

## **Trauma, Loss of Faith and Mental Health Service Use in Vets with PTSD**

VISN 1 MIRECC researchers have shown that continued guilt and loss of religious faith are potent factors in the treatment of veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In a survey of over 1400 veterans entering specialized VA PTSD programs, veterans reporting experiences of killing enemy or failing to prevent death of comrades were more likely to experience continued guilt and weakened religious faith. Weakened religious faith was a significant contributor to more extensive use of VA services in the 12 months after entering PTSD treatment. Notably, other important clinical features such as severity of PTSD symptoms and lack of social supports did not predict VA service utilization. This research adds to a growing number of studies showing that low religious faith is associated with greater severity of PTSD symptoms. Paradoxically, while traumatic exposure often has a weakening effect on religious faith, it can also lead to stronger reliance on religious faith. In this study, 24% reported that religion has become a greater source of comfort after their combat experience while 29% reported that religion has become less of a source of comfort. The subgroup reporting weakened faith had greater symptom severity and obtained more VA treatment, even within a group that was already seeking PTSD treatment 15-25 years after their combat exposure. The MIRECC researchers, Alan Fontana and Robert Rosenheck, suggest that a primary motivation for these veterans' continuing to pursue treatment may be their search for meaning and purpose to their traumatic experience. This possibility raises the broader issue of whether spirituality should be more central to treatment for PTSD, either in the form of a greater role for pastoral counseling or for wider inclusion of spiritual issues in traditional psychotherapy for PTSD.