Moral Injury Recognition and Care

Cohen Veterans Network
Webinar
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• The opinions expressed herein are those of the author, alone, and do not necessarily represent the official positions of the U.S. Marine Corps, Department of the Navy, or Department of Defense.

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• All scientific research referred to, reported or used in support or justification of a patient care recommendation conforms to the generally accepted standards of experimental design, data collection and analysis.
Science: The Newest Source of Nourishment for These Ancient Concepts

Moral Injury

Moral Repair

Science can add much value

But only if science doesn’t steal the show!

Simple Definitions

Moral Injury (MI):
Damage to a person resulting from a violent contradiction of deeply held moral expectations

SYNONYMS
Intense
Extreme
Vehement
Uncontrollable
Inordinate
Consuming

Moral Repair:
Rebuilding after a moral injury

Key Components of Definition:
• Literal damage
• To the whole person
• Caused by a “violent contradiction”
• Of “moral expectations”
Generic Concept of Stress Injury

**Normal Stress**
- You choose it (largely)
- Temporary
- Reversible
- Functioning is maintained
- Integrity is maintained

**Stress Injury**
- It happens to you (largely)
- May leave a scar
- Cannot be undone
- Functioning is diminished
- Integrity is diminished

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stress Continuum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>READY</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Fitness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Fear Conditioning, Loss, and Moral Injury

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Triggering Event</th>
<th>Fear</th>
<th>Lossb</th>
<th>Moral Injuryc</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actual or threatened death or serious injury</td>
<td>Persistent separation from that which is cherished</td>
<td>Acts that violate deeply held moral values</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role at time of event</td>
<td>Recipient or witness</td>
<td>Recipient</td>
<td>Perpetrator, recipient, or witness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predominant painful emotions</td>
<td>Terror, disgust, horror, helplessness</td>
<td>Sadness, longing</td>
<td>Shame, guilt, anger, outrage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-experiencing</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive/mood changes</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physiological arousal</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is lost?</td>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is needed?</td>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Relearn the world</td>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Nash et al., 2011  b. Prigerson et al., 2009  c. Litz et al., 2009
Moral Injury Events Scale (MIES)
Subscales: Perpetration Other, Perp Self, Betrayal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Moderately Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Moderately Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I saw things that were morally wrong.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I am troubled by having witnessed others' immoral acts.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I acted in ways that violated my own moral code or values.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am troubled by having acted in ways that violated my own morals or values.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I violated my own morals by failing to do something that I felt I should have done.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I am troubled because I violated my morals by failing to do something I felt I should have done.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I feel betrayed by leaders who I once trusted.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I feel betrayed by fellow service members who I once trusted.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I feel betrayed by others outside the U.S. military who I once trusted.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nash et al., 2013; Bryan et al., 2014; Bryan et al., 2015;

Moral Injury Event Exposure Best Predicted PTSD Symptom Group Membership in N = 208 OEF Marines

* Only Moral Injury Events Scale scores were significantly different (p < .01) across all three PTSD symptom-level groups

Nash & Litz: Unpublished data from Marine Resiliency Study
Pathways to PTSD in (N = 867) Combat Marines

Jordan, Eisen, Bolton, Nash, & Litz (In Press). Psych Trauma

What is damaged in Moral Injury? Could it be the same for Loss and Fear?

Identity. Core Self.
Sin: Judeo-Christian Root of MI

**Sin:** Judeo-Christian concept of moral transgression

“Cain said to the Lord, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.’” (Emphases mine)

— Genesis 4:13-14 (NSV)

Miasma: Greek Root of Moral Injury

**Miasma:** Ancient Greek concept of moral defilement or pollution, often resulting from unjust killing

“What can I do? Where can I hide from all this and not be found? What wings would take me high enough? How deep a hole would I have to dig? My shame for the evil I have done consumes me... I am soaked in blood-guilt, polluted, contagious... I am a pollutant, an offense to gods above.” (Emphases mine)

— Herakles in Euripides’ *Herakles* (424 BCE)
Facets of Moral Injury

- Shame
- Guilt
- Anger
- Contempt
- Loss of honor
- Loss of joy
- Loss of trust
- Severed ties
- Disconnection
- Contamination
- Unforgivability

- Continuity over time
- Authority over oneself
- Concept of the world
- Emotional repertoire
- Relationships
- Self-concept

Janoff-Bulman: Shattered Assumptions

Three Necessary Assumptions

- The self is worthy
- The world is benevolent
- The world is meaningful

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- Disconnection
- Contamination
- Unforgivability
- “I am not good”
- “I can’t be trusted”
- “I am a failure”
- “I am hopeless”
- “There is no God”
- “There is no goodness”
- “Life has no meaning”
- “Life has no purpose”
- Continuity over time
- Emotional repertoire
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Erik Erikson: “Identity Crisis”

The term “identity crisis” was first used, if I remember correctly, for a specific clinical purpose in the Mt. Zion Veterans’ Rehabilitation Clinic during the Second World War... Most of our patients, so we concluded at that time, had neither been “shellshocked” nor become malingerers, but had through the exigencies of war lost a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity. They were impaired in that central control over themselves for which, in the psychoanalytic scheme, only the “inner agency” of the ego could be held responsible. Therefore, I spoke of a loss of “ego identity.”

Herman: “Complex PTSD”

Complex PTSD: Herman’s Criteria

1. Prolonged subjugation to totalitarian control
2. Alterations in affect regulation
3. Alterations in consciousness
4. Alterations in self-perception
5. Alterations of perception of perpetrator
6. Alterations in relations with others
7. Alterations in systems of meaning


Shay: Moral Injury & Undoing of Character

“However, I shall argue what I’ve come to strongly believe through my work with Vietnam veterans: that moral injury is an essential part of any combat trauma that leads to lifelong psychological injury. Veterans can usually recover from horror, fear, and grief once they return to civilian life, so long as ‘what’s right’ has not also been violated.”

### Facets of Moral Injury

- Instability
- Unpredictability
- Shame
- Guilt
- Anger
- Contempt
- Loss of honor
- Loss of joy
- “I am not good”
- “I can’t be trusted”
- “I am a failure”
- “I am hopeless”
- Loss of trust
- Severed ties
- Disconnection
- Contamination
- Unforgivability
- Inability to calm down
- Loss of self-control
- Impulsivity
- Outbursts
- Unresponsiveness
- “There is no God”
- “There is no goodness”
- “Life has no meaning”
- “Life has no purpose”
- Instability
- Unpredictability
- Continuity over time
- Authority over oneself
- Concept of the world
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- Relationships
- Self-concept
- Continuity over time
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### Targeting Self-Regulation:
**Restore Health to Brain and Body**

- Sleep!
- Reduce stress load
- Stop panic attacks or rage outbursts
- Exercise
- Nutrition
- Prayer, meditation, yoga
- Self-calming
- Psychopharmacology
Targeting Self-Concept: Competence and Self-Confidence

- Competence before confidence
- Do, create, atone, become
- Identify and correct cognitive distortions
  - Over-generalizations
  - Black-and-white thinking
- Align with a benevolent moral authority
- Avoid hollow moral reassurance

Targeting Concept of the World: Social Justice, Spirituality

- Return to the world
- Give or seek amends
- Seek organizations or entities that still deserve respect and idealization
- Make the world a better place
- Religious practice
- Art, journaling
Targeting Moral Emotions: Mindfulness, Exposure Therapy

- Learn to tolerate intense negative moral emotions
- Mindfulness meditation
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
- Accelerated Resolution Therapy (ART)?
- Adaptive Disclosure*
- Practice positive moral emotions like joy and awe


Targeting Social Alienation: Peers, Family, Community

- Overcome barriers to trust
- Repair relationships
- Build new relationships
- Sharing stories in a trusting relationship
- Mentorship
- Peer support
- Mirroring
Thank you