

Managing Guilt in combat-related PTSD

No matter how much training or preparation a person has prior to entering a combat situation, there is bound to be a psychological impact in situations where people are injured, and lives are lost. Service members are put into situations where they may have to pull a trigger, release a bomb, mortar a target, or perform other duties that have the potential to cause harm to other people. They often witness or are aware of intense human suffering and death. Combat situations may require a Service member to kill others. One of the major psychological impacts of combat and war is guilt.

Guilt can sometimes be a hard emotion to shake. After combat experiences, guilt may come in a few different forms:

- **Survivor's guilt:** "Why did my buddies have to die while I survived?" This is one of the most publicized forms of combat-related guilt. Many service members die in wars; however, many more survive, and these members naturally find themselves wondering why they survived when their friends did not. Consider this scenario: you are driving a Humvee but asked a friend to take over when you got tired. Sometime later, an IED explodes near the vehicle, killing your friend who is driving. You, resting in the backseat, survive. Such a situation could lead to intense survivor's guilt. Arriving home and seeing a buddy's wife and kids coping with their loss can also heighten survivor's guilt. While it is normal to wonder "Why them and not me?", dwelling on it can lead to intense and unproductive feelings. You may even start to think that you should not have been allowed to survive.
- **Guilt about killing enemy combatants:** Many people assume that Service members aren't very concerned about killing enemy combatants, as opposed to losing buddies or accidentally killing civilians. But the truth is that many Service members do struggle with issues related to the morality of war. After killing an enemy combatant, a Service member may feel intense guilt about the person they shot and wonder things like "Was he someone's father or husband?" This can be especially hard in situations where enemy combatants are very young.
- **Decisions resulting in death of friends/teammates:** In war, imperfect people are sent to fight and make the best decisions they can. In combat, decisions have to be made that we know will cost the lives of people with whom we have engaged in combat, even some civilians. This type of guilt can result from:

- *Friendly fire*: Accidentally shooting a team member who runs in front of your line of fire; strafing a convoy at night that turns out to be fellow Americans; mortaring a position after getting bad intel and finding out there were allied troops there, etc.
 - *Losing subordinates*: Ordering your men into a situation you knew would cost many of them their lives (“We have orders to take this section of the city -- no matter what”); making a call in the heat of the moment that results in casualties or fatalities (“I made a decision that cost peoples’ lives”); unknowingly sending people into a trap/ambush, etc.
- **Other decisions or actions that are combat-related:** There are a range of other things people do in order to survive or cope in war zones that may result in regret and guilt. Some examples are:
- *Freezing during battle*: This is something that occurs more than soldiers like to admit. Estimates from Vietnam suggest that as many as 1 in 4 soldiers in combat froze up for at least a part of a firefight. Very often, the person blames themselves for not being effective or feels like they acted cowardly. This reaction, however, is not something that we can control. In traumatic situations, humans and other animals may have an involuntary mechanism activated that causes them to lose the ability to move. This state is called **tonic immobility**, and it is present in nearly all mammals. This type of freezing response is pre-programmed into people; if it is triggered, it’s completely involuntary and nearly impossible to override.
 - *Collateral damage*: In WWII, both Axis and Allied planes regularly bombed major cities, causing widespread civilian deaths. In modern warfare, however, there is a strong emphasis on minimizing civilian deaths. While we try to minimize civilian deaths, war is associated with accidental deaths of non-combatants. Accidentally killing civilians, including women and children, is an unfortunate part of warfare, particularly when battling an insurgency that is known to use “human shields.”
 - *Aggression toward non-combatants*: This is another part of combat that people don’t like to talk about, but it’s a part of every war. After losing a friend or several members of your unit to enemy actions, it’s natural to want revenge and to see justice served. The next time you are around civilians, it is possible that you would act more harshly toward them. Battling an insurgency, where anyone in a town who appears friendly could in fact be a hostile, makes this type of reaction even more likely.

Managing guilt

While combat-related guilt is normal, it can become a major problem for some Service members. This usually happens when a person gets stuck in a pattern of thinking that is unrealistic and unhelpful. Dwelling on thoughts about what your lost friends would be doing now, and how you weren't able to save them can make you miserable. Changing some of the dysfunctional beliefs and patterns of thinking that lead to severe guilt has been shown to help Service members cope with, and eventually move past, combat-related guilt.

Using the Thought Monitoring Sheets, practice changing your guilt-producing thoughts to more rational and practical thinking. Examples of this type of corrective thinking are listed in this table:

Dysfunctional Thinking	Corrective Thinking
If people knew what really happened, they would never speak to me.	People know by now that bad things happen in combat and that Service members are put into situations where they have to make hard choices. My family doesn't have to know everything that happened, but even if they did, it's very likely they would be sympathetic and not stop speaking to you.
I'm a changed person. I'm damaged, and I'll never be the same person I was.	1. I'm not "damaged." Most of the things that make me think that (feeling overwhelmed, nightmares, quick temper) are symptoms of PTSD. With help and support, they will go away, and I will be back to who I used to be soon. 2. I survived something bad, and I have PTSD, which is a change. It's also something that goes away. Just going through this program is going to help bring my life back to normal.
I got people killed. I can't ever be trusted.	1. People make mistakes, and there has never been a perfect person. Countries send people into combat. Therefore, we know there must be mistakes in combat. It's been this way forever and will continue to be this way as long as mankind fights wars, because people inherently make mistakes. 2. Making (one) mistake doesn't mean you can't be trusted. Everyone makes mistakes, and if you can't trust someone because of a mistake, nobody could be trusted. Many leaders that I followed had also made mistakes in combat, but they learned from them and moved on. If they did it, so can I.
Why did I live and others die? I don't deserve to live.	1. In war, people die randomly. In IED attacks, something as random as where you sit in a vehicle can determine whether you live or die. The fact that I made it and someone else didn't doesn't have any cosmic answer. It can be as simple as being in the wrong place when a mortar comes in or being on the side of the vehicle nearest the IED. 2. The fact that someone else didn't make it doesn't mean that I don't deserve to live. My buddies would want the people who made it out to go on living great lives.

I have to live a perfect life since I made it out. I owe it to them.	1. This is a great sentiment, but it's too much pressure to put on myself. Surviving a war is an ordeal. I've earned the right to have more problems than the average Joe on the street. I shouldn't feel like I have to be problem free. The friends I lost wouldn't look down on me for having marital problems when they were alive, so why would they do that after they are gone? 2. What I actually owe fallen comrades is to keep them in my heart and mind, to remember them and their families. I don't need to be perfect to do that.

Additional ways to manage guilt:

TAKE THINGS AT YOUR OWN PACE. After making it through combat and experiencing horrific things, some of your friends and family will assume you need to talk about things. They may bring it up often to get you to talk about it. While it's a good idea to eventually be able to talk about experiences, you have to listen to your gut, and let people know when you are ready to do it. If someone is pushing you to talk or mentioning things over and over, let them know that they have to give you space. There may even be some things that happened that you never discuss with your family, and that is OK.

FIND PEACE IN SPIRITUALITY. Many combat veterans have found that becoming more connected with their religion helps them cope with combat-related guilt. By attending religious services, talking with clergy, and praying, they are able to find meaning in what they have lived through.

ALLOW TIME TO HEAL YOUR WOUNDS. Many think it's a cliché to say that time heals all wounds, but there is truth in the idea that guilt and sorrow related to combat tend to get better as time passes. While you will always remember lost friends, these memories will come to feel less like they are haunting you and more like other memories you've experienced.

HONOR THE DEAD. Another way that combat veterans cope with guilt is by finding some way to honor the people they knew who died. Many veterans honor their fallen friends and others that were killed by doing such things as:

- Staying connected with a lost friend's family, visiting or calling on holidays and the anniversary of their loss.
- Writing a letter to a lost buddy that you put away or destroy. Putting your thoughts and feelings about the person on paper isn't just symbolic, it's very often a good way of getting some measure of closure.

- Going to your place of worship or some place that reminds you of your friend and saying a prayer for them.
- Saying a prayer and asking for forgiveness for lives taken and other things that happened in the war.