

A close-up photograph of two hands clasped together in a supportive grip. Both wrists are adorned with rainbow-colored wristbands, a symbol of the LGBTQ+ community. The background is dark and out of focus, emphasizing the hands and the text overlaid on the image.

Impact of the 'Gay Ban' on Policy on LGBT+ Veterans: Exploring Moral Injury

A Commentary on Harm, Recovery and Amends

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Underpinning Research

- Examine the impact of the LGBT+ Armed Forces ban on LGBT+ veterans to understand their lived experience and social isolation and loneliness.
- Provide an evidence base for service provision, help, and support to prevent and respond to social isolation and loneliness.
- Using a mixed method approach, Phase One (qualitative exploratory), Phase Two (quantitative survey) followed by triangulation of both phases for a comprehensive understanding.

Key Themes

Overarching Themes & Sub-Themes:

- **Emotional Impact**
 - Violation
 - Feelings of Mistrust
 - Sacrifice
 - Mental Health and Well-Being
- **Changing to Adapt and Adapting to Change**
 - Suppressing Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
 - Cultural Normalisation
 - Constant Vigilance: Heightened Stress and Anxiety
- **Aftermath: Barriers to Help Seeking**
 - Fear and Shame
 - Perceptions and Experiences of Accessing Support
 - Lack of Appropriate Support



Understanding the Harm to LGBT+ Veterans

Drawing on findings from our study *Lost and Found* our commentary focuses on:

- Contextualising the harm imposed by the 'gay ban' policy on LGBT+ veterans.
- Exploring potential implications of morally injurious events and moral injury.
- Importance of addressing the enduring losses at individual, organisational, social, and political levels.

A large rainbow flag is waving on a flagpole against a clear blue sky. The flag's colors are vibrant and the flagpole has a decorative finial. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Value conflict and LGBT+ identity suppression

The 'gay ban' violated fundamental aspects of LGBT+ veterans' lives.

Veterans were forced to choose between personal authenticity to LGBT+ identity or conforming to organisational heteronormativity.

LGBT+ identity suppression included avoiding thinking about their sexuality and hiding their authentic self

“You start living your lie at a very early age and it becomes a pattern, you just lie all the time. It doesn't feel like a lie, it seems more avoiding the truth and playing a game, to belong, to feel the peer pressure of whatever that is, whatever your difference is, you want to comply, you want to be with your peers, you want to be like everybody else, so you adapt, and you keep on adapting nearly all your life”

Impact of the 'Double Life'

Psychological and emotional consequences of forced identity concealment.

Disrupted sense of self-identity and reduced self-authenticity.

Consistent mistrust of others due to behaviours and prejudice within the Armed Forces

“There was this increasing anger that why should my life be so offensive and so incongruous with being able to be an army nurse, it didn't make sense”

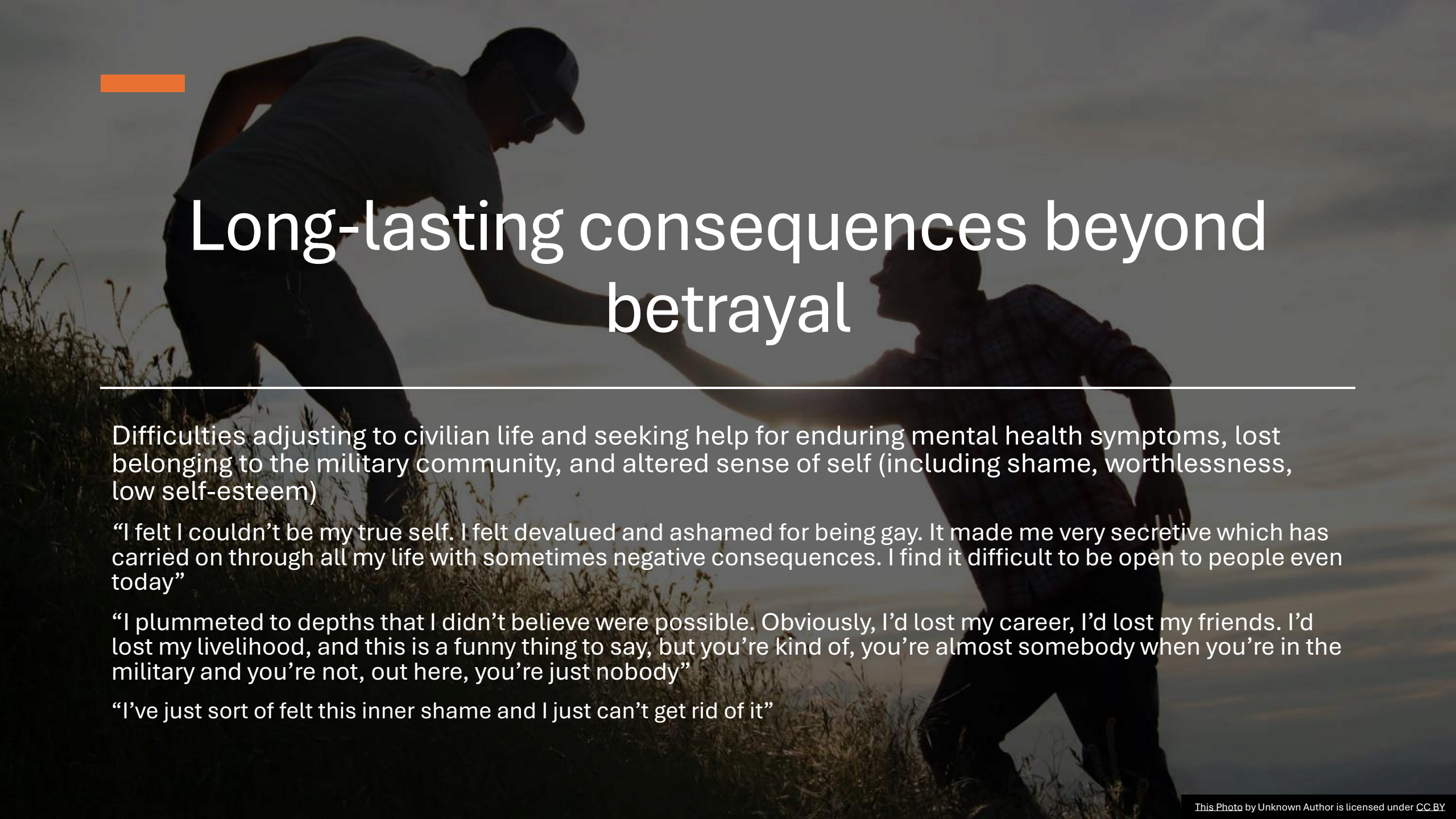
“I felt guilty and confused as I wanted a career in the Army. Worthless at times and felt I did not belong. Very stressed in case I was found out. I often asked myself, what is wrong with me and why am I like this. I knew others would think less of me if they knew I was a lesbian”

“I didn't recognise myself at times. I had created a false life based on lies. I struggled with anxiety and depression at times. At sea I felt so isolated and alone, often withdrawing to any quiet place I could find”



LOST AND FOUND

The LGBT+ Veteran Community
and the Impacts of the Gay Ban

A background image showing the silhouettes of two men on a grassy hill. One man is on the left, leaning forward with his hand on the other man's shoulder. The second man is on the right, standing and looking towards the first. The scene is set against a bright, hazy sky, possibly at sunrise or sunset. An orange horizontal bar is located in the top left corner.

Long-lasting consequences beyond betrayal

Difficulties adjusting to civilian life and seeking help for enduring mental health symptoms, lost belonging to the military community, and altered sense of self (including shame, worthlessness, low self-esteem)

“I felt I couldn’t be my true self. I felt devalued and ashamed for being gay. It made me very secretive which has carried on through all my life with sometimes negative consequences. I find it difficult to be open to people even today”

“I plummeted to depths that I didn’t believe were possible. Obviously, I’d lost my career, I’d lost my friends. I’d lost my livelihood, and this is a funny thing to say, but you’re kind of, you’re almost somebody when you’re in the military and you’re not, out here, you’re just nobody”

“I’ve just sort of felt this inner shame and I just can’t get rid of it”

Framing Moral Injury - Legacy of the 'Gay Ban'

The commentary explored the complex harm faced by LGBT+ veterans under the 'gay ban' through the lens of moral injury.

Resonant with Shay's conception of broken "Social Trust" and offers way to envision moral repair

Key Findings:

- Evidence from the *Lost and Found* research and Independent Review highlights long-term negative impacts at individual and contextual levels.
- Harm affected LGBT+ veterans on organisational, social, and political levels.

Need for Amends:

- Addressing multi-level moral harm through recognition of the damage and broken social trust.
- Meaningful reparative actions in policy and practice are crucial.


Holistic approach to amends- making

Richardson et al., (2022) emphasise how moral injury should not be considered solely an individual or personal construct but should also consider the role of multilevel systemic betrayal embedded within the military context. The need to consider multilevel betrayal and serving in the Armed Forces has implications for the morally injurious themes highlighted in both the Lost and Found Report and Independent Review.

Recent moral injury research has suggested that holistic multidisciplinary interventions may be required to address the complex harm associated with moral injury (at the individual, organisational, social, and political level) to promote recovery and repair (Carey & Hodgson, 2018; Hollis et al., 2023; Molendijk et al., 2022).

There is additionally emerging evidence of the value of forgiveness (of the self, others, and the divine) and reparative action and restorative justice (including intent to make positive social change through involvement in activism and apology as a form of self-repair) in the recovery and healing from moral injury (Cohen, 2018; Schrader, 2019; McGowan, 2022; Brémault-Philip et al., 2022; Pernicano et al., 2022).

The Nature of Moral Injury in LGBT+ Veterans



Betrayal and Ambivalence in Moral Injury

- Moral injury often involves betrayal of self and others, including systemic betrayal.
- Moral ambivalence: Struggling with conflicting realities or identities (Richardson et al., 2022).
- Injury of the soul: Disrupted meaning-making, fractured moral beliefs.

Recent proposals suggest a holistic, multidisciplinary model to acknowledge:

- moral injury as a violation, betrayal or suppression of deeply held beliefs and values.
- Harm spans biopsychosocial-spiritual domains (Carey & Hodgson, 2018; Molendijk et al., 2022).

Moving Forward with Meaningful Change

- UK government accepted all 49 recommendations of the Independent Review (Ministry of Defence, 2023).
- Commitment to work with LGBT+ veterans to implement restorative measures.
- Financial reparative actions must address social dimensions of moral repair.
- Acknowledging organisational, political, and social responsibilities is crucial for making amends.
- The process of healing requires both structural change and recognition of individual pain.
- Focus on creating an inclusive, supportive environment for LGBT+ veterans to heal and be heard.

Moral Repair

Non-Financial Elements of Moral Repair:

While important, financial support is best seen as a demonstration of commitment to moral repair, not the solution itself.

- Community Support: Peer networks, mentoring, and connection with others who understand the experience.
- Acknowledgment and Validation: Public recognition of harm, apologies, and statements of moral support from leaders and organizations.
- Restoring Trust and Purpose: Opportunities to regain a sense of dignity and role within the organisation or society.

Future Research

Further research should explore how moral injury impacts an individual's sense of self and social identity, particularly in the military environment. With an emphasise on the need for a broader understanding of the social dynamics involved in moral injury and recovery.

- Investigation into the enduring impact of the ban and the process of moral repair for LGBT+ veterans.
- Explore how peer networks, mentoring, and community engagement contribute to healing moral injury.
- Investigate potential barriers to successful moral repair, such as stigma, and continued alienation after compensation.

Summary – Lasting Impact

Impact of Past Policy:

- The UK Armed Forces' 'gay ban' has had long-lasting effects on LGBT+ veterans, impacting their health, well-being, and sense of belonging.
- This historical harm is a significant issue that continues to affect ex-Service personnel, their families, and the broader Armed Forces community today.

Current Needs of LGBT+ Veterans:

- Despite policy changes, LGBT+ veterans continue to face challenges related to identity, social stigma, and mental health—issues exacerbated by ongoing political debates and concerns about inadequate reparative actions.
- Addressing these emerging issues requires an understanding of moral injury and the need for multilevel reparative action, which can inform broader support strategies for other marginalised groups within the Armed Forces.



Thank you

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Related Research and Independent Review Sources:

Osborne, A., & McGill, G. (2023). Lost and found: The LGBT+ veteran community and the impacts of the gay ban.

Osborne, A. K., & McGill, G. (2024). The impact of the historic policy to ban homosexuality in the UK armed forces: The lived experience of LGBT+ veterans. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 21(3), 1123-1136.

McGill, G., Allen, S., & Osborne, A. K. (2024). “It Was a Complete Violation of Everything”: LGBT+ Veterans’ Experiences of Discrimination and Oppression Through the Exemptive UK Military “Gay Ban” Policy. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 1-16.

[Final Report | LGBT Veterans Independent Review](#)

McGill et al., 2022 – Progress Report Phase One: An exploratory study of the experiences of LGBT+ veterans affected by ‘the ban’.

[2022_Experiences_of_LGBT_Veterans_Affected_by_the_Ban_Phase_One_Progress_Report.pdf](#)