The Clergy Connection

January 2015

Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does. ~ William James

Newsletter of the National VA Chaplain Center **Rural Clergy Training Program**

Everyone - pantheist, atheist, skeptic, polytheist - has to answer these questions: 'Where did I come from? What is life's meaning? How do I def ne right from wrong and what happens to me when I die?' Those are the fulcrum points of our existence. ~ Ravi Zacharias

Increasingly, research is showing what the Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, and Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl knew all along: That meaning and purpose in life can sustain life itself and that it certainly contributes to quality of life. This issue of ***The Clergy Connection*** considers the relationships among life meaning, spirituality and trauma and provides guidance for rural community clergy in promoting health through a greater awareness of meaning and purpose in life. ☙

Did You Know? Spiritual Distress and Life Meaning

Spirituality is that which gives a person meaning and purpose. It is found in relationships: with self, others, ideas, nature, and, possibly, a higher power. These many relationships form a complex web that organizes a person's sense of meaning and purpose.

Spiritual crisis or distress arises when one of these relationships that provide meaning is threatened or broken. The more signif cant a particular relationship is, the greater the severity of spiritual distress if that relationship is threatened or broken.

Spiritual wholeness is restored when that which threatens or breaks the patient's relational web of meaning is removed, transformed, integrated, or transcended.

~ Chaplain Mark LaRocca-Pitts, MDiv, PhD, BCC

Questions to Consider

1. *Have you ever personally faced spiritual distress related to loss of life meaning? Or have you ever known a person experiencing such spiritual distress? If so, how would you describe the distress? How can you identify a person in spiritual distress related to loss of meaning?*
2. *Consider your experiences with resolution of spiritual distress. How were the distressed people changed following resolution of spiritual crisis and distress?*
3. *For those who resolved their spiritual crisis, what was the process that led to the resolution?* ☙

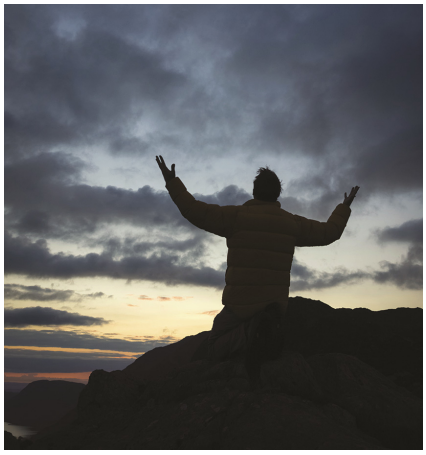
Veterans Crisis Line
1-800-273-8255 PRESS 1
Confidential help for Veterans and their Families.

The Clergy Connection is a publication of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) and National VA Chaplain Center "Rural Clergy Training Program." For more information, contact: Jim Goalder, jim.goalder@gmail.com.

Practical Pastoral Tips

Think about meaning and purpose in your own life. Imagine how your life might be changed if your purpose(s) suddenly ceased to exist. A couple of things might come to mind.

First, there would be distress and a sense of feeling lost. Second, there might be the feeling that you are unique. You might understand that your purpose was formed by very intimate and personal values cemented through teaching, life experiences and your own thought. The path through which you reached an understanding of purpose and the constellation of values undergirding it are yours alone. Third, the undergirding vales are sometimes hidden from us. We often understand purpose through our commitment to something. But we sometimes fail to know the underlying values that focus that commitment. That can make the re-establishment of purpose after trauma complicated and difficult. Fourth, any exploration of values following trauma would likely be a creative process.



That means that, after introduction of the topic of meaning or purpose, the process of understanding and helping is a free-form one. No formulas. But how can we start such a conversation well? Here are some ways of starting up such a dialogue with a warrior who has lost his or her sense of meaning.

1. *Is there anyone that you remain committed to, whose life is important to you?*
2. *Who have you known, either f ctional or real, that you deeply respect? What is it about them that you so deeply admired?*
3. *Think about your life before military service. What were the most important things in your life at that time? What parts of those things are still important to you? If none are, what might take their place?*
4. *Imagine yourself sometime in the future and imagine you know you are about to die. You know you have a short time to live. Review your life from today through the years until your death. What could you have done or who could you have been involved with that would allow you to feel better about your life?*
5. *What has brought you the greatest happiness in your life?*

After opening the door with these questions, good pastoral care involves exploratory conversations focused on values.

Conversation is used to f nd new ways the values can be satisf ed in the life of the warrior (*see A Community Success Story, pg. 4* for an example).

Your Story Matters: Purpose and Meaning

Through our workshop evaluations, we have learned much about how the warrior's community clergy see them and how they work with them. For example, we learned that most clergy are very comfortable working with Veterans and that clergy see both Veterans and their families for issues of concern fairly often.

Purpose and meaning for many warriors seems to be intimately tied to three interrelated abilities: 1) the ability to love and be loved, 2) the ability to accomplish something they believe is important, and 3) the ability to be happy. For these warriors, the tie that binds these abilities together can be religious faith and/or spirituality.

We have further learned from our evaluations that community clergy see warriors and their families most often for spiritual and marital/family issues and only a little less for social and employment issues.

These results suggest a focus on relationships, accomplishment and spirituality. And that suggests that many

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Research: Warriors' Search for Meaning

An interesting older study looked at the relationship between meaning and purpose in life and spiritual beliefs among warriors diagnosed with PTSD. Structural equation modeling, a sophisticated statistical technique, was used to analyze data. Results suggested that two combat events weakened religious faith both directly and through a sense of guilt:

1) Acceptance of personal responsibility for killing others and 2) failing to prevent deaths of others. Weakened religious faith predicted more extensive use of mental health services. Other data suggest that it is the weakening of faith and increases in guilt rather than severity of symptoms that actually serve to engage warriors in mental health services. The authors concluded that warriors with PTSD often seek care from mental health professionals to re-attain a meaning and purpose in life that was lost through a weakened faith and sense of guilt. Interestingly, recent research has found that warriors with PTSD and those who have been recently engaged with professionals in PTSD treatment are more likely to seek assistance from clergy.

Questions to Consider

1. *Warriors with a lost sense of purpose and meaning are often in existential and/or spiritual crisis. With such a crisis, they will usually look to their most trusted contacts for help. Preventively, how could you and your House of Worship become "most trusted" prior to a warrior's deployment?*

2. *It is interesting that warriors with PTSD and those in PTSD treatment are more likely to visit a member of the clergy for help. This suggests that mental health professionals may be an asset in your spiritual work. What is the current state of clergy/mental health professional relationships in your community? How could you or your ministerial association initiate improved collaboration with mental health professionals?*
3. *How well-prepared are you to work with warriors with a) weakened faith or 2) strong sense of guilt? If you need additional training in these areas, where could you get it?*

Read the abstracts from the cited research studies.

"Trauma, change in strength of religious faith, and mental health service use among veterans treated for PTSD," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15348973

"Help-seeking from clergy and spiritual counselors among veterans with depression and PTSD in primary care," *Journal of Religion and Health*, http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23297184 ☙

Your Story Matters *Continued from page 2*

Veterans may come to community clergy due to an undergirding issue: loss of meaning and purpose in life. Handling this undergirding issue effectively as well as the obvious, presented issues can greatly assist Veterans with a re-instillation of meaning and hope.

Questions to Consider

1. *Veterans in crisis f rst want to attend to the particulars of the crisis, not to "meaning in life." In your pastoral care, what are the signs that tell you it's time to switch from "crisis" discussion to "meaning" discussion?*
2. *What is the relationship between your faith or spirituality and your own happiness and quality of life? In working with a warrior with very different values, how can you keep from intruding into the warrior's life with your own values and yet be a source of healing?*
3. *What might your House of Worship or community do to promote a greater sense of meaning and purpose for Veterans at risk?* ☙

A Story for Reflection

A squad goes on patrol with Texas and Dillon, the speaker. "I was talking to Texas as we went across the ditch. He was about ten feet in front.... The sh*t—it hit the fan. He (Texas) hit a trip wire, big explosion, then everything went crazy.... Texas had fallen. It had blown him up in the bush.... We all were firing. That's when it came to me. The helmet was on the ground. I looked up and (pause) I could see his shoulders. I reached up and grabbed this part of him. I pulled him down in front of me. That's when I noticed this part of his face was gone…'Don't be dead, man, don't be dead!'

***

We smoked our first joint together. It didn't matter he was white and from Texas and I was from Philly. I was glad he lived but I wanted to see him. That's when I stopped getting too close.

***

I changed that night. I used to be really, really scared before Texas got it. I found after that I wanted to find them. I wanted to fight and shoot something and pay them back for Texas."

Questions to Consider

1. *Before this night, meaning was shared fear and the intent to survive together. On this night, meaning changed. How would you phrase Dillon's meaning or purpose after this night?*
2. *Assume that Dillon had a religious upbringing and commitment leading up to this night. What are some possible changes in Dillon's faith that might follow from changes in his purpose after this night?*
3. *Consider the information about meaning and purpose provided in the other sections of this newsletter. What long-range changes to this warrior's life purpose and faith might you expect in his future?*
4. *How could you use your pastoral care skills to help this warrior?* ꕥ

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Community Success Story: The Mission Continues

One innovative project supports meaning-making for disabled Veterans in a way suggested elsewhere in this newsletter (*Practical Pastoral Tips*). ***The Mission Continues*** is a national program established by Eric Greitens, a Navy SEAL who learned about warriors' continuing desires to serve their country despite their injuries. ***The Mission Continues*** is about "reporting for duty in your community" and allows warriors to continue practicing an important value—service to country. Redef ning the mission can help re-attach warriors to a meaning and purpose that they believed was lost.

Researchers at the Washington University in St. Louis have been studying the effects of participation in ***The Mission Continues*** and found that among the group of 27 service-connected veterans surveyed:

- *86% reported that participation in The Mission Continues was a positive, life-changing experience.*
- *71% have furthered their education.*
- *86% have transferred military skills to civilian employment.*
- *91% had been able to sustain a role of service in their communities.*

Read more about how The Mission Continues and civic service is making a positive impact on post-9/11 Veterans, http://csd.wustl.edu/OurWork/CivicService/Pages/Mission Continues Publications.aspx. ꕥ