda, Burundi, and Colombia as part of the Friends Peace Teams. She acknowledges psychodramatists Nina Garcia and Linda Condon for assistance with several of the exercises, as well as Christina Bellamy, who has been active in psychodrama and Playback Theater. Accordingly, there is a recommendation that certain action structures demand experience and/or supervision in gestalt therapy or psychodrama for effectiveness and emotional safety.

This book is ideal for mental health professionals, pastoral counselors, and others who work with active military personnel and veterans in any way. It is clearly helpful for those who counsel veterans in both outpatient and inpatient settings, and could be easily adapted for a weekend intensive. It includes a short bibliography and charts detailing research about war trauma. It deserves a place next to books like Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, and Edward Tick's *War and the Soul* and *Warrior's Return: Restoring the Soul after War*.