

## **NORMAL REACTIONS TO KILLING**

### **GOALS OF THE EXERCISE**

1. Resolve cognitive and emotional conflicts surrounding killing another human.
2. Facilitate reconciliation of spiritual and moral conflicts with killing.
3. Replace negative ruminations with more adaptive thoughts.
4. Reduce anxiety and prepare emotionally for future combat/training missions.
5. Understand how killing another human can impact the mind and create temporary changes in the body's physiology.

### **ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS FOR WHICH THIS EXERCISE MAY BE USEFUL**

- Adjustment to the Military Culture
- Combat and Operational Stress Reaction
- Nightmares
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Spiritual and Religious Issues

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH VETERAN/SERVICE MEMBER**

The “Normal Reactions to Killing” activity is designed for use with veterans/service members who are experiencing guilt and self-condemnation after combat experiences in which they killed other people, particularly when those emotions are based on conflicts between the act of killing and religious or other moral training received earlier in their lives. Alternately, it may also be useful with veterans/service members who feel “less than” among peers because they (the veterans/service members) perceive themselves as having more trouble making this adjustment than others. The activity seeks to normalize common thoughts and emotions experienced by many people in combat and other situations in which they must kill other human beings, and to help these veterans/service members gain reassurance by seeing that their reactions are healthy and normal. Follow-up for this exercise could include reporting back to the therapist on thoughts and feelings about this assignment and their outcome, as well as bibliotherapy using books suggested in Appendix A of *The Veterans and Active Duty Military Psychotherapy Treatment Planner*.

## NORMAL REACTIONS TO KILLING

What is a normal reaction to killing another person? What thoughts and emotions are typical for military men and women in this situation?

First, it's important to realize that there is no one normal reaction. Your response, and anyone else's, is shaped by a combination of childhood lessons about right and wrong, cultural messages, expectations about the experience of fighting and killing, and the specific circumstances in which the experience of killing takes place. There are some common tendencies, though. For many of us, it means we're doing the opposite of what we've been taught, and often of what our instincts tell us. It's also common to find that neither the experience of combat nor our feelings at the time are what we anticipated.

This exercise will help you think through this issue and, hopefully, make more sense of your experience in combat and of your thoughts and emotions about that experience.

1. To start with, what beliefs and values related to killing did you have going into combat, and how do you think those beliefs and values affected your reaction?

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2. Some of the common reactions many people have to killing include feeling sick, feeling regret, feeling guilty or ashamed, and other negative emotions. On the other hand, some people feel elated and glad to be alive, and some just feel a sense of satisfaction that they didn't let the other people in their unit down. It doesn't mean there's anything wrong with a person if he or she feels any of these things, or even goes back and forth between some of them. Before your experience of combat and killing, how did you think you would feel, and what did you consider a normal reaction?

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3. Now think of a leader you respect deeply, someone you consider both good at accomplishing the mission and a good person in terms of character. How do you suppose that person felt after his or her first experience of combat, death, and killing?

Have you talked with him or her about it, and if not, how do you believe that person would respond if you wanted to have that kind of talk?

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4. Although some people are surprised, perhaps even worried about themselves or ashamed, by their reactions to their first experiences of killing, some others are more bothered by the way their feelings about it change with more experience; they may find themselves caring less, feeling hardened, and wondering whether this means they are becoming people with no conscience. Have you experienced anything like this? If you have, please use this space to briefly describe the changes in your feelings and what you think they mean.

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5. Now, consider this: Would people who really were without conscience be worried about it, or even think about it at all? In fact, this process of becoming somewhat numb to the experiences of danger, of killing, perhaps of seeing friends killed or wounded, is usually the mind's way of taking care of itself, enabling a person to keep functioning in a harsh environment. We are very adaptable by nature, and human beings have survived in all kinds of extreme situations, in part by adapting mentally. This is a normal and healthy reaction under these extreme and unhealthy conditions, too. What do you think might happen to a person who had to stay in a combat environment and was unable to develop this kind of mental toughness?

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6. Finally, people sometimes look at the ways they've reacted to combat and killing and wonder whether they'll be able to readjust to normal life when they return to it. Have you had this concern? If so, what parts of your reaction to war worry you the most?

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7. This is a normal concern shared by many people, too; however, most of them make the readjustment to "real world" life successfully, and there are many resources you can go to for information and other tools to help you in the readjustment

EXERCISE 1.A

process. Please use this space to list three things you can do to make that readjustment as successful as possible for yourself.

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Be sure to bring this handout back to your next session with your therapist, and be prepared to discuss your thoughts and feelings about the exercise.

## WHEN KILLING IS NECESSARY

### GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. Resolve cognitive and emotional conflicts surrounding killing another human.
2. Facilitate reconciliation of spiritual and moral conflicts with killing.
3. Replace negative ruminations with more adaptive thoughts.
4. Reduce anxiety and prepare emotionally for future combat/training missions.

### ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS FOR WHICH THIS EXERCISE MAY BE USEFUL

- Adjustment to the Military Culture
- Combat and Operational Stress Reaction
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Spiritual and Religious Issues

### SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH VETERAN/SERVICE MEMBER

The “When Killing Is Necessary” activity is designed for use with veterans/service members who are experiencing moral, ethical, and/or spiritual conflict between normal societal values prohibiting killing of other people and the necessity to kill in combat. This activity is best suited for use with veterans/service members who are motivated by spiritual training and concerns about leading socially responsible and ethical lives and are troubled by this conflict, or who respond with feelings of guilt and cognitive dissonance when they find themselves engaged in, preparing to engage in, or remembering combat. Follow-up for this exercise could include reporting back to the therapist/therapy group on thoughts and feelings about this assignment, as well as bibliotherapy using books suggested in Appendix A of *The Veterans and Active Duty Military Psychotherapy Treatment Planner*.

## WHEN KILLING IS NECESSARY

Is killing ever right, and if so, when? That may seem like an unrealistic question, but even for some people who have experienced combat and killing, it's hard to answer. However, many people throughout history have struggled with this issue. Each of us must find our own solution, but there are some common realizations that many have found and shared. This exercise will help you think through this question and, hopefully, come to a resolution that truly makes sense for you.

Sometimes it's useful to look at the differences between the situations in which our "normal" values are meant to guide our actions, and the very different situations encountered in combat. Warfare has always created some very hard questions for people who want to do what is right, and it's wise to think through those questions in a calmer situation and, if possible, answer them for yourself before you have to act on your choices. The rest of this assignment will bring up some of those hard questions and ask you to think them through and answer them for yourself now.

1. A useful place to begin is with what we already know or believe. What have you been taught about violence against other people, up to and including killing?

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2. What situations have you learned or been taught justified violence against other people, if any—self-defense, defense of another person, and so on?

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3. Some people believe killing is always wrong no matter what. That sounds simple and clear, but it doesn't offer an answer when someone is likely to die no matter what you do, and it becomes a choice of who will die—you and your friends, or the enemies you're fighting. If you've held the belief that killing is wrong, period, what do you think the people who taught you that would want you to do when you have to choose between killing to defend yourself and the people depending on you, or

failing to do so and having that result in the deaths of yourself and others in your unit?

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4. It's fairly common in some kinds of warfare to encounter situations in which you are confronted with enemies who are not attacking or threatening you at that moment, or not directly, but who will represent a threat if left alone. If a close friend asked your advice, would you tell him or her that killing those enemies was justified—self-defense against a future threat rather than one in the present—and if not, what would you advise your friend to do?

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5. Finally, people who have never experienced it may not be able to understand the chaos, confusion, and stress that surround a person making life-and-death decisions in split-seconds in combat; even a belief in the right to self-defense against a clear threat may not guide you when a situation is not clear and failure to act may cause the wounding or death of yourself or other people in your unit, but taking forceful action may cause the deaths of noncombatants due to the confusion and chaos of the moment. Thinking about it now, if that close friend asked your advice again, would you tell him or her that forceful action was justified? If not, what would you recommend that your friend do?

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Most people would agree that all you can ask of anyone is that they would do their best in any situation, within the limits of what's going on around them; their mental, emotional, and physical state; and what information they have to act on. Do you agree with that philosophy, and if you do, is that a standard you can meet? If so, as long as you do your best, you'll be making the best of the situation even when none of the possible outcomes are what you might have wished they were. That's not to say you won't be troubled—you may be, depending on what situations you've met in the past or meet in the future. But if you can honestly tell yourself you made the best choices you could given the stressors and time pressure you were under and the limited knowledge of the situation you may have had, you've done all anyone has the right to ask of you. Try to remember not to judge yourself by a higher standard than you'd impose on a friend.

Be sure to bring this handout back to your next session with your therapist, and be prepared to discuss your thoughts and feelings about the exercise.