THE MEANING OF PERSONAL SACRIFICE AND ITS IMPACT ON COMBAT TRAUMA RECOVERY OF IRAQ/AFGHANISTAN VETERANS

By: Alice Psirakis Diacosavvas, LCSW & Adam W. Specjal, LCSW

“Suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.”
- Viktor Frankl, 1959

ABSTRACT

Combat veterans are prepared to leave the war behind them, only to be confronted by an emotional battleground when they return home. Shattered self-images, spiritual crises, moral afflictions and interpersonal dysfunction are common manifestations of combat trauma. The on-going wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are creating another generation of young men and women suffering with the psychological wounds of war. But for these veterans, the wars they fought in are not yet over- continued media coverage of U.S. Servicemembers deployed overseas serves as a constant reminder that the individual sacrifice of the Iraq/Afghanistan veteran remains in an indeterminate state, as these wars have yet to produce a tangible outcome against which they can measure their sacrifice. The meaning that veterans assign to their suffering has a mitigating effect on the lifecycle of their combat trauma. In an effort to effectively treat Iraq/Afghanistan veterans, a meaning matrix has been developed, which can be used by clinicians to help guide veterans in processing their combat trauma by exploring the relationship across three important concepts of meaning-making: purpose, sacrifice and outcome.

INDETERMINATE OUTCOMES OF IRAQ/AFGHANISTAN WARS

Identifying whether or not the United States has successfully achieved its foreign policy goals continues to be riddled with controversy. Questions still linger and both public and political opinions remain divided. Even many veterans themselves remain ambivalent about the objectives and outcomes of the two wars at this moment in time. Unlike in years past, what winning a war looks like has become more and more elusive. And because of the ambiguity of what it takes to win a war in modern combat, the burden to decide the outcome is often left up to the veteran. With no definitive way to measure progress or success, Iraq/Afghanistan veterans may struggle to assign meaning to the sacrifices they have endured...

So, if Iraq/Afghanistan veterans themselves are unsure of the tangible results these two wars have produced, how does that affect meaning-making? And how does the meaning that veterans assign to their post-war psychological suffering impact the lifecycle of their combat trauma and its healing?

CLINICAL FRAMEWORK

Guiding veterans to make meaning out of their combat trauma by exploring purpose, sacrifice & outcome via the meaning matrix

- **Sense of purpose**=The intended result or effect that the veteran hoped to achieve by participating in war
  - Examine this from the pre, during, and post-war angle
  - Discuss macro (nationalist/political) vs. micro-level (personal) goals
  - See if veteran’s sense of purpose was altered along the way
  - Help veteran understand the motivation behind his/her actions at the time they took place
  - Increase veteran’s ability for self-compassion & rational self-analysis
  - Explore any lingering feelings of insufficient sacrifice guilt (Diacosavvas & Specjal, 2011)
    - Teach cognitive restructuring techniques to help create a new belief which challenges original guilt
    - Educate veteran on natural vs. manufactured guilt
  - Examine multi-layers of meaning: help veteran understand that two opposing beliefs can be simultaneously held regarding sense of purpose
    - Push-Pull of pride in military service (ex: feeling both pride and outrage)
**Sacrifice**—“To give up in favor of a higher or more imperative object or duty” (Webster’s Dictionary, 2011)

Examine this from the pre, during, and post-war angle

- Explore sacrifice by examining what veteran has lost in the process
  - Level of sacrifice veterans will endure is underestimated: discuss difference between intellectually understanding a sacrifice and actually experiencing it
  - Conduct psycho-education regarding the interrupted Ericksonian stages of development while veteran was at war
  - Allow veteran to mourn the loss of his/her ‘old self’
  - PTSD symptoms are indicators of veteran’s sacrifice

- Discuss concrete sacrifices that occurred in the combat zone
  - EX: Threat to one’s physical integrity; loss of unit members; individual vs. the collective; sense of morality

- Help veterans process sacrifices in a context that considers the chaos, randomness and hostility of a war zone

- Post-War Sacrifices
  - Help veteran identify his/her sacrifices post-war: time; lost camaraderie; altered self-images; interpersonal relationships; spirituality; body
  - Be aware of spiritual reactions to combat trauma
  - Assist veteran in establishing a ‘new normal’ (physically & mentally)

**Outcome**—The tangible results that the veteran attributes to his/unit’s direct participation in war

Examine this from the pre, during, and post-war angle

- Make micro & macro-level outcomes available through therapeutic exploration
- Macro-level outcomes can be murky
  - Often based on political beliefs, which do warrant exploration
  - Conduct from a client-centered perspective; avoid political debates
  - May be continually shifting, as outcomes & consequences of war become more apparent in years to come

- Micro-level outcomes can be defined as situations/results that veteran directly influenced by his/her actions in the combat zone
  - Do not usually require many years to uncover, but rather a focused exploration
  - Help veteran explore how his actions saved the lives of others
  - Explore the new perspective on life that veterans often gain as a result of being in combat- position this as a client strength
  - Process physical & psychological wounds of combat: PTSD, traumatic brain injury, physical disabilities, depression, family tension and/or addictions

**CONCLUSION**

The lifecycle of combat trauma manifests itself in powerful ways. The meaning that Iraq/Afghanistan veterans assign to their suffering will ultimately have a mitigating effect on the healing of their combat trauma, in spite of the inconclusive nature of these two current wars. A meaning matrix was developed by the authors to assist clinicians in effectively exploring the various aspects of meaning that Iraq/Afghanistan veterans can process and assign to their participation in war. This paper serves as an initial stepping stone into the issue of meaning-making and did not include any research at this time. Future studies regarding this veteran population should incorporate concrete research demonstrating the utilization of the meaning matrix and whether or not it has the mitigating effect on combat trauma that we predict it does. Future research can also look at using macro-level events as benchmarks for discussions on purpose, meaning-making and sacrifice and compare them to the micro-level events that veterans and their clinicians uncover together in treatment. Also, another topic that was not explored in this paper was the impact that society’s response to the returning Iraq/Afghanistan veteran has on meaning-making. We know this to be an important factor because the main distinction between the Vietnam veteran and the Iraq/Afghanistan veteran is the societal response to their service in these two wars. Although many Americans may not agree with the wars themselves, they have learned to distinguish politics from the American GI and no longer use the returning veteran as a target for their political dissatisfaction.
# MEANING MATRIX

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BEFORE WAR</th>
<th>DURING WAR</th>
<th>POST-WAR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PURPOSE</strong></td>
<td>Sense of pride &amp; patriotism</td>
<td>Staying alive</td>
<td>Having saved lives</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Defending freedom and keeping the USA safe</td>
<td>Keeping fellow soldiers alive (purpose becomes very primitive/simplistic)</td>
<td>Having been part of an effort to depose a totalitarian dictator</td>
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<td>Stopping weapons of mass destruction</td>
<td>Providing people of Iraq/Afghanistan a safer and higher standard of living</td>
<td>Having kept his comrades safe in the face of danger</td>
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<td>Sharing in family history of military service</td>
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<td>“John Wayne Syndrome”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SACRIFICE</strong></td>
<td>Knowing that hopes/dreams/future plans need to be postponed</td>
<td>One’s own morality</td>
<td>Time</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowing there is a risk of being killed</td>
<td>One’s physical integrity</td>
<td>Camaraderie</td>
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<td>Unit members who are killed in action (KIA)</td>
<td>Self-image and “shattered assumptions” of the world/sense of innocence</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Religious faith</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Interpersonal relationships</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>OUTCOME</strong></td>
<td>Hoping to perform job well</td>
<td>Saving lives</td>
<td>Having deposed a totalitarian dictator/ head of Al-Qaida assassinated; Having saved lives (both soldiers and/or local civilians); Having sustained physical/psych wounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making family and military leadership proud</td>
<td>Perspective on life is in the process of being re-shaped/altered; greater appreciation for life/family/things</td>
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SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO ELICIT MEANING MATRIX CONCEPTS

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PURPOSE</strong></td>
<td>Do you remember what you told yourself when you were preparing to go to war? What sense of purpose did you have prior to reaching the combat zone?</td>
<td>Can you remember what it felt like while you were on missions? What was your sense of purpose while performing...? (insert veteran’s military job)</td>
<td>Looking back, what do you perceive your overall purpose as having been? How does that compare to your original sense of purpose? Can you think of other types of purposes you served? What would your comrades/ spouse / children/ parents/ friends/ family say about your purpose?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SACRIFICE</strong></td>
<td>What did you think you would be sacrificing by going to war?</td>
<td>What types of sacrifices did you feel yourself making while you were deployed?</td>
<td>Tell me about what it ultimately cost you to be deployed in a war zone- consider all physical, emotional, spiritual and/or psychological costs. What would your comrades/ spouse / children/ parents/ friends/ family say you’ve sacrificed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OUTCOME</strong></td>
<td>What did you hope to achieve during your deployment?</td>
<td>What personal/unit accomplishments were you aware of during your deployment? Is there anything you patted yourself on the back for while in country?</td>
<td>Looking back, what do you think your greatest accomplishments were during war? What do you believe your unit accomplished? What do you think are the positive outcomes of military action in...? (insert combat zone)</td>
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