



Spirituality

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1.1 INTRODUCTION: SPIRITUALITY IN WAR

Many service members think about spiritual issues during and after deployment. This section will define spirituality and spiritual fitness and explain why it matters.

1.1.1 The Big Picture

Many service members think about spiritual issues during and after deployment. It's normal to look at the world differently after facing danger and death. Returning service members talk about seeing the "big picture" and having a different sense of what's important.

Some may gain a stronger relationship with God. Others may question their beliefs or feel spiritually empty. Some may have questions about guilt and forgiveness, or may

wonder how God could allow terrible things like war to happen. The traumatic events of deployment cause some people to feel like they're in a spiritual vacuum, alone and unable to trust.

You may wonder:

- "Was that person's death, God's will?"
- "Is there any meaning or purpose to the awful things I saw or experienced?"
- "Am I condemned, or a bad person, because of my actions? Can I be forgiven?"
- "How can I trust anyone after what I know people are capable of?"
- "Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?"
- "Why did my buddy die and not me? It should've been me."

It's normal to have these kinds of questions.
It would be unusual for you to be unaffected by a war.

1.1.2 War Past And Present

Throughout history, people have questioned *and* strengthened their spiritual and religious paths in times of war. During the Holocaust in World War II, some Jews turned toward God and spirituality. And some began to see life as meaningless, without any divine presence. For some people, crisis creates a stronger connection to the spiritual realm. For example, there was a rise in spiritual interest and practice in Israel after an unexpected attack in 1973, and many WWII veterans reported that prayer and religion were helpful when times were tough.

But at times, service members talk about God "going AWOL." One soldier in the Vietnam War commented, "Before I went to Vietnam I believed in Jesus Christ and John Wayne, but in Vietnam both went down the tubes." This is a strong statement—the soldier's wartime experiences shattered his beliefs and made him question his faith. Crisis can lead people toward spirituality or away from it.





1.1.2 War Past And Present (Cont.)

Look at how stressful or traumatic experiences might affect your spiritual fitness and general health. Ask yourself:

- What are my beliefs and values?
- Do I feel truly connected to others?
- Do I feel connected to a divinity, God, or a higher power?
- How would I describe my sense of well-being and satisfaction with life?
- How do I see myself?
- What is my meaning or purpose in this world?

1.1.3 What Is Spirituality?

At its core, spirituality is about a connection between humans and a deity or divine presence.

Spirituality is also about **meaning**: what is truly important in life. For some, being spiritual is part of being religious. Other people may be spiritual without any religious affiliation.

Here are some of the ways people describe spirituality:

- Life's meaning and importance
- Values, beliefs and ethics
- Awareness of life beyond yourself
- Connection between you, others, and God
- Reflecting on life, and a sense of "deep self" or soul

1.1.4 What Is Spiritual Fitness?

Spiritual fitness can also mean different things to different people. For most people, it means having a set of beliefs and values that guide them and give their life meaning. Spiritually fit people tend to have a stronger self-esteem, better coping skills, and more solid relationships. Spiritual fitness can also bond people through love, forgiveness, and compassion.

Like physical fitness, spiritual fitness must be tended to and practiced. Some stay spiritually fit by participating in organized religion. For others, spiritual fitness is not tied to any religious belief. They might stay spiritually fit by spending time in nature, volunteering, creating something useful, or playing with a pet.

1.1.5 Why Is Spiritual Fitness Important?

Your spiritual fitness affects your ability to deal with stress and crisis. Along with helping you feel happier and healthier, spiritual fitness reduces chaos. Studies have found that veterans who have an active spiritual practice report fewer and less severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. Those who struggled with their faith or felt alienated from God had more severe PTSD symptoms. Spiritual coping has been linked to better health among people who are ill. Spiritual fitness also reduces loneliness and depression, while it increases life satisfaction after a stressful experience.

1.2 A SHATTERED WORLD

In this section, you will learn how deployment can affect Service Members differently. The extraordinary combat experiences you faced may lead you to question your values and beliefs.



1.2.1 When Bad Things Happen To Good People

Experiences like war *can* affect your spiritual fitness and shake up your beliefs and lead you to question your values. Some service members may feel more alone, or even abandoned or betrayed by their God. New priorities may emerge, giving you a new perspective on life, and less (or more) connection to what you hold sacred.

Most people believe:

- They are safe and worthy of love and respect.
- Other people are trustworthy and basically kind.
- The world is meaningful.

Do you believe those things?

If you're not sure, think about a time when someone did something mean or unfair to you. Or think about a child killed in a drunk-driving accident. Or maybe you heard about someone being unfaithful in a relationship. Were you surprised? Angered? Confused? Most people have strong feelings about those kinds of situations because they challenge deeply held beliefs. Deep down, these beliefs reflect our spirituality.

Let's look at examples of how deployment has affected some Service Members:

Example 1: Before deploying, SGT Smith had never been through a traumatic event. Three months into his deployment, a close buddy was killed by an IED. Before the tragedy, SGT Smith believed in God. But after his buddy's death, he started thinking that life didn't make any sense and that maybe God wasn't watching and protecting him. He thought it was unfair that his buddy, a good man, was killed while other people lived. He stopped praying because he figured no one was listening. SGT Smith felt like nothing mattered any more. After returning home, he stopped attending church, and didn't return phone calls from church friends. He began arguing more with his wife and coworkers.



1.2.1 When Bad Things Happen To Good People (cont.)



Example 2: Capt Morton's beliefs about life and other people were shattered after she was sexually assaulted. Trusting others became increasingly difficult. While Capt Morton didn't believe in God, she used to enjoy hiking and spending time in nature. Being in the woods, she sensed she was part of something bigger. Her hikes in the forest gave her comfort and happiness. But after the sexual assault, she began to feel a deep loneliness, as if she was separate from the world. She stopped asking for support because she didn't think anyone would come through for her. She spent more time by her self, until she was eating and spending all her free time alone. She stopped hiking or spending any time outdoors. She felt increasingly isolated and on edge.

The reactions of SGT Smith and Capt Morton to their traumatic experiences are understandable. In both situations, these service members learned their personal beliefs had exceptions. They discovered that they weren't always safe, that others weren't always trustworthy, and that life didn't always make sense. Unfortunately, because of their experiences their beliefs were completely overhauled – SGT Smith believed that *nothing* was meaningful and Capt Morton believed that *no one* was safe or trustworthy.

It's normal to struggle with these thoughts and questions in the face of stress and trauma. It makes sense that your beliefs, values, and ways of understanding things would change after an experience that goes against everything you thought was right, fair, or true. So what do you do if your assumptions about yourself, others, and the world are fundamentally shaken or entirely shattered?

1.3 MAKING MEANING OUT OF TRAUMA

In this section, you will be introduced to some ways to help you process and restore balance into your life. Learning to make sense of what happened can rebuild your sense of purpose and meaning.



1.3.1 Meaning And Connection

Things you can do after a traumatic experience to restore some balance:

- Talk about your questions and beliefs with someone you trust.
- Spend time thinking, expressing, and making sense of the experience, whether through talking, writing, art, music, or other means.
- Practice your spirituality to feel more connected and focused on what is important to you.
- Share your thoughts, feelings and questions with counselors and chaplains. They can help you rebuild your beliefs and find meaning.

1.3.1 Meaning And Connection (cont.)

How do you bring spirituality into your life?
How have you in the past? Which of the following suggestions would you consider as a way to bring more spirituality into your life?

- Prayer
- Meditation
- Attending religious services
- Spending time in a place of worship or contemplation
- Seeking spiritual counseling
- Participating in a religious or spiritual social group
- Participating in a spiritual or religious reading or discussion
- Being in nature
- Performing a ritual (*such as lighting a candle for a fallen friend, taking a pilgrimage to a sacred place, performing a “funeral” for the loss of your innocence and the rebirth of your spirit, or rituals associated with a particular belief system*)

You can do any of those things alone or with others. Participating in activities with family, friends, or a larger community adds another dimension to your spiritual fitness by increasing your connection to other people.

Now let's look
at ways to make sense
of what happened,
so you
can **rebuild** your sense
of
purpose and **meaning**.



Traumatic events can turn your world upside-down. You may have trouble making sense of what happened, notice shifts in what seems real, what really matters, and how connected you feel to others and God. When your beliefs get shattered, you may start to see life or God as confusing, meaningless, or even dangerous and cruel. It can be a painful and confusing time.

After a traumatic deployment experience, service members must make sense of the world again, examine their priorities, and come to terms with loss and change. They may ask for forgiveness or get angry about feeling betrayed. This process can affect your health and well-being. According to psychologist Margaret Nelson-Pechota, “The ability to make sense of a traumatic event in a way that ‘fits’ with one’s previous beliefs not only reduces the likelihood of PTSD, it may even lead to psychological or spiritual growth. Combat veterans who were able to find meaning and purpose in their traumatic experiences were less likely to develop PTSD”.

If you have had a traumatic experience, there are several ways that you can rebuild a sense of meaning. One way is to **reflect** on your feelings and experiences. Another is to **make sense** of your story, to look at it in the “big picture.”



1.4 GUILT, SHAME, BETRAYAL, TRUST

In this section, you will learn more about common feelings that are experienced by service members. Terrible things happen during war and some respond with guilt or shame while others become angry or feel betrayed. All of these emotions can be overcome as you learn to process them individually and with others.

1.4.1 Guilt And Shame

GUILT: Feeling guilty is not always bad. If you're feeling guilty, that's usually a sign you've done something that doesn't agree with your personal morals or values. Guilt can help you stay connected to your "moral compass," to other people, and to your spirituality. When people feel guilty, they are less likely to repeat the things that made them feel guilty. Guilt keeps them in line with their values.

In wartime, service members sometimes feel guilty about things they do in certain circumstances. They may feel guilt over something they did, like killing people. Or they may feel guilty because of something they didn't do, like not helping someone who was struggling. In the war zone, the ethics of war sometimes wins out over people's personal ethics. The service member may not have had a choice, but he or she may feel guilty anyway. Some service members say they have done things that felt "wrong" to them. Even if they acted under orders, many feel guilt about hurting others. They have trouble finding peace with themselves or God.

People feel
guilty
about things they
have done.

SURVIVOR GUILT is an example of guilt about something that could not be helped. It is common for service members to feel guilty that they survived when their buddies did not – even when they could not have prevented those losses. You may not understand why someone else died and you didn't. You may worry about whether people deserve to die, whether there is a God protecting you, and how unfair life is.

Talking to a chaplain, spiritual counselor, or therapist can help. With their guidance, you can sort through your guilt feelings and make amends if necessary.



SHAME: People feel *guilty* about their *behavior*, but people feel *shame* about *who they are*. When people feel shame, instead of focusing on an act, they turn the act into a statement about *themselves*. For example, instead of feeling guilty about killing people in combat, a service member might think, "I'm a killer. I'm a terrible person because I have killed." Every good thing that service member has done no longer counts or is forgotten. This one action has reduced the individual to one identity.

1.4.1 Guilt And Shame (cont.)

When people are ashamed, they think others will react to them in certain ways. Thoughts like, “if they knew what I did, they would reject me” indicate feelings of shame. People who feel shame often also feel weak, worthless, exposed, or humiliated. Service members who believe in God may also feel unworthy in God’s presence. Agnostics or atheists may also feel bad about themselves or unworthy of living.

These painful thoughts can lead service members to isolate from others or to treat themselves poorly. You may be able to get rid of your shame by talking to someone about the things you’ve hidden or ignored. You’ll learn that bad behaviors and bad judgment don’t make you a bad person. There are things you can do to make amends for mistakes you’ve made.

Shame is a normal,
but mistaken,
reaction to guilt feelings.

Maybe you’ve done things during deployment that you feel are unforgivable. You may feel distant from God or other people. To cope, you may try to forget your war experiences. One VA psychiatrist has said, “Service members may feel trapped by the fear of facing the meaning of their actions. They might attempt to forget, avoid, run, or outlive these memories. This leads to a feeling of bad faith and of breaking covenant with others, God, and with one’s own nature. Often, however, when they face these fears as adults, they realize they can deal with these fears as adults.

1.4.2 Overcoming Guilt And Shame

The following 5 steps can help you overcome your guilt or shame. Let’s take a closer look at each step:

STEP 1: Consider the seriousness of the act

Often guilt and shame mean your morals and values were violated. Ask yourself:

- Do other people think this is as serious as I do?
- How serious would I think this was if my best friend did the same thing?
- How serious will this seem one month from now? One year? Ten years?
How serious would I think this is if someone did the same thing to me?
- Did I know ahead of time how serious this was?
- Did I know ahead of time the meaning or consequences of my actions?
- Can the damage be repaired? How long will that take?
- Was there something more serious I considered but didn’t do?

STEP 2: Evaluate your personal responsibility

Sometimes people are required to do things without a choice. Was this true for you?

- How much personal responsibility did you have for the situation you feel guilty about? List (or think about) all of the people and circumstances surrounding the event. Put yourself last. Assign percentages of responsibility to each person.

OR

- Did you want or intend for this to happen? Did you volunteer or sign up for this?

STEP 1:
Consider the
seriousness of the act.

STEP 2:
Evaluate your personal
responsibility.

STEP 3:
Break the silence.

STEP 4:
Forgive.

STEP 5:
Make amends.

1.4.2 Overcoming Guilt And Shame (cont.)

STEP 3: Break the Silence

Often when people feel guilty or ashamed they prefer to keep quiet about it. Fear of rejection often goes

along with guilt and shame. It may help to talk with a trusted friend or counselor. Often your fears of others reactions are unfounded. Most people are willing to listen and forgive. Sometimes they're more willing to forgive us than we are to forgive ourselves. Remember to talk to someone you trust.

STEP 4: Forgive

You may have to learn how to forgive yourself and others. You might need to accept forgiveness from God for what you've done. Part of asking for God's forgiveness may involve repentance (expressing your remorse) and a commitment to act differently in the future. Forgiving yourself includes changing thinking from, "I am an awful person because of this" to, "My mistake does not define who I am." Forgiving yourself means recognizing mistakes and accepting shortcomings.



Research shows that when people forgive others, they become less vengeful, and more generous and kind toward others. Part of forgiveness is "benefit finding," or finding the good in a challenging situation. This part of forgiving doesn't mean forgetting the wrong. Instead, it means paying attention to ways you've grown or changed.

Common benefits found after a traumatic event include:

- Realizing inner strength.
- Renewed spirituality or greater sense of connection to God.
- New appreciation for life.
- Improved relationships with friends and family.

STEP 5: Make Amends

This is the "action" part of forgiveness. It is important to make amends when you harm someone else. Recognize

and accept your responsibility for the hurtful act. Then approach the person and ask for forgiveness, if possible. You must also decide how to repair the hurt and avoid similar situations in the future.

Making amends may be part of a spiritual or religious practice, too. Again, you can talk about this with a counselor, chaplain, or spiritual leader. You can also work through your guilt by talking to others and getting spiritual advice. As you make amends, keep these things in mind:

1. You did not know then everything you know now ("20-20 hindsight").
2. Split-second, life-and-death decisions don't allow you to make careful choices.
3. Think about what you thought was likely to happen when you decided what to do.
4. Acting on "hunches" or "intuition" rarely pays off; you can't predict what will happen.
5. Your emotional reactions to traumatic situations are usually out of your control.
6. When every choice has negative consequences, the least bad choice is the moral or wise choice.
7. DON'T focus only on the good things that *might* have happened if you had acted differently. Remember things might have turned out much worse.
8. Remember that many influences combine to cause traumatic events.

1.4.3 Betrayal And Trust

Terrible things can happen during war. When deaths or injuries occur, a service member may feel guilty, even if they acted appropriately. Other times, instead of guilt, the service member might feel angry or betrayed. Those of faith may feel betrayed by God. Agnostics and atheists may feel angry and betrayed by life itself. Feeling betrayed can lead to feeling disconnected, empty, and alone.



For example, after a deadly attack where civilians died, SPC Harris feels angry and betrayed by God and her commanding officers. She keeps wondering, "Who is to blame? Who allowed this death and destruction? Who wanted this to happen?" She's angry because she can't see why the death of civilians was necessary. She wonders if her superiors knew what they were doing or understood the cost of their commands. She also wonders how God could allow the deaths of so many civilians. She thinks God betrayed those who died or lost loved ones.

It's difficult to see the goodness or value of war when innocent lives are lost or good people are injured. Experiences like these may make you unsure of who and what you can count on.

It's **natural** to wonder who or what is to blame for death and destruction in the world.

Service members may feel let down or disappointed by their leadership or their buddies. Having the "Soldiers Trust" broken can change the way a service member sees things. Throughout history, military members have struggled with the "blame" question. Some service members feel their leadership is not concerned about the loss of life. Battlefield experiences may also lead spiritual service members to doubt, question, or even blame God. This has been called "becoming a spiritual orphan."

Without
some level
of **TRUST** —
life can become
lonely .

1.4.4 Overcoming Betrayal And Learning To Trust

At the same time, without at least a little trust in *something*, or in a few people, life can get lonely and bitter. Here is how one Vietnam veteran talks about this process: "What I found was that holding on to bitterness and hate keeps the wounds open. You have to give up even justified bitterness and hate to fully heal the emotional and spiritual wounds of war."

1.4.4 Overcoming Betrayal And Learning To Trust (cont.)

If you have a hard time trusting others or trusting God:

Talk to someone. Talking to a chaplain can help if you feel distant from or betrayed by God. Talk about what led you to stop trusting in the first place. For many people, the anger and fear they were feeling begins to dissolve once they talk about their experiences and feel heard.

Examine your thoughts. A traumatic experience can affect your self-talk in powerful ways. It's normal to think about the trauma, why it happened, and what it means about you and your future. You might think about things in negative, upsetting ways. This might *feel* right, but it may not be entirely accurate. Negative self-talk makes feelings worse, not better. Become more aware of what you say to yourself—weed out the unrealistic thoughts and beliefs and plant thoughts that are more accurate.

If you don't trust anyone, you may have some *automatic thoughts* that make trust difficult for you.

Example: MAJ Washington was injured during a convoy. Days later, he finds himself thinking his injury could have been avoided. He decides, "I can't count on anyone." MAJ Washington also thinks, "God doesn't really care. I thought He was watching out for me, but He's not." After discussing his situation with a chaplain, MAJ Washington realizes that thinking he can't count on *anyone at all* is extreme. He starts to think of exceptions, like friends and family who have come through for him in the past. Slowly, he begins to realize his injury has been no one's fault, and that there are *some* people he can count on, at least *some* of the time.

Once he gets over the "blame game," MAJ Washington talks with the chaplain about how he thinks God hasn't watched out for him and doesn't really care about him. Through discussion, MAJ Washington realizes he might be jumping to conclusions, and that it's hard to know what God is doing. He also realizes his pattern of thinking is pushing other people—and his spirituality—away. MAJ Washington stops *expecting* to be let down and starts noticing that sometimes his trust in others is rewarded.

If you wonder where God has gone during your difficult or traumatic experience, talk to a chaplain or spiritual counselor.

1.5 THE HERO'S JOURNEY

In this section, you will learn more about common feelings that are experienced by Service Members. Terrible things happen during war and some respond with guilt or shame while others become angry or feel betrayed. All of these emotions can be overcome as you learn to process them individually and with others.



1.5.1 What is a "Hero?"

It may be hard for you to make sense of the extreme experiences you've had. Sometimes it helps to think about how the events of your deployment fit into the world, and into history. This may help you find meaning in your experiences.

Not all service members feel like heroes. Some have done things they are ashamed of. Some believe they've let others down or failed at their duty. But before you decide you aren't a hero, let's think about what that word means.

Society has a powerful idea of what it means to be a "hero." Movie stars like John Wayne, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Angelina Jolie, and Sylvester Stallone are modern icons of heroism. But you don't need to be a fearless fighting machine to be a hero. Heroes sacrifice for their country, beliefs, loved ones and buddies.

1.5.1 What is a “Hero?” (cont.)

No matter what role you had during deployment, you are a hero because you took an oath to serve and protect America. Putting your life on the line shows great courage and strength of spirit.

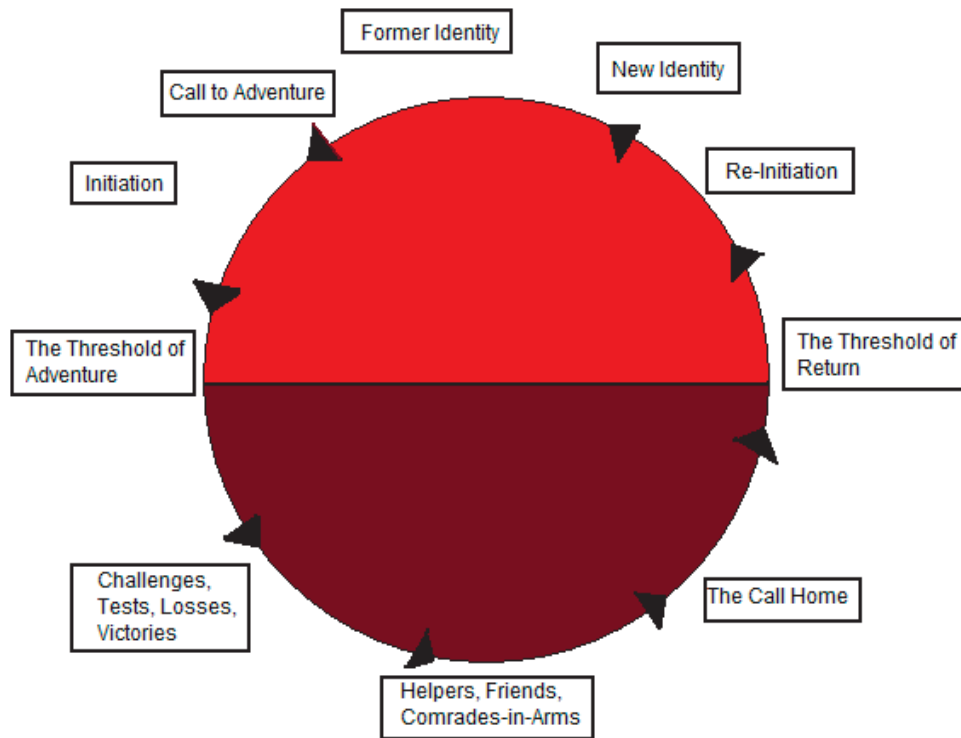
What makes a hero? Answering the call to serve makes you a hero. Enduring the hardships and chaos of deployment makes you a hero. Being in situations that forced you to make split-second decisions with no “good” options makes you a hero. Taking risks and carrying the burden of those risks makes you a hero. You might think you’re not a hero because your contribution was small or meaningless compared to others. But heroes and heroic deeds come in all sizes.

1.5.2 The Hero’s Journey

Author Joseph Campbell studied religions and myths of cultures from around the world. He discovered a pattern in the stories of all cultures that he called, “The Hero’s Journey.” The journey causes the hero to find meaning and purpose in life.

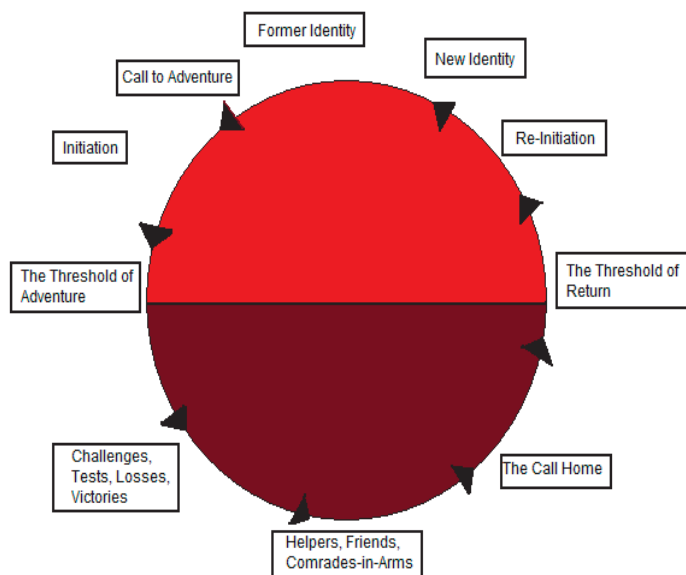
The Hero’s Journey is not all “fun and games.” Part of your hero’s journey is learning to overcome challenges and accept the new person you become as you grow and change.

This illustration of the Hero’s Journey explains the idea of “challenge and change.”



Finding this common pattern in sacred stories throughout the world and throughout history, Joseph Campbell saw the Hero’s Journey as a *universal* description of what people go through when faced with war or other life-changing trauma.

1.5.2 The Hero's Journey (cont.)



1. Former Identity

At the beginning of the Hero's Journey, the hero has an identity based on his life experience. This identity is made up of the beliefs and values described earlier in this section – a religious or spiritual practice and a moral and ethical understanding. The hero knows who he or she wants to be.

2. Call to Adventure

At some point in the hero's life, there is a "call to adventure." It may be a call to slay a dragon, or to bring an enemy to justice. This call is a moral battle for justice.

3. Initiation

Often, before the adventure can begin, the hero must prepare for the challenges ahead. The hero must say goodbye to loved ones, learn new skills, or travel a great distance.

4. Threshold of Adventure

Eventually, the hero enters new and dangerous territory. The hero often feels disoriented, uncomfortable, or shocked in this new world.

5. Challenges, Tests, Losses, and Victories

This new world presents challenges and hardships that catch the hero off guard. While battling the dragon or searching for sacred treasure, the hero suffers great losses (such as the death of a friend or the loss of a limb) and has great victories (the defeat of an enemy or the safe return of something valuable).

6. Helpers, Friends, Comrades-in-Arms

Throughout the adventure, the hero relies on others for support, protection, and friendship.

7. The Call Home

At some point, the hero must return home – the task has been completed or the hero is needed elsewhere. The hero prepares to end the adventure, even if things haven't gone as planned or the job is unfinished.

8. The Threshold of Return

Crossing over the "threshold of return," the hero experiences long travel and preparations before being reunited with friends and family.

9. Re-initiation

The hero returns home to family, friends and community. But much has changed in the hero's life, including the hero's values and beliefs.

10. New Identity

The hero must redefine life based on the new feelings and ideas brought up by the adventure. The hero's identity has changed because of the challenges, victories and losses experienced while on the Hero's Journey. To remain strong for the community, the hero works hard to make sense of the new values discovered along the journey.



1.5.3 The Hero's Journey: What Does It Mean To Me?

How can old stories and religious legends help you deal with *your* problems? The message of the Hero's Journey: no matter what hardships you face during a trauma, *you are not alone*. It is a normal, human experience *to be changed forever by intense life events*. Let's look at current example of the Hero's Journey. CPL Reuben is a medic who has been with the Army for a little over a year but has never been deployed.

1. Former Identity: CPL Reuben sees himself as a good father and a loving husband. He is proud of his medical training and skills, is active in his church, and is a loyal member of the Armed Forces.

2. Call to Adventure: As the conflict in Iraq intensifies, CPL Reuben's unit receives orders to deploy. He must say goodbye to his family and friends. He finds it especially difficult to say goodbye to his daughters. However, he believes he is serving a cause greater than himself by serving his country.

3. Initiation: CPL Reuben experiences intense preparation, briefing, and training based on new intelligence from the field. It's exciting, exhausting, and overwhelming. CPL Reuben gains a sense of purpose and is eager to join the conflict and help out as best he can.

4. Threshold of Adventure: Soon CPL Reuben's unit is deployed to Iraq and he finds himself in a "hot zone" with many casualties. The first week is a blur of tending to terrible wounds amid fighting and gunfire. CPL Reuben's nerves are rattled and raw. He doesn't know how to make sense of the things he sees. It feels like an alien world.

5. Challenges, Tests, Losses, and Victories: During the next several months CPL Reuben learns a great deal. His reflexes become faster, his skills become expert, and he saves lives. But he also sees a great deal of death. He is often in mortal danger. His best friend is sent home with a serious injury; many other friends die. He feels far from home, and far from his God.

6. Helpers, Friends, Comrades-In-Arms: Though CPL Reuben misses home, he doesn't feel alone. Surrounded by fellow service members, CPL Reuben feels proud to be working with such dedicated men and women. On the other hand, this makes it all the more difficult to watch his friends suffer from life-threatening injuries. He wonders how God could let such awful things happen to people trying to do good work. He finds himself torn between pride, fear, frustration and exhaustion.

7. The Call Home: As CPL Reuben's deployment ends, he has mixed emotions. He's ready to see his home and family. He's ready to heal from his shrapnel wounds. At the same time, he feels guilty leaving his buddies in the war zone and wonders why God allowed him to live when so many others died in action.

8. The Threshold of Return: CPL Reuben's unit returns to their post. They have several days of debriefing, examinations, interviews, and paperwork. While he is happy to be back in the States, CPL Reuben feels bored and restless. During Sunday church services, he feels angry at God for allowing the war in Iraq to continue. His religion doesn't seem to provide him with the answers he's seeking. Church services start to feel empty and meaningless.

9. Re-initiation: The day finally arrives for CPL Reuben to return to his hometown. He gets a warm welcome from neighbors and friends. He is overjoyed to see his wife and family. He's shocked at how much his kids have grown. There are other changes: his wife has rearranged the furniture, new houses have gone up in his neighborhood, and his activities are limited because of his shrapnel wounds. The changes make CPL Reuben feel like a stranger in his own home.

10. New Identity: The hero must redefine life based on the new feelings and ideas brought up by the adventure. The hero's identity has changed because of the challenges, victories and losses experienced while on the Hero's Journey. To remain strong for the community, the hero works hard to make sense of the new values discovered along the journey.

Heroes have problems too—
Nobody is perfect

Even heroes have doubts—
It's okay to seek spiritual
guidance

Heroes aren't all alone—
Heroes rely on their friends
and community

1.5.4 The Hero's Journey and Spiritual Fitness

Because of his difficult deployment experiences, CPL Reuben questions his beliefs and his values. He no longer enjoys going to church and questions his faith in God. His stress reactions cause conflict with his children. He argues more with his wife and his injuries make it difficult to do the things he used to enjoy. CPL Reuben is suffering an “identity crisis.”

Joseph Campbell discovered that in many cultural mythologies, the hero had to come to terms with a new identity to fully re-enter the community. When this didn't happen, the hero would often disappear into the forest or mountains, never to be heard from again. This is similar to “isolation,” when a person separates from friends and family to tackle (or ignore) problems alone.

Instead of isolating, CPL Reuben has several other options for dealing with his spiritual pain:

Nobody Is Perfect:

CPL Reuben could realize his physical injuries, frustration, and distress don't mean there is anything “wrong” with him. Even if his transition back home hasn't been perfect, he is still a hero for the sacrifices he made to serve his country.

It's Okay to Seek Spiritual Guidance:

CPL Reuben's questions about God and the meaning of life are normal after a stressful, traumatic event. Instead of shutting down and pulling away, CPL Reuben could speak with his minister or a chaplain about those concerns. He doesn't have to face these questions alone.

Heroes Rely on Friends and Community:

Remembering how much he appreciated his buddies and comrades during his deployment, CPL Reuben could realize that turning to close family members, friends, or a counselor could help. In the long run he will be a stronger, healthier, happier person if he asks for help.



HERO'S HWY

1.6 RECONNECTION

It's natural to distrust people or feel alone but over time these reactions can create other problems. Even though it is hard to ask for help, there are many resources available to help yourself or someone you know.



1.6.1 Spiritual Isolation

In the aftermath of trauma, it's common to have problems trusting people. Feeling alone and disconnected is also common. You may feel like others can't understand what you've been through or how you've changed. After being injured or having seen others hurt or killed, you may feel angry or vulnerable. You may want to withdraw or isolate yourself. This sense of isolation can get even stronger after returning home, because there may be fewer people around with similar experiences.

Why do service members isolate after a traumatic experience? Some isolate for privacy or to avoid the discomfort, fear, and anger they feel around others. Avoiding people and situations creates problems over time. The situation back home is not dangerous like your deployment. So "going it alone" isn't necessary.

**Avoiding doesn't
allow *new learning*
to occur.**

Some service members feel spiritually alienated. "Spiritual alienation" means moving away from what is spiritually meaningful, sacred, or divine. Service members who struggle in their relationship with God may struggle in other areas of their life. This may be especially true if their spiritual life was a source of support and guidance in the past.

Feeling disconnected from others often goes hand in hand with feeling spiritually alone. Connecting with others is part of what nourishes a person's spiritual life. Connecting gives us a sense of meaning and purpose.

1.6.2 Thoughts That Increase Isolation



Trauma survivors may feel even more disconnected and alone if they think "all-or-nothing" thoughts, such as, "The world is never safe," or, "I can't trust anyone." All-or-nothing thoughts put things in black and white. In reality, there is usually some gray area. Another way to look at the situation might be, "Something bad happened, but that doesn't mean the whole world is unsafe," or, "I can't trust *everyone*, but I can trust some people with some things."

Thinking it's safer to be alone is normal. When people are alone, they often feel less vulnerable and more in control. While being around other people may increase some risk, it's also a great source of support and protection from harm. Even though your desire to withdraw may be strong, isolation and avoidance often hurt more than they help. Isolation leaves people feeling alone, afraid, and disconnected.

1.6.3 Why Connect?

Spiritual fitness includes connecting with other people, with God, and with nature. It can be tough to reconnect after deployment. But connecting improves your quality of life and helps you recover and rebuild healthier life conditions.

People who connect through spiritual activities often feel part of something “bigger.” They tap into these experiences in a variety of ways:

- Spending time with other people at worship or spiritual events
- Participating in other communal spiritual activities (like meditating with others)

Connecting with others can also happen in settings that aren't spiritual:

- Having a good talk
- Playing sports with other people
- Working on a group project
- Walking/ Running for a cause (like support for troops, school funding, cancer)
- Volunteering



CONNECTING with others helps you to build community.

Some service members tap into a spiritual experience by connecting with nature, including animals. Being surrounded by life in all its forms also creates a sense of being part of something larger than you.

1.6.4 Tips For Beating Isolation

If you are tempted to isolate, you should force yourself to spend time with others. Being around others is important for spiritual and personal well-being. Withdrawing from people affects spiritual fitness because spirituality is about *meaning* and *connection*. Without connection, life feels meaningless.

AVOIDANCE *doesn't* solve problems.

It pushes the problems away and *may* even make the problems worse.

1.6.4 Tips For Beating Isolation (cont.)

You can beat isolation by:

- Making plans ahead of time to socialize with others. Stick to the plan even if your impulse is to be alone. For example: set a plan to make at least one phone call a day, even if it's only five minutes.
- Commit to leaving the house for at least thirty minutes a day and go to a location where you will find other people (grocery store, post office, bank).
- Spending time with people you trust, in places where you're comfortable.
- Being in places where you're around people but don't have to interact much, like a church service.
- Taking short outings. Then, with each outing, increase how long you stay out.
- Doing things with people where your attention is on the activity instead of the person, like playing a game or sport, or going to a movie.
- Increasing your comfort zone and taking small risks with someone you trust.



These steps help you increase your spiritual fitness and stay strong as you adjust to the transition back home.

For more spirituality support, think about talking to someone in person. Chaplains are on duty and on base “24/7.” Chaplains can help you address the pain from spiritual distress. Talk to a chaplain about your experiences, and about your relationships with others or with God. Chaplains provide support that relates to your health as a whole, including your deeply held values and beliefs. Chaplains can discuss how to build relationships that offer meaning and hope in the midst of your questions.



Chaplains don't take the place of other healthcare professionals. Most chaplains aren't trained to provide in-depth psychological counseling, though some chaplains have specialized training as counselors. Trained counselors, including psychologists, social workers, and marriage and family therapists, can also talk with you about your spiritual life.

Check out the other materials in the ***Spirituality*** program. There are also resources that can help in the ***Getting Help*** section of ***afterdeployment***.



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