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# How Deployed Service Members Make Meaning of Their Experiences: Chaplains' Perspectives

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How Deployed Service Members Make Meaning of Their Experiences:  
Chaplains' Perspectives

Submitted by Jessica R. Roemer  
May 2012

MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/ University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota, and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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### Abstract

Every service member experiences and is affected by deployment differently; there are, however, trends in the ways that service members are affected and ways in which they cope. The researcher explored the effect of deployment on religious and spiritual beliefs and the ways that service members use their religious and spiritual beliefs to make meaning of their experiences. Interviews were conducted with seven participants (n=7), primarily chaplains, who had discussed religious and spiritual matters with post-9/11 service members during deployment. This study found that deployment has an effect on the religious and spiritual beliefs of service members, and they use their beliefs to cope and to make meaning of their experiences. Service members cope through prayer, worship, good luck charms, reading Scripture, and discussions with others. The participants described how, why, and when service members make meaning and events where meaning was difficult to find. These findings indicate that social workers should assess for the religious and spiritual needs of service members because of the role that these beliefs play in coping and making meaning. Social workers should then make referrals if the needs of service members are beyond their scope of practice.

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## **How Deployed Service Members Make Meaning of Their Experiences: Chaplains' Perspectives**

### **Introduction**

More than two million all-volunteer troops have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since the declaration of war in the Middle East in 2001 (Obama, 2011). These service members have endured longer deployments and have had more frequent deployments than veterans who were serving 40 years ago (Obama, 2011). The effects of war (physical, mental, and spiritual) are becoming more prevalent as the wars continue; research documents these effects (Hoge et al., 2007; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007). The effects of deployment on religious and spiritual meaning systems is an understudied area of war and is a necessary component to examine when attempting to understand the meaning making process of service members (Larner & Blow, 2011).

The post-9/11 wars have been going for 10 years and because of the large numbers of returning service members, research has revealed some of the effects of war and frequent deployments. The current wars are unlike any wars service members have encountered previously. They are on duty virtually 24 hours a day, seven days a week with no time off (Bartone, 2006). Also, many service members are in constant fear of injury because of the places they are stationed and technology that makes it easier for others to harm them (Bartone, 2006). Although the current wars have varying effects on service members, the impact of war has remained generally the same throughout history (Bartone, 2006).

Deployment and combat have many effects on soldiers; these can include but are not limited to stress, visible (physical) and invisible (psychological) injuries, problems in personal lives and relationships, thoughts or acts of suicide, problems with substance abuse, and struggles with faith and spirituality, as well as, grief and loss (Bray et al., 2006). Many of these problems increase with multiple deployments (Thompson, 2010). Military personnel see and hear things for which no human can ever be completely prepared. Many of those in combat experience the death of comrades, see people get shot or blown up, either by their own doing or that of someone else, and have to be in the mindset that they could be attacked at any moment (Frontline, 2005; Reeves, 2007).

Some service members will be greatly affected by their experiences and will struggle to return to civilian life; however, most service members with little or no help will be able to return to civilian life because they have taken advantage of formal and informal support (Schok, Kleber, Elands, & Weerts, 2008). One specific type of support that can be either formal or informal that is relevant to most service members is religious and spiritual support. A majority of service members have religious or spiritual beliefs (Bray et al., 2006), and these beliefs can be used to make meaning of their experiences (Park & Folkman, 1997). When religious and spiritual beliefs are in agreement with the meaning that is made, service members are able to move forward, but when beliefs are not in agreement with the perceived meaning of the event, they have trouble adjusting (Park & Folkman, 1997). The goal, then, of religious and spiritual formal and informal support is to help service members make meaning that is in agreement with their beliefs.

For purposes of this study, religiosity and spirituality are seen as on a continuum; they are similar but have distinct differences. Also, religiosity and spirituality will hold



the meaning of their respective definitions. The words will *not* be interchanged when discussing specific studies but *may* be interchanged when explaining the overall importance of religiosity and spirituality in work with service members. Religiosity and spirituality will also be interchanged in conversations with participants. The definitions are as follows:

Following from Mattis (2000) and Zinnbauer et al., (1997) “*religiosity*” [emphasis added] is defined as the degree to which individuals adhere to the prescribed beliefs and practices of an organized religion. “*Spirituality*” [emphasis added] refers to the individual’s belief in the sacred and transcendent nature of life, and the manifestation of these beliefs in a sense of connectedness with others (e.g. humans, spirit, and God), and in a quest for goodness (as cited in Mattis, 2002, p. 310).

### **Relevance to Social Work**

Service members may need the help of a social worker either during deployment or as a part of their post-deployment transition. It is important for social workers to know the effects of deployment on service members, specifically how it affects their beliefs, and how service members make meaning of their deployment experiences. This information will be helpful for social workers who assess service members’ needs and make appropriate referrals.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which deployment affects service members’ religious and spiritual beliefs and how they use their religiosity or spirituality to make meaning of their experiences. Data were obtained by interviewing chaplains. The aim of this study was to find implications for social workers and other mental health professionals.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review will demonstrate the relevance of the topic of meaning making and service members, and at the same time, suggest the need for more research. First, a summary of the emerging body of research on the effects of the current wars on service members is presented. Second, a brief overview of the history and relevance of studying religious and spiritual effects on mental and physical health is provided. Third, research on trauma in the general population and trauma in service members is explored. Finally, studies of meaning making and bereavement, trauma and war are discussed. Studies related to both the general population and service members are included because of the limited number of articles on meaning making related specifically to service members.

### **Effects of Deployment and Coping**

The visible and invisible injuries of the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are discussed, as well as ways of coping, the stigma of seeking help, and the prevalence of religious and spiritual beliefs in the military.

**Visible and invisible injuries.** Service members react in different ways to the experiences they have during deployment. Hoge et al. (2004) found that 80% of service members who return will make a smooth transition, while 20% will struggle. Some service members struggle with transition because of the visible and invisible injuries that make it difficult to return to “normal” lives. *Invisible injuries* can include depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and traumatic brain injuries (TBI). *Visible injuries* include physical wounds such as amputations and spinal cord injuries. A link between

visible and invisible injuries has been established. This connection is important for social workers and professionals to know if they are to give the best care possible.

RAND (Research and Development) surveyed almost 2,000 veterans from the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on their rates of depression, PTSD, and traumatic brain injury and found them to be higher than those of the United States civilian population (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). The results show 14% of veterans screened positive for depression, 14% screened positive for PTSD, and 19% reported a likely TBI (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). The authors also made it clear that although major depression is not a direct result of combat, it can be greatly affected by it (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). The mental health risk for service members can increase over time, especially after their return to the United States; thus, an ongoing assessment is recommended between three and six months after their return (Milliken et al., 2007).

Hoge, Terhakopian, Castro, Messer, and Engel (2007) found that physical injuries in Iraqi veterans were likely linked to mental health. In a study of 2,863 soldiers one year after they experienced combat in Iraq, 31.8% of veterans who were wounded at least once met criteria for PTSD, compared to 13.6% who were never injured (Hoge et al., 2007).

Visible and invisible injuries affect how service members are able to cope when they return from duty. Most of them will be resilient, while others will turn to maladaptive ways of coping such as substance abuse, risky behaviors, or even suicide (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Service members' families and friends are greatly affected by their actions; reactions from loved ones can sometimes serve as an incentive for service members to seek professional help.

**Stigma of seeking help.** When service members are at war or at home, they may try to ignore or avoid difficult thoughts or other effects of war. Most hope that they will go away over time, and many service members are able to return to their normal routine without needing much help (Hoge et al., 2004). For those who cannot get rid of symptoms of depression, trauma, PTSD, or thoughts of suicide, it is necessary to seek help. Research has found that many soldiers and their commanders think that they will be stigmatized for seeking mental health support. Of the 16,146 military personnel surveyed by the Department of Defense, 44.1% of personnel thought that pursuing mental health counseling would probably or definitely damage their career (Bray et al., 2006); and of the almost 2,000 personnel surveyed by RAND, only half of those who met the criteria for depression or PTSD sought help from a physician or mental health provider (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Mental health activists and service members who are willing to share their stories are encouraging military personnel to seek help (Dingfelder, 2009). Thirty-nine percent of soldiers who were referred by commanders to get mental health treatment saw a negative impact on their career, while only 3% of self-referred personnel had impacts on their careers (Dingfelder, 2009). It is unknown if soldiers who referred themselves did so sooner than when commanders referred them, but it makes the case that if they are active in taking care of their mental health, it will have less of an impact on their career. When service members know they need help, but the stigma of seeing a therapist prevents them from receiving help, many of them turn to a chaplain.

**Religiosity and spirituality in the military.** Seeing a chaplain is completely confidential and easier for service members compared to a mental health professional. For this reason, military chaplains have seen an increase in the number of soldiers

seeking their guidance; less stigma is associated with going to a chaplain to discuss relationships, experiences, spirituality, and mental health problems than going to a therapist (Conant, Ephron, Dehghanpisheh, & Nordland, 2007). Service members are similar to the civilian population in this respect: those who have experienced trauma are more likely to contact clergy for support, and then, if at all, mental health professionals (Everly, 2003). When service members meet with chaplains they are able to discuss openly how the experience of war is affecting their spirituality and faith and how they are trying to make meaning of their experiences. This information is important for health professionals to know because spirituality and religiosity can be linked to mental health symptoms and overall wellbeing (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998).

A high percentage of service members have religious or spiritual beliefs. Ninety-nine percent of the 16,146 service members surveyed by the Department of Defense have some religious or spiritual beliefs; 74% of those reported a high or medium level of religious or spiritual beliefs (Bray et al., 2006). This finding mirrors a later survey of 6,384 different military respondents of whom 75% had a religious preference (Military Leadership Diversity Commission [MLDC], 2010). In the same study, 65.8% of them claimed they had a Christian identity (MLDC, 2010). A majority of service members have religious or spiritual beliefs, so it makes sense to use these beliefs to help all service members make meaning of their experiences. For those with invisible and visible injuries, finding ways of coping will be a priority, and even those without injuries will benefit from finding meaning in their experiences.

### **Healthcare and Religiosity and Spirituality**

The use of religious and spiritual beliefs in the healthcare field has changed over the years. In the mid-1800s medicine started to shift from a religious model to one based on scientific facts (Koenig, McCulloch, & Larson, 2001). Religiosity, or lack thereof, was once viewed as the reason for pathologies, but that was replaced with actual evidence from research (Koenig et al., 2001). The discussion of spirituality and healthcare became taboo in the early 1900s as the Medical Model became main-stream (Koenig et al., 2001). Many healthcare providers believed it was too personal or irrelevant to even bring the topic up in treatment (Koenig et al., 2001). Over the past 20 years, however, there has been a resurgence of research and interest in the integration of spirituality in the healthcare system once again (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Providers have observed that religion remains an integral part in many people's lives regardless of the advances in education, psychology, and medicine (Koenig et al., 2001).

Previous research has found that, in most cases, patients would like their providers to ask about and discuss their spirituality while they are receiving healthcare (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Fletcher (2004) was curious to find the perspective of healthcare providers on discussing spirituality with the veterans they cared for. Five focus groups with a total of 55 providers of care including nurses, physicians, social workers, psychologists, and chaplains were held at two Veterans Administration Medical Centers (Fletcher, 2004). Fletcher (2004) found that the groups were in agreement that acknowledging spirituality was a benefit for the veteran patients. The focus groups did, however, agree that they were uncertain on how to approach the topic when they work in a government institution and in the limited amount of time they have with their patients

(Fletcher, 2004). Also, discussing spirituality is not seen as a priority to management and some participants in the focus group did not wish to discuss spirituality at all with their patients (Fletcher, 2004). The participants appreciated the role that the chaplains perform in supporting patients and their families, but also acknowledged that there were not enough of them to adequately support every patient (Fletcher, 2004). Lastly, the focus group recognized the importance for all providers and patients to be educated about spiritual needs; they even recommended that professionals should be educated in their respective schools and through continuing education about the spiritual needs of patients (Fletcher, 2004). It is important for professionals to acknowledge that religiosity and spirituality are important to the health of patients. Educating providers about the spiritual needs of patients may help them to become more comfortable discussing the topic with their patients, thus providing a more holistic service.

### **Spirituality and Trauma**

It is important to note the relationship between spirituality and trauma because of the traumatic experiences some service members have to process. Recently, there has been an increase in research dealing with the use of religion as a coping method by people who are stressed, ill, or having difficulties (Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Smith, 2004). Through these studies, researchers are seeing the interconnectedness of mind, body, soul, and environment within the human person (Smith, 2004); and this is evident in the study of spirituality and trauma.

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as the following:

an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal,

some people have difficulty moving on with their lives (American Psychological Association [APA], 2011).

If trauma is untreated, it can develop into an anxiety problem called PTSD where people often experience the event again through flashbacks, memories, and nightmares (APA, 2011). Approximately 60% of men and 50% of women in the United States experience traumatic stress, such as divorce, bereavement, sexual victimizations, and disasters (Schnurr & Green, 2004); of these, about one-tenth of men and one-third of women develop PTSD (Chen & Koenig, 2006).

When people experience traumatic events, it leaves them with a loss of trust and security in the world, and possibly in their God or spiritual belief system (Smith, 2004). Individuals question why the traumatic event happened to them and why God allowed it to happen (Smith, 2004). Although traumatic events result in questioning of faith, most people who experience trauma use aspects of religious functioning to cope (Schuster et al., 2001).

Pargament et al. (1998) surveyed three groups of participants. One was a group of 296 people from two churches who were in Oklahoma City when the federal building was bombed; the second group of participants were 540 college students who had experienced a serious negative event (such as death of a friend or family member or problems with romantic relationships) in the last three years; and the third group was 551 patients age 55 and older at two participating hospitals. Pargament et al. (1998) found that people use many different religious coping strategies to deal with distress such as religious thought, feeling, behavior, and relationships; these can become positive or negative patterns of coping. In negative patterns, individuals may feel angry toward God and believe that evil may have more power than God (Pargament et al., 1998). It is



natural to have these feelings, but when people are not angry anymore and want to mend their relationship with God or spiritual life, they may feel guilt (Pargament et al., 1998).

This guilt can cause more harm when individuals are trying to recover from trauma.

With or without this guilt, people turn to positive religious patterns to cope. Pargament et al. (1998) found that these patterns, such as seeking support from clergy or members of their church, forgiveness, and focusing on faith, are used more often than negative patterns. The positive coping patterns produced good outcomes including less symptoms of psychological distress and reports of psychological and religious growth (Pargament et al., 1998). In many cases, traumatic experiences can be seen as the reason people grow in their faith and spirituality and gives a new meaning to their life (Smith, 2004).

**Veteran trauma and spirituality.** Veteran trauma is different from other types of trauma and this, in turn, affects how veterans view their experiences. Veteran trauma is different than any other trauma because combat service members are the perpetrator and the victim. Combat soldiers are expected to “kill other human beings, destroy property, take control of territory, and break the enemy’s will to fight” (Larner & Blow, 2011, p. 188). These are moral decisions that have to be made, sometimes, in seconds, and some service members are uneasy with the decisions that they made or were ordered to make. They are faced with questions of right and wrong and good and evil that most victims of trauma do not have to address (Larner & Blow, 2011).

Many combat service members have seen and/or experienced traumatic events. If left untreated, the two events that can play a major role in the development of PTSD and feelings of guilt are killing another person and failing to stop others from dying (Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004). Fontana and Rosenheck (2004) interviewed 1,385 veterans, 95% of

whom served in Vietnam and 5% in World War II or Korea, and found that feelings of guilt contributed to the weakening of religious faith. The researchers also found that veterans were more likely to pursue mental health services because of feelings of guilt rather than increased symptoms of PTSD or lack of social functioning (Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004). Fontana and Rosenheck (2004) concluded that veterans were pursuing services to gain meaning and purpose from their traumatic experiences. The researchers recognize the need for spiritual guidance for veterans with PTSD, but noticed the lack of chaplain services and pastoral counseling for outpatient veterans at the Veterans Affairs Medical Centers. They suggest therapists address spiritual needs during psychotherapy; and while they do recognize the mistakes that therapists can make (e.g., imposing their spiritual beliefs on their clients), it is a conversation worth starting.

### **Meaning Making**

Many service members will experience or see something unsettling during deployment. Research has shown that making meaning of these experiences can help them to cope (Schok, Kleber, & Lensvelt-Mulders, 2009; Owens, Steger, Whitesell, & Herrera, 2009).

There has been a recent surge in research about how to make meaning and the meaning making process. Meaning making can look different for every person so it is difficult to study the process. For most people, an event will happen, they will make initial appraisals (judgments) of the events, and if the appraisals match people's fundamental beliefs and expectations of the world, then the meaning process has been successfully completed (Park & Folkman, 1997). Unsuccessful meaning making occurs when the initial appraisal does not match up with people's beliefs and expectations.

When this discrepancy occurs, it is necessary to either change the way they believe the event should have happened or accept the event for what it was; both of these can be challenging and take time and much consideration because a change in worldview must occur (Park & Folkman, 1997). Most people use their religiosity or spirituality to make meaning of the situation because that is what they base their worldview on, while others try to make meaning without the direct reliance on religious or spiritual practices. The following is research that has been done on meaning making and bereavement, trauma, and military service.

**Meaning making and bereavement/ grief and loss.** Bereavement is one of the major areas studied in the meaning making literature. Park (2005) used questionnaires to find the ways that 169 college students grieved the loss of someone moderately close to them within the past year. Many of the participants stated that they were at least somewhat religious and that religion was related to their comprehension of the death. Park (2005) found more discrepancy between *global meanings* (fundamental assumptions and beliefs about the world) and *appraised meanings* (initial judgment made about the event) of the situations in those who were early in bereavement, while these discrepancies diminished for those later in bereavement. Also for students earlier in bereavement, religion was related to more distress, higher levels of intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and higher levels of depressed moods. These symptoms mostly disappeared in those late in bereavement. These results illustrated that for many, the meaning making process takes over a year, and although religion can increase negative symptoms in the early stages of bereavement, it can help a person through the bereavement process.

Michael and Snyder (2005) also studied bereavement in college students. One hundred and forty-eight undergraduate students who experienced the death of someone close to them within an average of three years completed questionnaires. The researchers found that many people use rumination (repetitive thinking about causes and outcomes) to find meaning, and this can be helpful for some in their meaning making process, while others can continue to ruminate on the negative and not find meaning; in other words, rumination was helpful for those who were in their first year of bereavement and harmful for those who were in later years. It was also found that finding meaning within the first year of bereavement was better for the person's well-being.

This bereavement information can be applied to service members and how they make meaning after their deployment. Some will suffer the loss of a comrade during deployment, so it is necessary for them to make meaning of those losses.

**Meaning making and trauma.** Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, and McMillan (2000) gave questionnaires to 54 college students who had experienced a traumatic event within the past three years. A few examples of the traumatic experiences are being victims of serious crime, sudden death of a loved one by homicide or suicide, and vehicle accident resulting in an injury. Calhoun et al. (2000) found that students who ruminated more had more posttraumatic growth, "the individual's experience of significant positive change arising from the struggle with a major life crisis" (p. 521), if the rumination was not predominantly intrusive negative thoughts that lasted for extended periods of time. Also, the students were more likely to experience posttraumatic growth if they were open to religious change and thought about the potential meaning and significance of the event.

The Holocaust was a traumatic experience for all who were involved. A mixed methods study using semi-structured interview questions was completed by 133 Holocaust survivors living in nine states in the United States (Armour, 2010). The purpose of the study was to gather personal stories about the Holocaust from those who had experienced it, as well as, learn how the survivors made meaning of their experience. Through their actions, survivors were able to make meaning during and after the Holocaust; their actions were based on their personal appraised meaning of the event. Actions during the Holocaust were primarily based on the need to survive, while actions after the Holocaust were rooted in mastering areas of life and control.

Armour (2010) listed four ways in which survivors of the Holocaust made meaning of their experience through action. The first was that as a result of the trauma, the survivors reestablished a moral order by being purposeful in their actions (e.g., a woman kissed and hugged more than usual to make up for lost time and a dancer who fled to Russia taught his dance students Jewish dances to preserve the culture). Secondly, survivors acted in response to the horrible things that were happening or had happened in an either self-protective or survival mode (e.g., using creative solutions to avoid being killed and after the fact, focusing their energy on giving their children the life they did not have). Thirdly, small acts are done to make meaning during the traumatic experience (e.g., sewing pictures of loved ones inside their jacket before being marched to the ghetto and turning their jacket inside out to hide the star which labeled them a Jew). Lastly, although survivors were not intentional about finding meaning through actions, it was a result of their actions (e.g., a man wrote 19 books in which he recorded his life after the Holocaust; and a woman who moved around from school to school during the Holocaust

was able to see her gift of adaptability gained through the experience and became a teacher herself). This study shows that action may play an important part in the meaning making of a traumatic event.

**Meaning making and service members.** Research is needed on combat service members and meaning making and posttraumatic growth (Larner & Blow, 2011). Larner and Blow (2011) searched available literature published within a 10 year period and found eight articles pertaining to posttraumatic growth in veterans; four articles concentrated on prisoners of war, while the other four were representative of veterans as a whole. Increasingly more research is being done on the current wars and the effects they have on service members, but a need remains for more meaning making studies. If professionals understand how meaning is made and what resources are necessary, they will be able to assist service members in the meaning making process.

Schok et al. (2009) gathered data by distributing questionnaires to 1,561 Dutch veterans who served in wars and peacekeeping operations. The researchers found that veterans with high self-esteem, personal control, and optimism had the emotional stability to look at their time in the military as a positive experience and did not struggle from intrusive or avoidant thoughts. These elements helped the veteran to be resilient and have a lower emotional impact from the experience. Veterans who did not have high self-esteem, personal control, optimism, and resiliency were more likely to have intrusive and avoidant thoughts, distrust, and a negative worldview. It can be concluded that not all veterans will need a long period of time to make meaning, but for those who are struggling with symptoms from their deployment, meaning making can be a helpful process.

Owens et al. (2009) recruited 174 American veterans from various wars to answer a questionnaire. The authors found that meaning in life can be an important factor in lower levels of PTSD (Owens et al., 2009). Veterans with mild depression and a sense of meaning in their lives had lower PTSD symptoms than those with severe depression and unclear meaning of their lives. From their research, Owens and colleagues (2009) believe that creating a sense of meaning can be beneficial for veterans with or without depression and guilt. They propose strengthening healthy attitudes about meaning in life as veterans are processing their experiences.

The literature review provides support for the need to study how service members use religiosity and spirituality to make meaning of their deployed experiences. It is necessary to understand how deployment affects religious and spiritual beliefs and what can be done to counteract negative effects, so service members can use their beliefs to make meaning of their experiences. If meaning can be made, a lower number of service members will need mental health services and more veterans will be able to live dignified lives (Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004).

### Conceptual Framework

The theory of religion as a meaning system and religion used to make meaning are used to frame this study. Many people view the world through a religious lens; this enables them to contribute meaning to their experiences and the world around them. With religion as their meaning system, people are able to decipher the nature of people, the nature of the world, and the combination of the two (Silberman, 2005). They are able to make generalizations about how the world works and what they can expect in the future. Particularly with religion as a meaning system, the person's beliefs revolve around what is sacred and divine. Many beliefs are based on holy and evil, people and actions. These meaning systems give people a framework to live their lives, as well as purpose to their lives (Silberman, 2005). When the religious meaning system is confronted with a new event that has not been processed (e.g., killing another human being), it can lead to an unsettling of the meaning system. At this point, it becomes necessary to use the religious meaning system as a way of making meaning of the experience. This study will support the theory that people use religious and spiritual beliefs to make meaning of their world, experiences, and people they encounter.

Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, found that the primary motive of humans is to find meaning, especially in the wake of trauma and suffering (1992). Meaning can help with coping and reduces the stress of the situation (Frankl, 1992). People have global meanings and situational meanings. *Global meaning* is "people's basic goals and fundamental assumptions, beliefs, and expectations about the world" (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 115). Because people have global meanings, they are able to comprehend the past and present and have expectations for the future. *Situational meaning*, on the other



hand, is defined as the interaction between a person's global meaning and a specific interaction between that person and an event (Park & Folkman, 1997). After an event, the person appraises the meaning of the event, then searches for the meaning, and comes to his/her final meaning of the event. This process happens over a period of time, and when discrepancies appear between the appraised meaning of the event and a person's global meaning, there is a problem. Sometimes making a reappraisal of the event will consolidate the situational meaning with the global meaning, but at times the event can be so traumatic, life changing, or hard to understand that the meaning of the event cannot fit with the global meaning structure. At these times, it is necessary for the person to change his/her fundamental belief, or a continual cycle of reappraisal will occur (Park & Folkman, 1997).

Deployment is a life changing experience, and religious and spiritual belief systems will encounter many new experiences. It is the goal of this research to find the ways in which belief systems comprehend, change, and make meaning of deployment. Because the details necessary to understand these factors are not quantifiable, qualitative research will be done.

The personal lens of the researcher has influenced this study. The researcher believes that many people have religious and spiritual beliefs that can be used in the healthcare field to enhance resiliency. For those service members with visible or invisible wounds of war, religious meaning making will be helpful in their recovery process. It is also the researcher's belief that to help service members reintegrate and be resilient, they need to understand and make meaning of their experiences. Without integrating religious or spiritual beliefs into the meaning of the experiences, service

members ignore an important part of who they are. Finally, the researcher is biased toward qualitative interviews because she believes it will yield rich data that will contribute to the exploration of this research topic.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to explore the effect of deployment on the religious and spiritual beliefs of post-9/11 service members and how they use their beliefs to make meaning of their experiences. Qualitative interviews were used to collect data because the information cannot be easily quantified. Literature on meaning making and service members is scarce, so the purpose of this research was to explore the interactions of deployment, beliefs, and meaning making pertaining to service members. Using qualitative research allowed the participants to state their observations of the many service members they worked with while deployed.

### **Sample**

The researcher interviewed seven individuals who worked with post-9/11 service members during deployment. Five of the participants were chaplains, one participant was a chaplain's assistant, and another participant worked closely with service members concerning religious and spiritual beliefs. All of the participants were Christian males who had been deployed after September 2001, oftentimes more than once, and have worked with service members in the deployed setting. Six of the participants were in the Army (active-duty, Reserve, and National Guard) and one was a Navy Reserve. Demographic details about the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Demographics of Interview Participants*

	n (%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	7 (100%)
Female	0 (0%)
<b>Role</b>	
Chaplain	5 (71%)
Chaplain's Assistant	1 (14%)
Other <sup>a</sup>	1 (14%)
<b>Military branches</b>	
Army <sup>b</sup>	6 (86%)
Navy <sup>c</sup>	1 (14%)
<b>Religious/ spiritual background</b>	
Christian	7 (100%)
<b>Deployments</b>	
1-3	7 (100%)

*Note.* This table reflects the demographics of the participants.

<sup>a</sup> Participant was actively involved in discussing spiritual matters with other service members.

<sup>b</sup> Participants were Army active-duty, Reserve, and National Guard. <sup>c</sup> Participant was Navy Reserve.

## Procedures

**Recruitment.** The researcher contacted committee members for recommendations for possible research participants. After the first interview, the researcher was able to use snowball sampling, recommendations from other participants, to get seven total interviews. At the initial contact, the researcher sent out an e-mail or called potential participants providing them with information about this study. The information included the Letter of Recruitment and Introduction (Appendix A), Letter of Informed Consent (Appendix B), and the Interview Questions (Appendix D). Upon

reviewing the information and agreeing to the informed consent, the researcher and participant set up a time for the interview.

**Protection of human subjects.** To ensure the protection of human subjects and reduce the risk of harm, participants were asked about service members' experiences with whom they work or had worked with, not their own experiences. The participants were also told not to share any identifying information of the service members such as name, specific duties, or rank. The study was reviewed by a research committee and the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. Also, to ensure the protection of human subjects, a list of resources (Appendix C) was given to the participants along with the consent form.

The confidentiality of the participants and service members of whom they spoke were important to this study. The researcher did not use names or identifying information in notes, transcripts, and in the findings of this report. The audio recordings and transcripts were located on the password protected computer of the researcher. When presenting the data in this report, the researcher did not connect participants to their quotes in order to ensure another level of anonymity.

The informed consent was important to ensure the protection of the subjects. Participants were given ample time to review the form prior to the interview. The researcher went over the consent form with the participants to make sure that they had a good understanding of the study and that they could stop at any time if they did not wish to continue. With the consent form, the participants were given a list of resources (Appendix C) they could utilize if they felt upset or uneasy after talking about deployment and beliefs.

**Data collection.** The interviews were conducted in the private setting of an office or in a private classroom. Prior to the interview, the researcher reviewed the consent form with the participant and reiterated that the interview was voluntary and confidential. Once the consent form was signed, the interview began. The interviews were digitally recorded and field notes were taken during the interviews by the researcher. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by a list of predetermined questions (Appendix D). This interview style allowed room for clarification questions and other questions prompted by the discussion. Some questions were skipped because the participant had already answered those questions. The interviews lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. The researcher transcribed the interviews for analysis as they were completed. The researcher numbered the interviews and referred to them that way during data analysis to ensure confidentiality of the participants.

**Data analysis.** The researcher used content analysis, a detailed analysis used to interpret the data by finding themes, to review the findings (Berg, 2009). Four themes and 13 subthemes rose from the questions asked during the interviews. The themes were present in all the interviews, while the subthemes varied among participants. The findings section will explore the data and the discussion will compare it to the current literature.

### **Findings**

The four main themes evolving from the interviews reflected these four questions: How does deployment effect religious and spiritual beliefs? How do service members use their beliefs to cope? How do service members use their beliefs to make meaning? How can social workers use this information to better their practices with service members? On the theme of the effects on beliefs, two subthemes emerged: the religious and spiritual beliefs of service members and the effects of deployment on service members' beliefs. On the theme of coping, five subthemes arose: prayer, worship, good luck charms, reading the Scripture/ bible study, and the ministry of presence/utilizing relationships. On the theme of meaning making, four subthemes were identified: how to make meaning, why to make meaning, when to make meaning, and events where meaning was hard to find. Lastly, on the theme of the ways that social workers can attend to the religious and spiritual beliefs of service members, two subthemes emerged: acknowledgment of beliefs and assessing for beliefs. These themes are outlined in Table 2 with direct quotations as sample responses. For each interview question, participants shared their individual observations of service members, and the answers varied depending on their duties and length of interaction with service members.

Table 2

*Thematic Categories of This Meaning Making Study*

Theme	Subtheme	Sample responses
Effects on Beliefs		
	Beliefs	“Even the most agnostic person would still talk about spiritual things.”
	Effects	“I’ve seen people that have come into combat reporting strong faith, shattered. Some people coming into combat reporting no faith, conversion. I don’t see a pattern there.”
Use of Religious and Spiritual Beliefs to Cope		
	Prayer	“You’ll see a lot of soldiers before a convoy have a prayer. It’s not chaplain led, so that’s obviously something to fortify themselves before they go to do something they know to be very dangerous.”
	Worship	“Holding worship services, those are touchstones for people’s reality. Those are portals to heaven. It helps people.”
	Good luck charms	“They like having chaplains. For some of them, I think they think of us as being good luck charms.”
	Scripture	“I know people are very interested in looking at the Scriptures, finding comfort in Scripture.”
	Relationships	“I found that there were people who had a relationship with another person who is religious and they were in conversations many times.”
Meaning Making		
	How	“Most of the time, people would talk about ultimate things in life, especially when their friends were killed, so it was about meaning. ‘Is this all worth it? Is what we are doing making a difference? Am I going to be different as a result of this?’”
	Why	“Sometimes that’s what happens when you encounter a crisis and if you don’t find a way to process it, it can make a person go into turmoil.”

*Note.* This table includes the themes and subthemes that evolved from this study. Sample responses for each subtheme are provided in this chart.



Table 2 (Continued)

*Thematic Categories of This Meaning Making Study*

Theme	Subtheme	Sample responses
Meaning Making (Continued)		
	When	“I think it comes with life experience, you know, that is a huge piece. That’s when you encounter something and you can’t make sense out of it.”
	Difficult events	“When their friends are killed. It’s hard to make meaning of that. And what’s difficult is when they didn’t have time to even process that.”
How Social Workers Can Help		
	Acknowledge spirituality	“So, a social worker where as you may not be spiritual in any sort of way, you’ve got to respect that I am.”
	Assessment	“Do an assessment of their values and the resources they have to sustain them, and be very careful to not overlook them.”

*Note.* This table includes the themes and subthemes that evolved from this study. Sample responses for each subtheme are provided in this chart.

The participants had different answers as to why service members sought chaplain support. All the participants stated that relationship problems and work-related issues were the main reasons why service members would contact them. They also talked about referrals for mental health, crisis, having questions about their beliefs, the death of a service member, and confidentiality. The reasons why service members sought out chaplain support are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

*Reasons Service Members Sought Chaplain Support*

	n (%)
Relationship problems	
With a significant other or family member	5 (71%)
Work-related issues	
Hierarchy/ politics of the military	3 (43%)
Problems with superior	6 (86%)
Problems with other service members	4 (57%)
Mental health (depression or suicidal ideation)	4 (57%)
Crisis	5 (71%)
Questioning their beliefs	5 (71%)
Death of a service member	5 (71%)
Assurance of confidentiality <sup>a</sup>	5 (71%)

*Note.* This table reflects the reasons the participants stated that service members were referred to chaplains. All participants gave more than one reason but not for all of the categories; therefore,  $n \neq 100$  in some sections.

<sup>a</sup> Participants noted that service members would seek them out for support because of their confidentiality clause; they could not divulge any information that was told to them in confidence. Unlike therapists, chaplains are not mandated reporters.

### **Effects of Deployment on Religious and Spiritual Beliefs**

**Religious and spiritual beliefs.** Every participant mentioned that many, if not all, the service members whom they came into contact with had some sort of belief, especially when they were faced with their mortality. This reality came to light in some of the comments made by participants. One said, “My reading is that almost all of them have a spiritual basis. I think there is a spirituality in most of the soldiers’ hearts or souls,” while another participant stated, “Even the most agnostic person would still talk about spiritual things.” The same participant went on to say, “recently they are less likely and because of the nature of the people I was with to identify publicly about their faith.”

Many participants said that service members did not identify with a specific faith. Two of them used terms such as “salad bar worldview” and “God du jour” to describe how service members, like many people in our society, develop their belief systems; they pick and choose what they want to believe in and don’t identify with specific religions.

**Effects on beliefs.** One chaplain articulated the process that he saw service members go through during their combat deployment. First, service members enter into deployment, which is a new and different experience for most of them. Second, service members begin a deconstruction of their worldview where they begin to analyze their beliefs and compare them to what they are experiencing. Third, they feel a deeper level of isolation because they are separating from the worldview they once held. Fourth, the service members reconstruct their new worldview. During the second, third, and fourth stages, the participant stated that service members were very impressionable, like hot wax, and that they were at risk of impressing whatever worldview got there first. Lastly, they implement their newly formed worldview. The chaplain stated that this is not how all service members experience their beliefs changing during deployment, but he saw many of them going through most of these stages.

All the participants had different answers for how service members’ beliefs were affected by their deployment, but they all agreed that it did have an effect on their beliefs. One chaplain used the metaphor, “You can’t go into a coal mine without getting some coal dust on you.” He used this to explain that it does not matter what a person believes or what their job is during deployment, their beliefs will be challenged or affected by that deployment. Another chaplain stated that he had “seen people that have come into combat reporting strong faith, shattered. Some people coming into combat reporting no

faith, conversion. I don't see a pattern." He did not see a pattern among service members but he quantified his observations reporting that about one-third of service members grew in faith, another third separated from their faith and it went dormant for lack of attention, and the final third became fatalistic. In his view, those who were fatalistic focused on the here and now, and could not put any energy into thinking about the past or the future.

Several of the participants said that coming face-to-face with mortality ignited many of the service members to consider their faith and really think about what they believed in. A participant described a generalized thought process for service members: "I realize I don't know what I believe. Yet, I realize I believe something, even if it's a mess of something that I don't know what I believe in." He went on to say that some service members do not have a great self-awareness of what they do believe in when it is tested by the stress, fear, and recognition of mortality during deployment. Another participant stated, "when rockets are coming at them, people are affected by that kind of traumatic experience differently. For some, they view their faith as a comfort, while others feel like they have been abandoned."

During these stressful times, service members started asking ultimate questions (questions that strive to find the meaning and purpose of life and experiences). At least half of the participants reported that there was a lot of time to think about beliefs during deployment. One participant described the difference between life as a civilian and life during deployment. He revealed that there is a lot of down time or a lot of time for service members to think: "It does create more time for spiritual... thinking. They do a lot of soul seeking [and] asking the big questions." Another service member mentioned, "Deployment does cause people to think deeply about moral and spiritual issues."

Service members were trying to find the meaning of their life and the purpose of their deployment.

Lastly, the effect of deployment on service members' religious and spiritual belief systems were dependent on other circumstances. A participant described the importance of training on the effect of deployment. For elite warriors who are trained to be in combat, they are less likely to be affected by combat than are the average soldiers who may experience combat during deployment. The average soldiers are more likely to feel disconnected from their belief systems and have problems making meaning than the elite warriors. Secondly, four of the seven participants noted that how service members view God can be an important factor in the impact of deployment on religious and spiritual beliefs. One participant said, "I find that the traditions that really have a sense of God's sovereignty, you know the doctrine that Christians call sovereignty that God is in control, seem to do pretty well in combat." Another participant stated,

So if they see God as a punishing presence - if I do something wrong then I'll punish you - they're not going to have the same resilience as somebody who understands God as being loving, caring, and accepting. So how their faith relates to their resiliency then really does go back to their theology and what they see God is really about and how they relate to their God.

**Effects conclusion.** The participants made note that almost every service member has some sort of religious or spiritual beliefs. The effects of a deployment on these beliefs are different for each individual. Some will strengthen their beliefs while others will lose faith in theirs. When service members are confronted with their own mortality or try to make meaning of deployment, they start asking questions. They are trying to appraise events and find ways to integrate the experiences into their belief

systems. The ability to appraise and integrate experiences is affected by the way that service members view God and what they have been trained to do during deployment.

### **Use of Religious and Spiritual Beliefs to Cope**

**Prayer.** Four of the seven participants mentioned that prayer was an important coping skill for deployed service members. They stated that prayer was particularly important to soldiers who were going on convoys/ missions. One participant said, “You’ll see a lot of soldiers before a convoy have a prayer. It’s not chaplain led. So that’s obviously something to fortify themselves before they go to do something they know to be very dangerous.” A second chaplain stated, “When they go out on a patrol or something like that, and you ask them if they want to have a prayer before they go, and [they will say] ‘oh yeah’ because that is important to them.” The last two participants made similar statements about service members saying prayers before missions whether it was chaplain led or not.

**Worship.** All of the seven participants thought that worship was an important way to cope for deployed service members. A chaplain described worship services as “touchstones for people’s reality. Those are portals to heaven. It helps people.” Three of the seven noted that there would often be an increase in chapel attendance. Two said that this was often prior to combat missions, “95% would come for service and communion,” or as a way to cope with the stress of being in a combat zone. Two other participants noticed a decline in chapel attendance, specifically in areas where service members were not directly involved in combat.

**Good luck charms.** Three of the seven participants mentioned good luck charms as ways that service members cope. Good luck charms that were mentioned by the

participants were the chaplains themselves, prayer beads, crosses, St. Christopher (patron saint of travelers) medals, rabbits' feet, and wearing the same clothing for those who were superstitious. A chaplain revealed,

You develop more empathy when you are faced with some situations where you are afraid you are going to die because it really is an instinctual response to [say] "hey, whatever helps here." It's kind of a pragmatic response even though a little cartoonish from the vantage point of a safe couch.

Another participant had a somewhat similar response to that: "you want as much as you can, whether it is a good luck charm or something like that."

**Scriptures and bible studies.** Four out of the seven participants talked about the use of Scriptures and bible studies as coping methods. Two participants stated that they used Scripture to help service members understand events and to find comfort in certain passages. The other two reported holding bible studies for people to "sort through things," and have a clearer image of what they believed in.

**Ministry of presence/ relationships.** Four of the seven participants felt like their "ministry of presence" was helpful for service members. One of them said,

The fact that I'm walking around, my presence, not because of me but because of the cross that I have, is powerful to people. God is here. That gives meaning to people. For some it causes crisis because they feel like they are in a very godless place.

A different participant stated, "It's the regularity of having that chaplain, that spiritual leader on board that's going to bring out some things. That's one of the things that I think is most conducive: the availability to talk." It was important to the participants to be that unspoken reminder that God is there, even when the world seemed too difficult to face. Although the presence of the chaplain could result in a spiritual crisis for some service members, having a religious person to discuss ultimate questions, confess sins, and be

forgiven for their sins were very helpful to those with intrusive thoughts. All of the participants were used to cope with spiritual crises and they thought their presence was greatly appreciated by many service members.

**Coping conclusion.** Service members use various ways to cope with deployment. The most popular was prayer and discussing questions and thoughts with other service members. Others coped by attending worship services, obtaining good luck charms, and finding Scripture that was comforting and helpful for finding meaning. Not all service members used these coping strategies and some would use more than one; it depended on the individual and what best served them as a way to cope.

### **Meaning Making**

**How to make meaning.** The participants described *how* they observed many of the service members making meaning: by asking questions and having conversations, through relationships with others, through debriefing, and through rituals.

The first is by asking questions and having discussions. Service members asked ultimate questions to cope with deployment, and they also asked questions to make meaning of their deployment. Six of the seven participants discussed the different questions people would ask as they made meaning of their deployments. One of the main questions that surfaced was “was it worth it?” Two of the chaplains specifically noted this question as an important way for service members make meaning. This question was oftentimes surrounded by other thoughts and questions, especially when thinking about the death of a friend: “Is this all worth it, chaplain? Is what we are doing making a difference, chaplain? Am I going to be different as a result of this?” Another participant talked about questions that service members usually asked him,



“Why did this happen? How could God allow this to happen? How do I find forgiveness? How do I reconcile with my family?” The how questions, the why questions, the what do I do questions. “Where is God in the midst of all of this? God gives me strength, God shows me how to forgive, God gives me a way to move ahead even though this combat doesn’t make sense.”

The participants tried to put into words the thoughts that go through service members’ minds and how trying to find answers to their questions about life and deployment can help them make some sort of meaning out of their situations.

Having a relationship with someone and being able to talk about what they were thinking was deemed very important by all of the participants. One of the chaplains articulated the importance of talking about things that were on service members’ minds,

Well, like everything, it becomes real when we speak about it. A lot of times having a conversation about it. I’m not postmodern in the sense that things do not exist unless you speak of them, but I do think for a lot of young people who are experiencing these things for the first time, it crystallizes in relationship, in conversation.

Two of them stated that having a peer or a superior to talk to was helpful as well as having a chaplain. One participant mentioned the importance of talking about things with peers, “So I think it comes in relationships and conversations. You got to talk about it with your buddies,” while another noted the importance of the military structure and taking care of each other, “We have this leadership responsibility to know our people well enough, know their personalities and talk to them.” Another participant mentioned the importance of the chaplain being out there and meeting people to build rapport. Then, creating a safe space where service members can come and “get into some healthy dialogue” about their deployment, to start making meaning.

Debriefing (reviewing an event or mission after it occurred), which is a natural part of the military, can be very helpful for soldiers to make meaning. Two participants discussed the importance of debriefing. One of them said,

Sometimes if they don't have a debriefer there, people can find themselves scapegoating. They won't say it was your fault but sometimes conversations are "am I responsible? What am I responsible for?" The debriefers try to objectify it as much as possible. If people do not get debriefed, or work through some of the pain and stuff, it will harbor inside of themselves.

He articulated the importance of debriefing for an individual service member, while the other participant noted the importance of debriefing for the entire unit:

This can shatter units. So a unit goes into an attack, an ambush, an IED, everybody sees it differently, and then out of meaning making draws different inferences from it. Now you lay down all those pieces on a table and this person says, "we had to do that, you know it's the right thing to do." And this person believes it was that guy's time. Everything has a meaning. Okay, can you see how pretty soon a close unit can be pulled apart over something really traumatic like that: not having the same frame of reference? People will reflect on things and see it through their values and their worldview.

Debriefing is important for the individuals and the unit to make meaning together. They may not come to the same conclusions, but debriefing can prevent service members from blaming themselves or others.

Rituals were also a helpful way for service members to make meaning of their experiences. Memorial ceremonies/ services and ramp ceremonies were mentioned by almost all of the participants as something that was important for meaning making and moving forward. One participant articulated the memorial service:

What does the Army want to say to that young soldier who tomorrow has to go back to the same deadly place and continue the mission? It's a meaning thing. Number one, you won't be forgotten, two, your sacrifice is honored, and three, the reason why we're doing this is so that you can find meaning so you can go do this in the face of death. This death was not meaningless. What you are doing matters. Your life is important, important enough to go sacrifice it like this guy

did. So, just having a memorial service you are helping people find meaning. It's critical. It's all about meaning in the face of chaos and trauma.

Memorial services can be powerful in the meaning making process. They provide some closure for service members, and many of them appreciate the chaplain blessing the dead soldier. It gives them some comfort. Other rituals were put together by chaplains for their units. A participant described making a monument out of stones. The soldiers were asked to grab a stone, say a prayer for a person who they know that had died, and put the stone on the pile. This ritual helped some service members to make meaning and provide closure before they left the area where they were stationed.

**Why make meaning.** Service members make meaning so that they can continue on with their deployment, do not remain in turmoil, and do not self-medicate. In the previous section, a participant was quoted about the importance of memorial services for service members to make meaning. This is also an important reason as to *why* service members make meaning; they need to have a sense that they have made some meaning out of the death so they are able to continue on with their responsibilities. If they do not move forward and do not perform their duties, there is the likelihood that others could be harmed. The participant stated, "That death had a meaning, that meaning was intended to be nice, neat, and tidy. I can go on with my life because if I linger too much in this crisis, I could get myself killed." Another chaplain described his struggle as he observed service members after someone got killed,

"Wow, this is hard for people to process." I wanted people to process it. I didn't want them to stuff this in a way that is going to psychologically traumatize their future, their years after deployment, and yet, the fact remains you have to get people out the door, back into their body armor, and the patrols covering the base entry points, doing the financial, medical support group, all of it. People can't stop working or else other people are going to die. It's a unique thing to process.

So, for the safety of all those on the base, it was necessary for service members to find some meaning out of the death of a comrade.

Two participants reported the importance of making meaning to prevent service members from going into turmoil; they feel unsettled about events that occurred and do not feel content with themselves. Some service members feel guilt about being alive when their friend(s) died; they dedicate their lives to living for that friend. One participant said that this was unhealthy because it perpetuates feelings of guilt. The service members need to process the death of their friend(s) so they are not living in guilt. They also need to make meaning to prevent unhealthy coping strategies. Three of the seven participants made comments about service members using alcohol to cope after their deployments. One participant said, "A lot of soldiers therapeutically take care of their trauma or life problems through alcohol." While another participant noted, "you have to talk about it instead of self-medicating." The participants noted the importance of making meaning through discussion and relationships so that service members did not resort to unhealthy coping strategies.

**When to make meaning.** All the participants commented on the fact that meaning, in most cases, cannot be made during deployment, but that some things can be done before, during, and after deployment to assist the meaning making process.

A participant had discussed his experience thoroughly with a new soldier who was going on deployment for the first time. He said that that information was helpful to the new soldier to prepare him for what he would possibly experience. The participant said that soldier was able to adjust more easily and seemed to make meaning of things more easily because he was prepared. For most service members, they do not have this

luxury. Another chaplain described service members' reactions when they first entered deployment,

People are shocked. "They shot at us?!" The Army assumes you'll get yourself mentally prepared because we just sent you out with a rifle to shoot at a range and we told you you were going to war. "Didn't that mentally prepare you?"

Many participants talked about how hard it was for some service members to adjust because they were not mentally prepared for what deployment was. Although the participants would try to help service members through the beginning process of meaning making, it was difficult because there was not one right answer to every question.

All of the participants touched on the fact that full meaning of experiences cannot be made while on deployment because they are in the midst of things. One of them stated,

When a person has just lost their friend or are afraid for their lives, it's... about... the present moment and what's happening with them. "Ok, how can I get through this? What can we do? What's going to make it better?"

They are trying to grapple with things that are so new and unexplainable that they cannot make meaning at that point. Another participant articulated how hard it can be to process events:

Getting your head around something when you're in the middle of it, and now I have to deal with my circumstances, deal with my head. I want to be home. I don't want to be here, but yet I have to be here.

A third participant believed that because most service members do not have the time or energy to make meaning or reflect on what is going on, this can resemble running on a hurt limb. Lastly, a participant revealed that certain events, like killing someone, are "issues you are going to have to deal with the rest of your life, and I guarantee you that most guys maybe won't think about it when they are there, but when they get back they

will.” So, some things can be thought through while deployed, but other things would be unhelpful or dangerous to process while still deployed.

The participants agreed that meaning making best occurs over time. Three of the participants mentioned the developmental dimension that goes along with making meaning. One participant first described how young service members ages 18-22 do not have the life experience needed to make meaning:

They’re still at a place where they’re just trying to learn about life and the ones that I’ve seen that have been under some kind of mental and emotional stress are not making meaning yet. They are just in more of immediate pain. It’s not about making meaning at this point. They will do that later.

Another chaplain stated, “I do find that people reevaluate as you get older. You just have a different skill set, a different deepening value system to reflect on what you’ve done.”

The third mentioned that life experience is key to making meaning. Another participant revealed how hard it can be for reservists to make meaning after deployment because the support of their peers, superiors, and chaplains are not readily available. He said, “The chaplain goes away and you go away and everyone goes their own separate ways and it wasn’t fixed.” Lastly, a chaplain put a timeframe on it. He believed that if professionals could make contact with service members within the next five years, this may help with long-term problems. He stated,

Really working with these veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, let’s just say the next five years, really leaning into that. Trying to understand the trends and patterns but treating each person as an individual. Really getting them to integrate some of those experiences into a newly formed worldview, not just addressing symptoms like alcoholism and domestic violence, but really focusing more on integration of the whole issue.

Having professionals as an active part in helping service members to make meaning and processing experiences was important to this participant.

**Events where meaning was difficult to find.** The participants mentioned five events where meaning was difficult to find: 1) death of a friend, 2) infidelity, 3) defying human and cultural norms, 4) loss of innocence, and 5) wondering if they made a difference. Five out of the seven participants reported that the death of a friend, especially by suicide, was an event where meaning was difficult to find. One participant believed that the military, like the American culture, is a death denying culture:

I don't know if I would have said that before because it's an organization that carries weapons and kills people, so you think they would be pretty comfortable with death. We are not immune to the culture we are from, and our culture does not like to think about our own death or we don't talk in terms of good deaths and bad deaths or honoring deaths. Death is bad and we just deny [it].

If service members had this train of thought and denied death, it would be difficult for them to come to terms with the death of a friend. Another chaplain mentioned that in the beginning of the wars, there was not time to grieve the loss of a friend and they did not know how to grieve the loss. So, not having time to grieve and not knowing what to think of the death was difficult for service members, especially when they were trying to make meaning of what had happened. This can be especially true when service members take their own lives. A few participants commented that it was difficult for service members to find meaning in the event of a suicide.

The second area mentioned where meaning was hard to find was infidelity, whether it was of their own doings or that of their significant others. One participant described it as "crazy making to their whole world." Some service members cannot come to an understanding of why it happened, and they do not have the leisure of focusing all their attention on the infidelity while they are deployed.

Defying human and cultural norms was the third area that was mentioned by a couple of participants as being hard to make meaning of. One way that some service members have defied human norms is to take the life of another human. A couple participants said that this was hard for people, especially when it was not in self-defense. A participant stated, "It is not a light thing to take a life. It does something to the soul. Taking a life will follow you for the rest of [your life]." The other cultural norms that some service members defied were not helping civilians who were injured and killing animals for the safety of others. One chaplain said, "[As] Americans, I think we really value helping blatant suffering in front of our eyes. I think that's kind of an American value." This societal value, in turn, made it difficult for some soldiers who guarded the base to deny help to civilians who were wounded.

The fourth event that participants mentioned where meaning was hard to find for service members was their loss of innocence. About half of the participants mentioned that soldiers felt like they had lost their innocence either through people that they had harmed or things that they had witnessed. Making sense of this loss did not come easily to service members, and they did not know how to find meaning.

Lastly, feeling like they made a difference was difficult for some service members to decipher. One participant talked about the way that service members evaluate their job:

I think what we're going to see is if Iraq falls apart, we're going to see more of this: "Why did my friend have to die? Was it worth it?" If we pull out of Afghanistan and it returns to barbaric Taliban control we'll see it with those guys. "Why did we go there? What did we give those 10 years for and all those lives?"

He went on to say, "If people question the value of what you've done or you come to question, then you're questioning the significance of their lives and death. Those are



tough things, really tough things.” Participants commented on the various duties that people were assigned and that some duties are viewed as more prestigious than others. A couple of the participants talked about the shame that some service members feel about their duties because they did not experience combat. They have a hard time viewing their jobs as valuable when others may not see them as being valuable. A chaplain said,

Maybe they didn't [see “blood and guts”], maybe they're deeply ashamed about that. They signed up to see that but they never did and instead of being an infantry soldier on convoys, they were the guy that changed the toilet paper in the biffies for a year.

It is difficult for service members to find meaning in their deployment when they and others are questioning the value of their work.

**Meaning making conclusion.** Like the other themes, meaning making is based on the individual. Service members use the support and resources they have to make meaning. Sometimes meaning is forced on service members for their own safety, but for the most part, they are able to find meaning in their own way and time. A longer and more intense meaning making process is necessary for events where meaning is hard to find. Although service members need to make meaning for themselves, they find support in each other through talking about their experiences.

### **How Social Workers Can Help**

**Acknowledge beliefs.** All of the participants were very passionate about explaining the different ways that social workers can help service members to address spirituality and meaning making. Most of the participants stated that social workers need to acknowledge the fact that spirituality is real. One chaplain went on to tell how this affects service members:

What I think that does is when you take that seriously, it really honors our humanity in a different kind of way. Many soldiers are not going to be ready for that but some are. I think that as a social worker, if you work with soldiers, don't just treat their symptoms but really listen to them and help them to have a sense of who they are and what this all means. It goes a long way.

He went on to say that he never challenges service members' beliefs unless they are "obstructing what they really want to do." Another participant strongly believed that social workers cannot help service members when they do not have beliefs themselves. He said, "Part of it is if you don't have faith yourself, how can you help somebody who really needs it?"

**Belief assessment.** Participants talked about assessing service members and asking questions to discover their needs. One participant said, "Do an assessment of their values and [the] resources they have to sustain them, and be very careful to not overlook them." He stated that a social worker can do this by asking the service member these questions: "How is God working in your life? What resources are you bringing from your own experience with God?" Another chaplain also mentioned those same questions along with, "Are there practices of your faith, whatever it is, that could help you at a time like this, and what are you doing with those?"

The participants stressed the importance of assessing for the needs of service members related to their belief systems, but that social workers do not necessarily have to attempt to address the needs themselves. One thing mentioned by two participants was the importance of referrals. They thought it was essential for social workers to connect service members to professionals who could help them meet their needs. Half of the participants also noted that most service members who have served in the military do not like to receive help from professionals who have not served. Service members are much

more likely to open up with someone who has been in the service and has had similar experiences. One participant wished that he could send social workers on deployment, or at least to basic training, to help them understand military culture and as a result have initial rapport with clients. He was passionate about social workers needing to have a better understanding of deployment and trends of society and military culture in order to assess and treat service members. He was quoted earlier saying that it is important to know the trends but to also treat the person as an individual. One of the most important reminders in working with service members was stated by another participant, "Treat us like humans and that we do make meaning and that is very, very important to us."

**Social workers conclusion.** Social workers can help service members by acknowledging that spirituality is important to many service members and thus their spiritual needs must be assessed. The assessment of service members should include questions about their beliefs and how they can use their spirituality to cope and make meaning. If social workers think that it is not their place or they feel inadequate to make an assessment, they should refer the client to someone else (i.e., connect them with resources). Professionals cannot ignore this important aspect of the human, and the religious and spiritual beliefs need to be used to address problems that service members may come across during and after deployment.

### **Summary**

Many of the participants agreed on the four themes, varying a bit on the details in the subthemes. The participants revealed many ways that service members use their religious and spiritual beliefs to cope and make meaning. Deployment affects these beliefs, sometimes strengthening them and sometimes weakening them. All of the

participants agreed that this area of study is much needed, and it is important to address the beliefs of service members when treating them. The effect of deployment on service members is unique, but similarities exist among those trying to cope and make meaning of their experiences.

## **Discussion**

This research was constructed and examined through the lens that people use their religious and spiritual beliefs to make meaning of their experiences. For the most part, this study supported the available literature on meaning making and revealed new information that could not be found by the researcher at the time this paper was written. The discussion will compare the existing literature and the results of this study.

### **Effects of Deployment on Religious and Spiritual Beliefs**

Although the data obtained from participants about service members' religious and spiritual beliefs and the effect of deployment on their beliefs was not quantifiable, it was informative and unwavering. As expressed in their observations, the participants found that most, if not all, service members possessed some religious or spiritual beliefs. This finding is similar to the Department of Defense Survey in which 99% of the service members surveyed stated that they had some beliefs (Bray et al., 2006). Even though most service members described in this study did not outwardly state their beliefs, almost all of them asked questions about faith and tried to find meaning in their experiences when they experienced stress from deployment. It was hard for the participants to know the exact beliefs of a lot of service members because they did not usually contact the participants to discuss their beliefs; the discussion would usually flow from other conversations. According to some of the participants, service members' beliefs changed as they experienced new things and found meaning in the experiences, so in that respect, many of the service members would not be able to confidently identify with a specific religion or spiritual belief system. This finding would support the fact that there is not much available research about the specific beliefs of service members. Instead of

quantitative research on the religious and spiritual beliefs of deployed service members, qualitative research on the ways that beliefs change and the resources needed to sustain beliefs may produce more helpful findings for those working with service members.

While some research has been conducted to evaluate religious and spiritual beliefs of service members and ways they use their beliefs to cope, more research is needed to learn about the effects of deployment on service members' beliefs. Participants revealed that many service members did not follow a specific pattern when it came to the effect of deployment on their beliefs; this may be why it is hard to quantify or generalize the effect. Some service members' faith deepens, some have their faith fade as they separate themselves from it, while others do not think about it at all. Without details from service members about their individual experiences, it is hard to know what causes these changes in faith. From the available research, it is noticeable to friends and family when people in the general population start to evaluate their faith because they begin asking faith-centered questions (Schuster et al., 2001; Smith 2004) as they try to come to an understanding of traumatic events such as deaths or crises. Service members, also, use faith-centered questions to evaluate their belief systems and create new worldviews that incorporate their experiences.

### **Use of Religious and Spiritual Beliefs to Cope**

The participants gave many examples of how service members cope by putting their beliefs to practice: praying, attending worship, carrying good luck charms, reading Scripture/ studying the bible, and using relationships to facilitate discussions. Some of the coping strategies used by service members in this study are similar to those used by non-service members who were coping with major life stressors; a list of these coping

methods was compiled by Pargament et al. (1998, p. 711). Service members described in this study “sought spiritual support” (p. 711) from God through prayer and possibly found “religious purification” (p. 711) by attending worship services (Pargament et al., 1998). They used bible studies to find Scriptures that were “comforting and reassuring of God’s love and care” (Pargament et al., 1998, p. 711). Lastly, service members used relationships with chaplains and other service members to discuss their beliefs. They asked questions and expressed “points of confusion” and “anger that they had toward God” (Pargament et al., 1998, p. 711). Some service members used their knowledge and belief systems to “support others” (p. 711), which in turn helped them to cope (Pargament et al., 1998). In summary, service members use similar religious coping methods to others who have encountered major life stressors; deployment and being removed from their environment can be stressful for service members. These coping patterns can be healthy for service members if they do not get into the routine of focusing their anger toward God and the belief that evil in the world overpowers the good (Pargament, et al., 1998).

Participants mentioned that they most often observed prayer as a means of coping for service members. They said it comforted the service members and helped them to collect themselves before missions. Similar findings were presented in a Department of Defense study: a little over half of service members stated that they said a prayer to cope with stress, while 80% - 90% embraced prayer by a chaplain (Bray et al., 2006). The participants understood the importance of prayer as a coping method, so they would support service members through prayer whenever it was requested. Prayer was found to be a positive predictor for posttraumatic growth for those who had experienced a

traumatic event (Harris et al., 2010). Pargament et al. (1998) also found that psychological and religious growth and lessened symptoms of psychological distress are evident when prayer is used as a positive coping strategy. It was not apparent from the interviews of this study if prayer helped with posttraumatic growth, but the participants commented on prayer and its comforting effect on service members. Lastly, in a study of soldiers, prayer correlated with scores of higher total spirituality (Wester, 2009). A few participants touched on their observations that service members would look to those who were outspoken and identified outwardly with their faiths to say prayers and discuss spiritual matters. The service members who identified outwardly with their faiths were probably viewed by other service members as having a higher level of spirituality, which would draw those searching for comfort and guidance to them. The participants in this study were unable to see the direct correlation between prayer and level of spirituality, but they were able to see how service members used prayer and their beliefs to cope.

### **Meaning Making**

The participants in this study noted that the interview question asking them to describe the meaning making process of service members was a difficult question to answer. They said that when they had helped service members, they had not thought about it in terms of making meaning; their goal was more along the lines of helping service members find ways to cope with what they were experiencing. The most prominent way that service members tried to cope, and as a result started to make meaning, was through asking questions and having discussions. Service members asked questions about the meaning of life, the meaning of their experiences, and how God fit into everything; they were trying to decipher the nature of the people they were working



with and people they fought against, the nature of their new environment and events that they encountered, and how everything interacted to create their deployment experience. One of the purposes of religious belief systems is to have the personal answers for these thoughts and questions (Silberman, 2005), so it was clear that service members were trying to clarify their beliefs while using their beliefs to find meaning. Some service members may be so engrossed in these questions that thinking about them turns into rumination.

Rumination was found to help those who had experienced a traumatic event during the year after the event; if the rumination lasted more than a year, however, it resulted in low levels of growth and high levels of stress (Calhoun et al., 2000; Michael & Snyder, 2005). By contrast, in a study by Park (2005), participants took longer than a year to make meaning. This time frame would more likely reflect the length of the meaning making process described for service members in this study. It may be necessary for professionals working with service members to monitor their ruminations; while rumination may be helpful during the first year after deployment, if it lasts longer than that, it could be harmful to the service member.

Participants described the importance of life experience to make meaning. A few mentioned that it was a developmental process and the younger soldiers did not have the life experience or solid faith to make meaning. This finding is supported by a study done with more than 1,000 people of all ages in the United States. Peacock and Poloma (1998) found that as people got older, their religious beliefs got stronger. The authors attributed this growth to the changes in motivation as a person ages. Peacock and Poloma (1998) also noted that the leading predictor of life satisfaction among all age groups was

perceived closeness to God. The participants of this meaning making study did not have detailed information regarding service members' perceived closeness to God; they were, however, able to see the trend that as some service members get older, their faith matures and they have a deeper relationship with God. The participants thought that this deepened relationship over time was helpful in the meaning making process; having stronger faith allowed soldiers to find meaning more quickly than those with weaker faith.

Service members may have problems making meaning when they avoid thoughts and feelings of grief and refrain from harboring feelings of guilt. Michael and Snyder (2005) found that avoiding thoughts and feelings related to grief may have long-term negative effects for those who suffered the loss of a loved one. The importance of addressing grief was reflected in a participant's response when he said that service members would be in turmoil if they did not find a way to process the crisis. Therefore, it is important for service members to process their thoughts and feelings around the death of a friend or they may suffer from intrusive and distressing thoughts.

It is also important for service members to process feelings of guilt either for things they have done or for events they feel they could have prevented. Feelings of guilt can weaken faith (Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004), and the combination of guilt and weakened faith can greatly affect the ability of service members to make meaning. A chaplain from this study commented that some service members live their lives in remembrance of others, that they inflict guilt upon themselves because they are alive and other soldiers are not. He said that this was not a healthy way for service members to go about living because they put unneeded pressure on themselves to live a good life as a

result of that guilt. The meaning of deployment would be hard to find if service members are burdened with feelings of guilt for being alive. If service members are willing to talk about their feelings of guilt and find meaning in the deaths of friends, their views of deployments and outlooks on life will most likely be more positive.

Service members not only benefit from finding meaning of feelings of guilt, they can also benefit from having an open mind about their faiths; having an open mind about religious and spiritual beliefs while grieving will benefit service members. Openness to religious change was found to predict growth in those who were grieving (Calhoun et al., 2000). Participants of this study described service members as they attempted to cope and make meaning during deployment, and it sounded as if they were open to learning about religious and spiritual aspects of life. Service members would ask questions about God and discuss their relationships with God; it was evident through the questions that service members asked that they were willing to take many views into consideration as they tried to find what they actually believed and then use the beliefs to make meaning. They were trying to find answers that made sense to them and find comfort in these answers. Some participants thought that every service members' worldview was challenged while they were deployed and that all of them went through the process of discovering what they believe. It is important for service members to be open to some change in their beliefs because there is a high chance that it could happen while deployed. This openness will help them to develop a belief system that fits their needs and will help in finding meaning.

### **How Social Workers Can Help**

All of the participants passionately described ways in which social workers can help service members pertaining to beliefs and meaning making. They said that it is important for social workers to recognize that spirituality is real, they should do assessments and ask questions to find what service members needs are, they should understand the trends of their clients, and they should at least make referrals for help. In the study by Fletcher (2004), professionals did acknowledge that spirituality is beneficial for their patients; they did not, however, know how to approach the topic. The participants in this meaning making study gave some extremely useful open-ended questions for social workers to use when addressing the topic of beliefs with clients. The questions serve as a great starting point for social workers who feel uncomfortable about approaching the topic with service members. Participants also noted that following the lead of the client would help social workers feel more comfortable; if service members bring up the topic first, take their lead on it. Some of the professionals in Fletcher's (2004) study did not want to approach the topic of spirituality with their patients. The participants in this study recommended that social workers assess the client for spiritual needs but make referrals after that point if they do not feel comfortable and are not trained to address the needs of clients. Clients deserve holistic care and acknowledging that religious and spiritual beliefs are important to clients, helping clients to assess their spiritual needs, and finding resources to meet clients' needs are a part of holistic care.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

There were strengths and limitations to this current research study. The strengths of this study include the following: chaplains as the participants and using qualitative

data to analyze the problem. One strength of this study was interviewing chaplains and other service members who were closely involved with spiritual matters. The chaplains had knowledge about the general and specific ways that deployment affected service members and how they went about making meaning. Every participant interviewed had contact with hundreds of service members, so there was a lot of data gathered in a small number of interviews. Although all of the participants were from the state of Minnesota, some of them interacted with military personnel from other states, so they offered a broad spectrum of observations. Another strength of this study was the use of qualitative interviews to collect data. Much of the information could not be quantified and a lot of it would have been missed if the participants had completed a quantitative survey. The researcher was able to deviate from the questions to clarify responses and go deeper into specific questions.

Among the many limitations of this study are the similar demographics of the participants, the sample size, the fact that service members themselves were not interviewed, and using qualitative research to obtain data. The participants in this study were all male Christians from Minnesota, and all but one were in the Army. If the participants had been more diverse, for example, including, all genders, various military branches, and several religious and spiritual belief systems, the outcomes would have ensured that the data be more applicable to all service members and possibly would provide different responses to the questions. All people see the world differently, but similarities may exist among those of the same gender, military branches, and religions; it would be important to have the viewpoints of these different groups to be able to generalize the findings to all service members. The sample size of seven is small and the

similar demographics do not make the information generalizable to all service members. The fact that service members themselves were not interviewed was the biggest limitation of the study. While the participants provided rich data that contributes to the knowledge about the meaning making process, specific information that could have been obtained from service members would have been helpful to compare and contrast effects of deployment and the meaning making process for individuals. It can be difficult to get specific answers to questions when using qualitative research because the participants do not always answer the questions asked; they may allude to them or answer the questions in the way they interpreted them, rather than the intent of the researcher.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Few studies are available about the effects of deployment on religious and spiritual beliefs and the use of beliefs to make meaning by service members. With over two million veterans of post-9/11 deployments (Obama, 2011), this type of research will be needed. Service members will be trying to make meaning of their deployments, the loss of friends, reintegration into society, and integration of experiences into their worldviews. Research on the meaning making process, specific to deployed service members, will help professionals better understand their needs.

When most service members have beliefs and use their beliefs to make meaning, it is necessary to know how beliefs are affected by deployment and ways to prevent and cope with these affects. Interviewing service members from all over the country and in different military branches would be helpful to compare and contrast the effects of deployment and the ways in which service members make meaning. The findings of a

larger research study with diverse participants would educate social workers on the needs of specific groups within different military branches.

A few specific areas of research emerged from this study. Active-duty members of the service are continually in the presence of other service members, while reservists do not have that support when they return from deployment. Research on the differences between the coping strategies and meaning making processes that reservists and active-duty members use would be important when providing services for both groups. This relates to another area of research: how do service members find support and answers during their meaning making process years after their deployment? Researching what this process looks like and what supports are utilized would be helpful in future years with veterans. Because of the paucity of meaning making studies pertaining to service members, research is needed to explore the actual effects of meaning making on the lives of service members. Lastly, this study does not include the voice of females. Females and males may be affected by deployment and go about finding meaning in different ways, so research is necessary to understand female service members.

Overall, more research is needed and will be helpful for future work with service members. Having a general idea of how service members cope and make meaning and what resources can be utilized will hopefully prevent the need for more intensive and expensive services later on.

### **Implications for Future Social Work Practice**

The participants in this study affirmed that understanding the effects of deployment on the religious and spiritual beliefs of service members and how service members use their beliefs to make meaning are important when working with service

members. Making meaning of deployment and the events that occur during deployment can help service members to reduce mental health symptoms, feelings of guilt, and the need for more intense social services later in their lives (Owens et al., 2009). Social workers can address the religious and spiritual needs of clients by asking questions and making an assessment. Then they can work with clients to address these needs through appropriate referrals, if necessary. Only knowing how to assess clients is not enough. Social workers should also be competent in the differences between religiosity and spirituality and the different types of religious and spiritual practices. Having this knowledge will assist social workers in their assessments and demonstrate to the clients that this is an important topic.

It is essential for social workers to be aware that the military has its own culture. Some service members will not want to talk to people who have not been in the military because they believe that the person does not deserve to know the answers to the questions that he/she asked or that the person will not understand without being familiar with life in the military. Social workers who work with service members should be educated on military culture to improve their understanding and thus serve their clients more effectively.

### **Implications for Future Policy**

A need that arose for service members was the ability for professionals to address their spiritual needs. Many of the participants expressed their dissatisfaction about the availability of programming to address and support spiritual needs after deployment. They understood that with the separation of church and state, it may be difficult to get federally funded spiritual programs and that professionals may not be able to address the



topic in their care; but they came back to the point that it was important for spirituality to be addressed. VA Medical Centers provide chaplain services for service members pertaining to their faith that are of support while hospitalized (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012), but a need remains for ongoing individual and spiritual support for service members. Some service members find religious and spiritual support in their own communities, while others would benefit from professional religious and spiritual counseling to address how disagreements between their beliefs and the ways they are living their lives are affecting their ability to move forward after deployment. Religious and spiritual counseling could be a federally funded resource available to service members at VA Medical Centers and Vet Centers around the country.

One participant thought that if connections could be made with veterans within the next five years to address their spiritual needs and meaning making processes, these connections could prevent homelessness among veterans and reduce domestic violence in coming years. The VA, with federal funds through the Homeless Initiative, is working to end veteran homelessness. The funding supports community partnerships, such as shelters and soup kitchens, finds housing for vets, and provides jobs, rate-reduced housing, outreach, medical and psychological treatment, and prevention measures (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). Including interventions to address spirituality and meaning making in the services offered through the Homeless Initiative could potentially increase the ability to end veteran homelessness.

It is important to create policies that help service members but also mandate some care and connection within the military community. During deployment, service members take care of each other, and when they come back they go their separate ways.

Finding a way to keep veterans in touch with each other and giving them access to resources would be important policy issues to study and implement. Beyond the Yellow Ribbon is a program that was started in Minnesota. The program mandates a 30-60-90 day check-in with service members after they return from deployment (Beyond the Yellow Ribbon, 2012). This process is beneficial for service members by bringing them together to talk with one another and evaluating how they are integrating into society. Having continued support and contact with other service members after these initial 90 days would keep lines of communication open among personnel; therefore, service members may be more likely to contact each other in a time of crisis and need.

### **Conclusion**

This research provided the viewpoints of chaplains and other spiritual military personnel on the effects of deployment on beliefs and the meaning making process of service members. Deployment was seen to have an effect on religious and spiritual beliefs, which led to questioning and finding a way to integrate experiences into new worldviews. Service members use their beliefs to cope by praying, worshipping, acquiring good luck charms, reading the bible and finding Scripture that comforts them, and using relationships with chaplains and other service members to discuss spirituality.

This research revealed how service members make meaning, why they make meaning, when they make meaning, and events where meaning is difficult to find. Service members make meaning through asking questions and relationships with other religious and spiritual people, debriefing after an incident, and taking part in rituals. Service members need to make meaning for the safety of themselves and other individuals, so they do not live their lives with feelings of guilt, and so they cope in

healthy ways. Without making meaning, some service members live with an unsettling feeling about their experiences. Most of them started the meaning making process during deployment by asking questions and evaluating their belief system, but it is not until after deployment when most service members can more fully make meaning. The events where meaning is hard to find for service members are the death of a friend, infidelity, defying human and cultural norms, loss of innocence, and wondering if they made a difference.

This study provided evidence supporting the belief that deployment affects the lives of service members, and through the support of their peers and other professionals, they can use their beliefs to find meaning in their experiences. Social workers are called to acknowledge and assess the spiritual aspect of service members' lives and help them to attain resources to address these needs. Providing assessments and referrals for spiritual needs are important aspects of holistic care that treat service members with the dignity that they deserve.

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## Appendix A: Letter of Introduction and Recruitment

Dear Chaplain,

I am Jessica Roemer, a graduate student in the School of Social Work at the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University. I am writing my clinical research paper on post-9/11 service members' use of religiosity and spirituality in making meaning of their experiences during deployment. The purpose of this study is to find ways in which deployment has affected religious and spiritual beliefs, how service members have made meaning of their experiences, and the implications for social workers. I will be interviewing chaplains who work or have worked with post-9/11 service members in the area of religiosity and spirituality. I am contacting you because I see from your agency's website that you work with service members/ my colleague mentioned that you work with service members and may be a potential candidate for my interviews.

I would personally like to invite you to participate in this study. By doing so, you share your knowledge acquired in your work with service members and add to this much needed area of research. The interviews are completely voluntary, uncompensated, and will last about an hour. I am including a copy of the consent form you will need to sign if you decide to participate in this study and a copy of the questions. These forms will give you more details about what I am asking of you as a participant. Please review these forms and contact me to arrange an interview if you are interested in participating or if there are any other potential participants you think I should contact.

Sincerely,

Jessica Roemer

[jroemer@stthomas.edu](mailto:jroemer@stthomas.edu)

## Appendix B: Letter of Informed Consent

## **Consent Form University of St. Thomas**

How Deployed Service Members Making Meaning of Their Experiences:  
Chaplains' Perspectives  
[IRB Log #293991-1]

I am conducting this study to explore the ways in which deployment effects the religious and spiritual beliefs of service members and how they use these beliefs to make meaning of their experiences. You are invited to participate in this research because you work directly with post-9/11 service members and have had discussions about religiosity and spirituality with them. Please review this form and ask any questions you may have before the interview begins.

This study is being conducted by Jessica Roemer, a graduate student in social work, and supervised by Kari Fletcher, PhD, LICSW, from the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University School of Social Work.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which deployment effects the religious and spiritual beliefs of service members and how they use these beliefs to make meaning of their experiences.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to this study, I will ask you to participate in a 45-60 minute digitally recorded interview about your work with service members. The interviews will take place in a private location determined by the researcher and the participant.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Some risk may be involved. Talking about combat and religious and spiritual beliefs may stir up some emotions. You may skip questions or end the interview if at any point it becomes too overwhelming. If you are in need of extra support, you may contact Crisis Connection, Veterans Crisis Line, VA Mental Health Intake, or religious counseling (see attached reference sheet for telephone numbers). There will be no compensation for subsequent treatment, so you or a third party payer will be responsible for payments.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any report that I publish, I will not include any identifying information. The types of records I will create include an audio recording, written notes, and a typed transcription of the interview. The recordings, notes, and transcriptions will be kept on my personal computer and no one will have access but me. I will destroy the digital recordings before May 31, 2012.

**I ask that you keep identifying information, such as name, rank, and specific duties, of service members confidential. The purpose of this study is to get overall themes of meaning making, specific and identifying information will not be necessary.**

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with any cooperating agencies or institutions or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time before or during the study. You are also free to skip any questions that may be asked. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used in this study, unless allowed by you.

**Contacts and Questions:**

My name is **Jessica Roemer**. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at jrroemer@stthomas.edu. You may also contact **Kari Fletcher**, PhD, LICSW, research advisor, at 651-962-5807, or the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**State of Consent:**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I am at least 18 years old. I consent to participate in the study.

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**Signature of Study Participant**

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**Date**

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**Print Name of Study Participant**

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**Signature of Researcher**

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**Date**

## Appendix C: Resources

**Resources**

If this interview has stirred up memories or uneasiness and you would like to talk to someone, here is a list of resources.

**Crisis Connection**..... 612-379-6363

**Crisis Connection** is a hotline that provides 24-hour crisis counseling by telephone and is free of charge.

**Veterans Crisis Line**..... 1-800-273-8255

The **Veterans Crisis Line** is a free confidential resource that can be called at any time of the day. They will work with you to find resources and get you the help you need.

**VA Mental Health Intake**..... 612-725-1921

The **VA Mental Health Intake** is open between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. They offer a range of services such as inpatient psychiatric unit, partial hospitalization, and outpatient programming. The level of care will be determined once you have set up and completed an intake. Insurance or personal payment will be necessary for these levels of care.

**Nystrom & Associates**..... 651-628-9566

**Nystrom and Associates** is a Christian based organization providing counseling. Call this number to make an appointment. Individual insurance or payment will be necessary.

For other forms of religious or spiritual counseling, performing an internet search should yield results.

## Appendix D: Interview Questions

**Interview Questions**

1. In what setting do/did you work with service members?
2. In your experience, what typically prompts service members to contact you?
3. What effect, if any, do service members say that deployment has on their religious or spiritual beliefs?
4. In your experience, how do you see service members using religious or spiritual beliefs to cope?
5. How do service members use religious or spiritual belief systems to make meaning of their experiences?
  - a. How have they been successful?
  - b. How have they struggled?
  - c. What does this meaning making process look like?
  - d. How have you assisted in this process?
6. How would you recommend social workers approach the topic of religious or spiritual beliefs with service members?
7. Is there anyone else I should talk to? How do I get ahold of them?