



FIVE EYES
MHRIC

A MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH AND INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE IN MILITARY, VETERAN AND FAMILY MENTAL HEALTH

Plain language summary

WHEN THE TROOPS LEAVE: WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

THE ISSUE

After a 20-year war followed by military withdrawals, the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021. The result has been fear and violence. The advances made on women's and girls' rights and freedoms have been overturned. For the troops who served in Afghanistan and other operations, the Taliban's return risks causing mental health harm. They may question their efforts and the value of their service, or feel they wasted their years in Afghanistan. They may ask why they risked their lives and if the sacrifices were worth it. Others may believe they abandoned Afghanistan and fear reprisals against the Afghans who assisted them.

WHY IT MATTERS

The feelings of guilt, shame, regret, and anger that some military personnel will feel can have deep and lasting effects. Moral injury happens when mental health problems emerge after actions that breach a person's moral or ethical code. Research on moral injury shows this feeling of failure can contribute to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and suicide risk among military personnel. There is good evidence to help address these feelings and risks, and growing guidance on how to manage moral injury.

WHAT WE FOUND

Addressing guilt, regret, and anger is critical

Clinicians and others who work with deployed military personnel should pay attention to feelings connected to the withdrawal from Afghanistan. These may involve guilt, regret, and anger, especially if they feel the mission's purpose was not fulfilled or sustained, or they are concerned about the losses they experienced, or the Afghan allies they left behind.

Focusing on the positive helps separate actions from the outcome

Research around managing moral injury includes guidance on separating a person's actions or intentions (and what happened) from the eventual conflict outcome. It's important to discuss how a person served their country, worked within the rules of engagement, and operated to the best of their ability. Highlighting how a person's actions might have had positive effects and outcomes for Afghans, if only for a limited time, can balance their perspective.

Government and community leaders should balance negative messages

Media coverage of the military withdrawal talks about the so-called wasted years in Afghanistan. This can compound depression and PTSD. It's important to balance this message with positive public comments from the community, leaders, and government.

The 5 Eyes Mental Health Research and Innovation Collaborative is composed of thought leaders from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These experts conduct research and provide advice on mental health issues to governments and other interested parties, including policymakers, practitioners, and scientists. Our shared goal is to improve mental health outcomes for past and present military personnel, veterans, and their families.

KEY MESSAGES

- **Emphasize the merits of deployment and the positive outcomes.** Many deployed military personnel and military and government leaders are publicly recognizing the positive aspects of the Afghanistan missions. This contributes to better mental health.
- **Highlight the many ways the deployment changed lives for the better.** Balance negative media coverage with specific examples of how service to Afghanistan improved conditions for Afghans. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted, “A new generation of men and women have grown up in a new Afghanistan. Able to get education, take part in the political process, run their own businesses [. . .]. Those gains cannot be easily reversed.”
- **Be prepared to respond to the mental health challenges that emerge.** As the world watches events in Afghanistan unfold, leaders and the community should continue to recognize the positive contributions military forces have made.

This is a plain language summary of “The effect of the withdrawal from Afghanistan on military personnel’s mental health.”

Published: September 16, 2021 | [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(21\)00369-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(21)00369-2)

Authors: Richard A. Bryant, David Forbes, Neil Greenberg