

Veterans and invisible wounds: How ex-combat soldiers cope with 'nature of war'



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When he's on the mat at the Ronin Training Center, Eric Sowers feels like a warrior again.

The environment at the Grandview Heights gym, along with the mixed martial arts practice of jiu-

jitsu, offers Sowers some of the comforts of military service he struggled to leave behind when he left the Army — the structured environment, standing in formation and respecting others' rank, among other things.

It also helps him cope with the aftermath of his military service.

'Moral injury': U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan prompted talk of 'moral injury' in veterans

"Jiu-jitsu affords me to be a warrior again (in a way) that ends with hugs, not cuffs," he said.

Sowers said he suffers from "moral injury," psychological distress that can result from traumatic or stressful situations in which people fail to prevent, witness or even carry out events that contradict their values and beliefs.



Sowers is one of an estimated 37% to 65% of veterans who experience moral injury, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs, which is similar and can occur at the same time as post-traumatic stress

disorder (PTSD) but without the fear. Those suffering from moral injury can experience feelings of helplessness, flashbacks, grief, shame and a loss of trust in themselves, among other symptoms.

Moral injury: When soldiers take actions that violate their sense of right and wrong

Moral injury “comes from you having a set of values and being put in a situation where you might have to compromise those values,” said Kaitlynne Yancy, associate director of government affairs with the New York-based nonprofit Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

Grove City veteran: Grove City veteran: 'It's heartbreaking' to watch Taliban take back Afghanistan

Though experiences of moral injury have been referenced for hundreds of years in literature on combat veterans' experiences, the naming of it is newer,

said Dr. Keith Meador, director of Integrative Mental Health at the U.S. Veterans Health Administration.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, books and studies began using the term "moral injury" to describe the condition. But references really skyrocketed after a 2009 Clinical Psychology article on the topic, with 158 citations of the term in medical literature in 2021, Meador said.

Moral injury, however, isn't a diagnosis and psychiatrists and doctors are still working out what elements make up the condition, Meador said. What's clear, though, is that veterans who exhibit signs of moral injury also typically experience a range of mental health problems, including depression, PTSD, suicidality and substance abuse, he said.

Afghan refugees in Columbus:'Full of success stories': A year after fall of Kabul, Afghans find belonging in Columbus

Moral injury is also starting to be recognized in professions outside of the military, said Sonya Norman, director of the PTSD consultation program at the National Center for PTSD. Frontline health care workers, for instance, could develop moral injury from situations during the COVID-19 pandemic, she said. It's also been described with first responders, child protective services workers and refugees, Norman said.

For Sowers, moral injury manifests in different ways, but at the root of it is a feeling of guilt over leaving his fellow soldiers behind in Afghanistan in 2008 when he left the Army, with some later killed in action.

"I could have been there, I should have been there. Did I abandon them?" Sowers often asks himself.

Triggering events

Every veteran could have experienced something that causes moral injury, said Nicole Jackson, clinical director of whole health at the Veterans Affairs Central Ohio Healthcare System on the city's East Side, no matter where or how they served.

Jackson worked with one veteran who didn't have a combat-related job, but was ordered to quickly get to safety in a bunker. The veteran tried to make sure everyone else also got there, but some people died.

These emotions can have “serious implications for a person's quality of life,” Jackson said.

'Life or death':Visa program not enough to save lives of those who helped US troops in Afghanistan, advocates say

When experienced with other mental health issues, moral injury can increase the likelihood that someone will die by suicide, Jackson said. It may also cause people to withdraw from loved ones due to overwhelming feelings of hopelessness, shame, guilt and anger.

In August 2021, Gretchen Klingler, 35, found herself glued to her computer and phone, seeking updates at all hours of the day and night on the withdrawal of the final American troops from Afghanistan after 20 years of war.

Klingler — who served in the Air Force from 2009 to 2015, including two deployments and four months in Afghanistan — became withdrawn and quiet and was frustrated, wishing she could save the lives of the Afghans she had left behind.



"I just remember watching TV every night just hoping that we got out as many people as we could because I had been told the whole time while I was in: 'We're winning hearts and minds; we're winning the war,'" Klingler said. "... It was devastating to know I had been a part of making promises to people."

Despite vows to the contrary, the United States has evacuated only about 3% of Afghans who worked for the American government and applied for special visas, leaving behind an estimated 78,000, according to a March report by the nonprofit Association of Wartime Allies.

"I'd worked for an organization that made promises they had no intention of keeping or never thought they had to keep," Klingler said.

Accepting 'the nature of war'

On a plane back from a friend's funeral last year, Sowers beat himself up for not being able to save his buddy who overdosed on drugs years after the two served in the Army together.

Sowers realized then that while he couldn't save his friend, he could do his best to save others.



Sowers had just been accepted into a doctorate program in social work at Ohio State University and is now working to complete that degree.

Along with jiu-jitsu, meditation and talking with other veterans, Sowers has found that helping other veterans helps him most in coping with his moral injury.

"I think everybody can come out of this in a positive light," said Sowers, who turned to drinking to deal with his pain after leaving the military and had his own run-ins with the justice system, including two drunken-driving charges.

'They've got to matter': Veterans lobby in Columbus to get act passed to help Afghan allies here, overseas

He hopes to help stem the "military-to-prison pipeline" through working with veterans courts, a specialized docket like one in Franklin County Common Pleas Court that emphasizes treatment instead of punishment for veterans. In 2016, the latest available statistics, 107,400 veterans were in state or federal prisons, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

"There's people out there that just need a little guidance, need that little push," Sowers said. "If I don't tell my story, nobody's going to hear it, and nobody's going to know there's another side that can be experienced that can be fulfilling."

How veterans cope while living with moral injury

There are multiple ways to treat moral injury, Jackson said, including therapy, peer-led support groups, medication management and reconnecting to people in a meaningful way.

"Veterans can get better," Jackson said. "People can manage mental health in ways that make them stronger."

'At least a safe life':Uncertainty takes toll on Afghan people in Columbus, around the world

What ultimately made helped Klingler feel better was finding ways to take personal action to help Afghans who had helped the U.S. military.

For instance, she connected another veteran searching for a way to get his interpreter out of Afghanistan with members of a veterans chat group that ultimately helped get that individual to safety.



"Knowing I made a connection that helped someone get an ally out of Afghanistan made me feel better," Klingler said. "I've grown since then through learning to take action and advocate and do something with my hurt and my frustration."

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