

# Moral Injury

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## What is Moral Injury?

Moral injury refers to the deep psychological, spiritual, and social impact that occurs when a person perpetrates, fails to prevent, witnesses, or is the victim of acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectation.<sup>4,5</sup>

## Moral Injury & the Military

Moral injury is not a new concept or experience. In his foundational book, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character*, the Veterans Affairs psychiatrist Jonathan Shay (1994), relates the betrayal of cultural definitions of right and wrong experienced by Vietnam war veterans to those described by Homer in the *Iliad* nearly 3000 years ago.<sup>5</sup> Although the experience of a violation of one's sense of moral order may be an ancient and even widespread human experience, the use of the term "moral injury" by mental health practitioners is relatively recent. The concept of moral injury was first articulated by mental health practitioners providing services to military veterans of war who realized that many were suffering from a type of distress that was not being captured by the DSM diagnosis of PTSD<sup>3,5</sup> or resolved by interventions for PTSD.<sup>3,4</sup> Currently, the vast majority of studies on moral injury have been conducted in military contexts.

## What is the Difference between Moral Injury & Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

By definition, PTSD involves a traumatic threat to one's own or a loved one's physical safety and results in symptoms of anxiety.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, moral injury occurs when a high stakes event contradicts one's deeply held moral framework; that is, basic beliefs about right and wrong that one has long held as sacred.<sup>4,5</sup> In other words, moral injury occurs when there is a troubling mismatch between the individual's core moral beliefs and the event. Distress arises because individuals

cannot integrate the realities of the transgressions they have perpetrated, witnessed or experienced with their own moral frameworks. They are unable to make sense or construct meaning out of the morally injurious events. It is this lack of meaning that contributes to poor mental health outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

## Implications for Moral Injury in Child Welfare

There is a growing interest in examining moral injury in other high-stakes non-military settings. Work within child welfare settings frequently occurs in morally complex contexts and thus moral injury is an important concept for practitioners to understand and address in their work. The Child Protection System is an example of one such environment. Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay suggests that a caregiver's betrayal of the moral order through physical or sexual abuse or neglect impacts the "character" of the vulnerable child through a disruption of a sense of safety, trustworthiness, reliability and competence within the family.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the impact of moral injury may play a significant role in increasing the vulnerability and mental health needs of some of the profession's highest need clients as well as its practitioners.

## Future Research

Dr. Wendy Haight and her research team are currently conducting the first empirical study of moral injury in child welfare contexts. Their research questions are:

- To what extent are child welfare-involved parents, children and professionals involved in events that may be morally injurious? What are these events?
- To what extent do child welfare-involved parents, children and professionals experience moral injury?
- How can we prevent or ameliorate moral injury in child welfare clients and professionals?

## References

- <sup>1</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM-5)*. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- <sup>2</sup> Currier, J.M., Holland, J.M., & Malott, J. (2015). Moral injury, meaning making, and mental health in returning veterans. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 71*(3), 229-240.
- <sup>3</sup> Gray, M.J., Schorr, Y., Nash, W., Lebowitz, L., Amidon, A., Lansing, A., Maglione, M., Lang, A.J., Litz, B.T. (2012). Adaptive disclosure: An open trial of a novel exposure-based intervention for service members with combat-related psychological stress injuries. *Behavior Therapy, 43*, 407-415.
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- <sup>5</sup> Shay, J. (1994). *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character*. New York, NY: Scribner.
- <sup>6</sup> Shay, J. (2014). Moral injury. *Psychoanalytic Psychology, 31*(2), 182-191.