

1 WHAT IS MORAL INJURY?

Moral injury happens when a person's core moral foundations are violated in high stakes situations. This violation recasts the way people see themselves, others, and the world and causes changes in behavior that signal a loss of trust, connection, self-worth, and meaning.

2 WHAT KINDS OF VIOLATIONS CAUSE MORAL INJURY?

Violations can happen from actions a person took themselves (such as killing another person, whether it was intentional, unintentional, or unavoidable); actions a person witnessed (like torture or abuse); actions that a person was forced to do against their will or better judgment (like abandoning or injuring someone or going on a fated mission because a higher-up commanded you too); and actions that a person couldn't take to prevent a bad situation from happening.



CARRYING THE INVISIBLE SCARS OF MORAL INJURY MAY FEEL UNBEARABLE AT TIMES. BUT THIS PAIN IS ACTUALLY A MARK OF ABIDING GOODNESS – AND THE STARTING POINT FOR HEALING. ALL THAT'S NEEDED IS A SAFE WAY IN.

3 WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF MORAL INJURY?

People with moral injury often feel a range of emotions like shame, guilt, anger, disgust, contempt, resentment, despair, grief, remorse, worthlessness, hopelessness, helplessness, powerlessness, alienation, self-loathing, and hate. (Sometimes, after a while, people stop feeling anything at all.)

5 HOW IS MORAL INJURY DIFFERENT THAN PTSD?

That's a good question — and one that many people are still trying to answer.

What we know is that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a fear-based condition that responds as if a person's physical body is in danger — a perceived threat to life. What recent research has shown (my own included) is that moral injury may also be fear-based, only not to a perceived threat to the life of the body; instead, to the survival of the soul or what's also been called the “core-connected self.”

In other words, if people with moral injury can no longer trust themselves, others, or the world, then that world is a pretty damn foreign and scary place. Despite all the talk about self-reliance, human beings are relational to their core. We need others in our lives; connection is essential for survival.

4 WHAT'S IT LIKE TO HAVE MORAL INJURY?

Depending on the type of violation, people often lose trust in themselves, others, God, and/or the world. They see themselves as bad, evil, weak, a monster, or unworthy — or they see others that way. They feel like the world no longer makes sense or is unsafe and unfamiliar. They often lose faith and have trouble forgiving, having compassion, or relating to others.

People with moral injury often have relationship challenges — they avoid intimacy, self-isolate, and lash out at the slightest provocation. Because the “story” of moral injury is often too painful to share — they think others couldn't understand, wouldn't understand, or would judge — people often “swallow the awful” and live in self-segregating silence.

It's not uncommon for people with moral injury to try to hide their pain with alcohol or drugs, or by engaging in risky and self-sabotaging behavior. Suicidal thoughts are also not uncommon.



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6 WHAT'S THE BEST TREATMENT FOR MORAL INJURY?

That's also a good question — and another one that many people are trying to answer — myself included.

Moral injury and PTSD share some symptoms, like anger, overwhelm, addiction, or depression, but research over the last three decades have shown that protocols for PTSD (like traditional exposure-based therapies and some cognitive-behavioral approaches) not only don't work, but also can exacerbate moral injury.

The bad news is that wherever human beings are, so too is moral injury; we and life are imperfect and incomplete — in other words, shit happens. The good news is that moral injury is one of the most natural (if painful) human experiences; it's also a mark that goodness still exists.

Moral injury is complex, and, to date, it doesn't have an agreed-upon treatment. Some people continue to use cognitive-behavioral therapy along with compassion-based approaches. Others have developed their own novel, hybrid approaches.

7 IS THERE A TREATMENT APPROACH THAT YOU FAVOR?

In a word, yes. It's called Embodied Exposure Therapy (or EDT). It grew out of my two decades of comprehensive research in trauma, emotions, neuroscience, psychology, somatic therapy, spirituality, and resilience. EDT is a body-based approach that uses writing and real-time grounding practices to overcome the challenge that many people don't (or quite literally can't) talk about their moral injury "story."

The good news is that EDT is brief, cost-efficient, and requires little clinical intervention. And it's one of the few scientifically backed writing therapies out there.

Being able to share your experience of moral injury with trusted others is, at some point, helpful to fully healing. EDT works to help you begin to engage the moral injury in a way that isn't overwhelming or retraumatizing. It also helps you to understand how moral injury is living inside of you and affecting how you feel, think, act, and relate. In short, it lets you tell the truth about your morally injurious experience in a way that brings comfort and safety in the way that you need to. It also gets you ready to share your story, when, where, and with whom you determine is right.



WE DON'T ALWAYS HAVE CONTROL OVER THE EVENTS IN OUR LIVES, BUT THE "SCRIPT" WE LIVE BY IS OURS TO WRITE – AND WRITE IT WE MUST, AS ONLY WE CAN.

8 DOES MORAL INJURY ONLY AFFECT VETERANS AND WARFIGHTERS?

No, moral injury affects everyone. We are, as a species, hardwired to embody goodness, love, compassion, empathy, and a sense of right and wrong. Moral expectations are at the heart of who we are as people and as societies. But human beings are also imperfect and limited. We can't always meet our own moral expectations, nor can others always meet them. Sometimes life throws us into situations where the stakes are high and no outcome is good, and we or others act, under duress, doing what we or they otherwise know to be bad, aware that harm will come, in one way or another, to ourselves or to another. Sometimes that "other" is simply life.

For instance, a doctor misdiagnoses a patient with fatal consequences; a first responder has to choose which victims to save and which to let die; a mother living with addiction loses custody of her children; a law enforcement officer can't respond to a situation the way he knows to because others above him command him to do otherwise; a worker falsifies documents for fear of losing a job; an expectant mother has to abort a pregnancy that threatens her life; a husband has an affair during the end of his wife's life; a driver fails to see a person crossing the street and crashes into and killing them; a teenager walks away from their best friend even though that friend is being bullied.

9 HOW DO I HELP A LOVED ONE OR FRIEND WHO IS SUFFERING FROM MORAL INJURY?

Attending to someone you love is important, but it's not always easy. People with moral injury are often distant, cold or aloof, reluctant to share, preoccupied, controlling, drinking or sleeping too much, burnt out, or not able to be present. Talking might be difficult, and little excites them. They may even be unaware of why they feel so horrible. These are all signs that their body may have shut down in order to protect itself from the emotional pain.

While there is no one perfect way to respond to or support someone you care about, here are some helpful tips.

- **Ask them if they've heard of moral injury.** Often, when people are introduced to the term, they have an "ah-ha! — so *that's* what's called" moment.
- **Don't take on the role of therapist, even if you are one.** Showing up, expressing love, listening, and holding back judgment (even if it's hard) are, instead, all wonderful (and advisable) practices.
- **Don't say, "Everything happens for a reason" or "We're only given what we can handle."** You're not God, so don't try to be.
- **Give yourself leeway.** Being present to someone who has moral injury isn't easy. You may not always get it right. You may unintentionally stick your foot in your mouth; it happens. Don't beat yourself up. Reach out to your own trusted others.
- **Don't force them to tell you "the awful truth."** The story is theirs to share whenever they're ready.
- **Get consent if you do offer advice or strategies.** Best to let them ask you for your opinion before you impose it. And if at some point you feel strongly that you have some wise words to offer, consider saying, "Can I make a suggestion?" Or "Maybe you would find this helpful..."
- **Stay clear of sayings like, "Don't be negative. Just think happy thoughts."** Moral injury isn't an enjoyable experience. Instead of platitudes, how about just being honest, "I wish I knew what to say" or "You're right, this really sucks."



HONORING PAIN, RECONCILING DIFFICULT TRUTHS, TRANSFORMING WAYS OF THINKING AND BEING, AND RESTORING MORAL INTEGRITY STARTS NOW.

10 ARE THERE ADDITIONAL RESOURCES THAT CAN HELP ME AND MY LOVED ONES BETTER UNDERSTAND MORAL INJURY?

Yes, lots. Movies, books, blogs, essays, stories, art, and conversations can all be great ways into moral injury. [This link](#) provides all the above.

FOR IMMEDIATE HELP

If you are in crisis and in need urgent of help, reach out to these organizations:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Call: 1-800-273-8255

Text Crisis Text Line: Text HELLO to 741741

Crisis counselors are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If the situation is potentially life-threatening, call 911 or go to a hospital emergency room immediately.