

Not Everything Is PTSD: A More Balanced View of What Returning Veterans Need



by MATTHEW MCCRANEY

In 2021, the United States withdrew its forces from Afghanistan after twenty years of fighting. America’s longest war was over. When the campaigns in Iraq and Syria are included, the numbers really add up. Over 1.9 million American service members were deployed in these conflicts. With more than 7,000 killed in combat, the impact of these wars on service members is incalculable.

Unfortunately, their struggles continue long after their deployment and, for some, even end in suicide (over 30,000 post 9/11). Their problems are largely misunderstood, especially outside the military. This contributes to the stereotype of the unstable veteran, who is prone to violent outbursts and unable to function in normal society. Often known as the “broken vet” trope, this view dominates the public’s beliefs about those who return from active duty overseas. Movies and television portray all these men and women as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and they routinely face misunderstandings about their service, their abilities, and their struggles. This lack of nuance gives way to broad generalizations, and two problematic beliefs develop:

Matthew McCraney (DMin, PhD) is a major in the US Army. He currently serves as the Group Chaplain for the 7th Special Forces.

1. that PTSD causes most of the trouble that returning service members face, and
2. that all service members are broken beyond repair with no hope of improvement, cleansing, or redemption.¹

Labels inherently hold power—the label of PTSD particularly so. It creates stigma and increases social barriers as civilians stand far away.

The PTSD label even impacts those who do not have PTSD. A former colleague shared the story of his job search after leaving the military. He graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point with a degree in engineering and conquered some of the military's hardest schools (i.e., Ranger School, Airborne, Air Assault). Yet despite his qualifications,

Veterans' problems are largely misunderstood, and this contributes to the stereotype of the unstable veteran.

professionalism, and excellent references, prospective employers did not see him as an individual but as an at-risk veteran. Comments like “this resume has PTSD written all over it” made the job hunt difficult.

Sadly, his story is not unique. Stereotypes impact not only members of the public and prospective employers; they also impact pastors and biblical counselors. If we believe the trope too and assume that every soldier struggling with anger, loss, or reintegration into civilian life suffers from PTSD, we miss the opportunity to bring genuine biblical care to them. We must seek to understand service members and veterans as *individuals* and look beyond the stereotypes, or our care will not address their truest needs.

Still, the issues *are* complex. We are all broken, body and soul. Our embodied nature means that what impacts the body also impacts the soul, and military service can be a cauldron of pressure on both.² On the one hand, God created us in his image and sees us as his representatives in the world. This is what makes taking human life so tragic (Gen 9:6).

1. Allen Frances, *Saving Normal: An Insider's Revolt against Out-of-Control Psychiatric Diagnosis, DSM-5, Big Pharma, and the Medicalization of Ordinary Life* (New York: William Morrow, 2013), 109.

2. Gregg R. Allison, *Embodied: Living as Whole People in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021), 29.

Military members train to take lives, and they often do. On the other hand, God also sees these men and women as fulfilling an important role within society—that of maintaining peace (Rom 13:1–5). Living with this tension is a hard calling. The pressures impact us, yet we are all still responsible for our actions. Such challenges can drive individuals to despair. What these men and women need is for helpers to understand their struggles accurately and reframe them in light of God’s faithfulness and goodness.

For the past fourteen years, I have served these men and women as a chaplain in the US Army. Most of my career has been spent caring for frontline soldiers who experience the worst of combat (i.e., infantry, cavalry, special operations, etc.). Many of those I have cared for struggle with the repercussions of taking life, seeing horrors, and suffering life-altering injuries. And while churches can be a place of healing and comfort, these soldiers are often misunderstood and subjected to platitudes—even in 2023. I want to help change that.

In this article, I will argue that there are four primary issues that counselors mistakenly confuse when working with service members:

1. physiological problems associated with PTSD,
2. traumatic brain injury,
3. soldiers struggling with the problem of evil (theodicy), and
4. their own sinful behaviors.

These four areas can also overlap, which makes the struggles even more complex. I will work to differentiate between these problems and offer thoughts about how biblical counselors can apply the truths of Scripture in each area.

Understanding PTSD

We will start with the primary category: PTSD. I will describe it, say more about why it is an issue, and then offer thoughts about biblical counseling for these symptoms.

What is PTSD? *Post-traumatic stress disorder* is a diagnostic term used to describe the symptoms people can experience after one or several events threaten their life or safety in a significant way. Though the term PTSD is used fairly broadly in our culture, I will use it more narrowly in this article. Here, PTSD denotes a dysfunction of a person’s

To continue reading this article, visit ccef.org/jbc to purchase the individual journal issue or subscribe to the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*.

The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

Copyright © 2023 CCEF

All rights reserved.