

# An Introduction to Moral Injury

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# Today's presenters



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President & CEO



Brian McKenna,  
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Stephanie Houle,  
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# Outline

- Part I:
  - Defining Moral Injury
  - Moral Injury in Health Care Workers
- Part II:
  - A Veteran's Experience with Moral Injury
- Part III:
  - Recognizing Moral Injury
  - Promoting Moral Healing



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# WHAT IS MORAL INJURY?



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**Table 1** Examples of moral injury definitions in chronological order<sup>a,b</sup>

Author/s	Definition
Shay (2002)	'...a betrayal of what's right, by someone who holds legitimate authority, in a high-stakes situation' (p. 240)
Litz et al. (2009)	'...the lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations' (p. 695)
US Department Veteran Affairs (2009)	'...perpetuating failing to prevent bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. This may entail participating in or witnessing inhumane or cruel actions, failing to prevent the immoral acts of others as well as engaging in subtle acts or experiencing reactions that, upon reflection, transgress a moral code' (p. 1)
Nash et al. (2010)	'...changes in biological, psychological, social, or spiritual functioning resulting from witnessing or perpetrating acts or failures to act that transgress deeply held, communally shared moral beliefs and expectations' (p. 1677)
Boudreau (2010)	'Moral injury is...the damage done to our moral fiber when transgressions occur by our hands, through our orders, or with our connivance. When we accept these transgressions, however pragmatically (for survival, for instance), we sacrifice a piece of our moral integrity' (p. 749)
Brock and Lettini (2011)	'...moral injury is a wound in the soul, an inner conflict based on a moral evaluation of having inflicted or witnessed harm ...moral injury can result not only from active behavior, such as torturing or killing, but also from passive behavior, such as failing to prevent harm or witnessing a close friend be slain ...it can (also) involve feeling betrayed by persons in authority' (p. 1)
Drescher et al. (2011)	'...a disruption in an individual's confidence and expectations about one's own or others' motivations or capacity to behave in a just and ethical manner. This injury is brought about by bearing witness to perceived immoral acts, failure to stop such actions, or perpetration of immoral acts, in particular actions that are inhumane, cruel, depraved, or violent, bringing about pain, suffering, or death of others' (p. 9)
Brock et al. (2012)	'Moral injury is a negative self-judgement [due to] having transgressed core moral beliefs and values or feeling betrayed by authorities. It is reflected in the destruction of moral identity and loss of meaning. Its symptoms include shame, survivor guilt, depression, despair, addiction, distrust, anger, a need to make amends and the loss of a desire to live' (p. 1)
Kingham (2012)	'...the experience of having acted (or consented to others acting) incommensurably with one's most deeply held moral conceptions' (p. 57)
Beard (2015)	'Moral injury involves the difficulties an individual faces when forced to integrate the wrongdoing of a moral authority into their broader conception of the world as a morally reliable place' (p. 175)
Sherman (2015)	'...the experiences of serious inner conflict arising from what one takes to be grievous moral transgression that can overwhelm one's sense of goodness and humanity' (p. 8)
Zust (2015)	'... a complex "soul" wound that results from soldiers' conscientious inability to reconcile the moral dissonance between their idealized values and their perceived experiences. This wound produces a continuum of exiting behaviors that damage soldiers' ability to reconnect with their lives' (p. 2) <sup>d</sup>

**Table 1** continued

Author/s	Definition
Forbes et al. (2015)	'Moral injury is defined as a psychological state that arises from events and experiences associated with perpetuating, failing to prevent or bearing witness to inhumane or cruel actions, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. Events associated with such transgressions and internal conflict leading to a moral injury can include acts of commission or omission, behaviours of others in the unit, bearing witness to human suffering or horrific acts of violence perpetrated by oneself or by others' (p. 6)
Nielson et al. (2016)	'In sum: moral injury is the result of harm or damage (a wound) that reduces the functioning or impairs the performance of (injuries) the moral self, which is that part of a person where moral reasoning and moral decision making takes place' (p. 35)
Carey et al. (2016b) <sup>e</sup>	'Moral injury originates (i) at an <i>individual level</i> when a person perpetuates, fails to prevent or bears witness to a serious act that transgresses deeply held moral beliefs and expectations which leads to inner conflict because the experience is at odds with their personal core ethical and moral beliefs, and/or, (ii) at an <i>organizational level</i> , when serious acts of transgression have been caused by or resulted in a betrayal of what is culturally held to be morally right in a 'high-stakes' situation by those who hold legitimate authority' (p. 3)
Litz (2016)	Two types of moral injury—'perpetration'-based moral injury <sup>e</sup> and 'betrayal'-based moral injury <sup>f</sup>
Jinkerson (2016) <sup>f</sup>	Phenomenologically, <i>moral injury</i> represents a particular trauma syndrome including psychological, existential, behavioural and interpersonal issues that emerge following perceived violations of deep moral beliefs by (i) oneself or (ii) trusted individuals (i.e. morally injurious experiences). These experiences cause significant moral dissonance, which if unresolved leads to the development of core and secondary symptoms (p. 126) <sup>f</sup>

Hodgson &amp; Carey, 2017



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# What is Moral Injury?

- Johnathan Shay (2002): “...a betrayal of what’s right, by someone who holds legitimate authority, in a high stakes situation”
- Litz et al., (2009): “...the lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioural, and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations”
- Brock & Lettini (2012): “...a wound in the soul, an inner conflict based on moral evaluations of having inflicted or witnessed harm....moral injury can result not only from active behaviour, such as torturing or killing, but also from passive behaviour, such as failing to prevent harm or witnessing a close friend be slain...it can (also) involve feeling betrayed by persons in authority”
- Jinkerson (2016): ...syndrome including psychological, existential, behavioural, and interpersonal issues that emerge following perceived violations of deep moral beliefs by oneself or trusted individuals (i.e., morally injurious experiences). These experiences cause significant moral dissonance, which if unresolved, leads to the development of its core symptoms.



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# What is Moral Injury?

- Describes the *psycho-spiritual consequences* of events that seriously violate one's core moral beliefs and expectations
- Call these events **Potentially Morally Injurious Events**



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# Potentially Morally Injurious Events

- Direct or indirect involvement in, or witnessing of acts that violate moral beliefs
- Can be expected or unexpected (e.g., killing)
- Includes both acts of commission (e.g., committing abuse) and acts of omission (e.g., witnessed abuse, did not intervene)
- Violation could be perceived at time of event (e.g., atrocities), or in retrospect (e.g., following orders)



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# Potentially Morally Injurious Events

- Examples include:
  - Witnessing atrocities (e.g., genocide)
  - Making a decision that resulted in harm to others
  - Deliberate or inadvertent killing/wounding of others
  - Killing within or outside the Rules of Engagement
  - Harm to self or others as a result of being directed to undertake military tasks for which inadequately prepared/resourced



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# Potentially Morally Injurious Events

- Prevalence of Potentially Morally Injurious Events exposure in combat-exposed Canadian Armed Forces service members/Veterans
  - 49 to 84% report exposure to atrocities or massacres
  - 56% report exposure to any Potentially Morally Injurious Events, including:
    - Seeing ill or injured women and children that were unable to help
    - Felt responsible for the death of Canadian or ally personnel
    - Difficulty distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants

*Nazarov et al., 2018; Sareen et al., 2007*



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# Potentially Morally Injurious Events

Personal Responsibility	Responsibility of Others
Disproportionate violence	Disproportionate violence
Harming civilians and civilian life	Harming civilians and civilian life
Killing/injuring the enemy	Betrayal by trusted others (including within-rank violence)
Failing to prevent harm to others	Betrayal by systems



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*Summarized from Drescher et al., 2011; Schorr et al., 2018*

Organizational	Environmental	Psychological	Cultural/ Relational
ROEs restrictive, inconvenient, or hard to define	Enemy's tactical strategies	Hopelessness, resolution to return home	"Kill or capture" attitude
Leadership incompetent, out-of-touch, self-serving or uncaring	Difficulty appraising threat (e.g., identifying enemy)	Possible enjoyment of aggressive acts	Lack of trust/perceived incompetence of comrades
Deferring to authority in times of uncertainty	Dealing with poverty and difficult geographic conditions	Emotional detachment	Dehumanization of enemy, hateful attitudes towards civilians
Lack of accountability and sense of vulnerability in small units	Persistent chaos, need for split-second decision making	Fear, helplessness	Uneasy alliances with civilians and collaborators
Inaccurate intelligence	Civilians unpredictable, make unsafe decisions	Accumulation of anger, desire for retribution	
Lack of training/preparation for moral challenges		Changes in identity/morality	

Grief over combat losses

*Currier et al., 2015*



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# Moral Stress Amongst Healthcare Workers During COVID-19

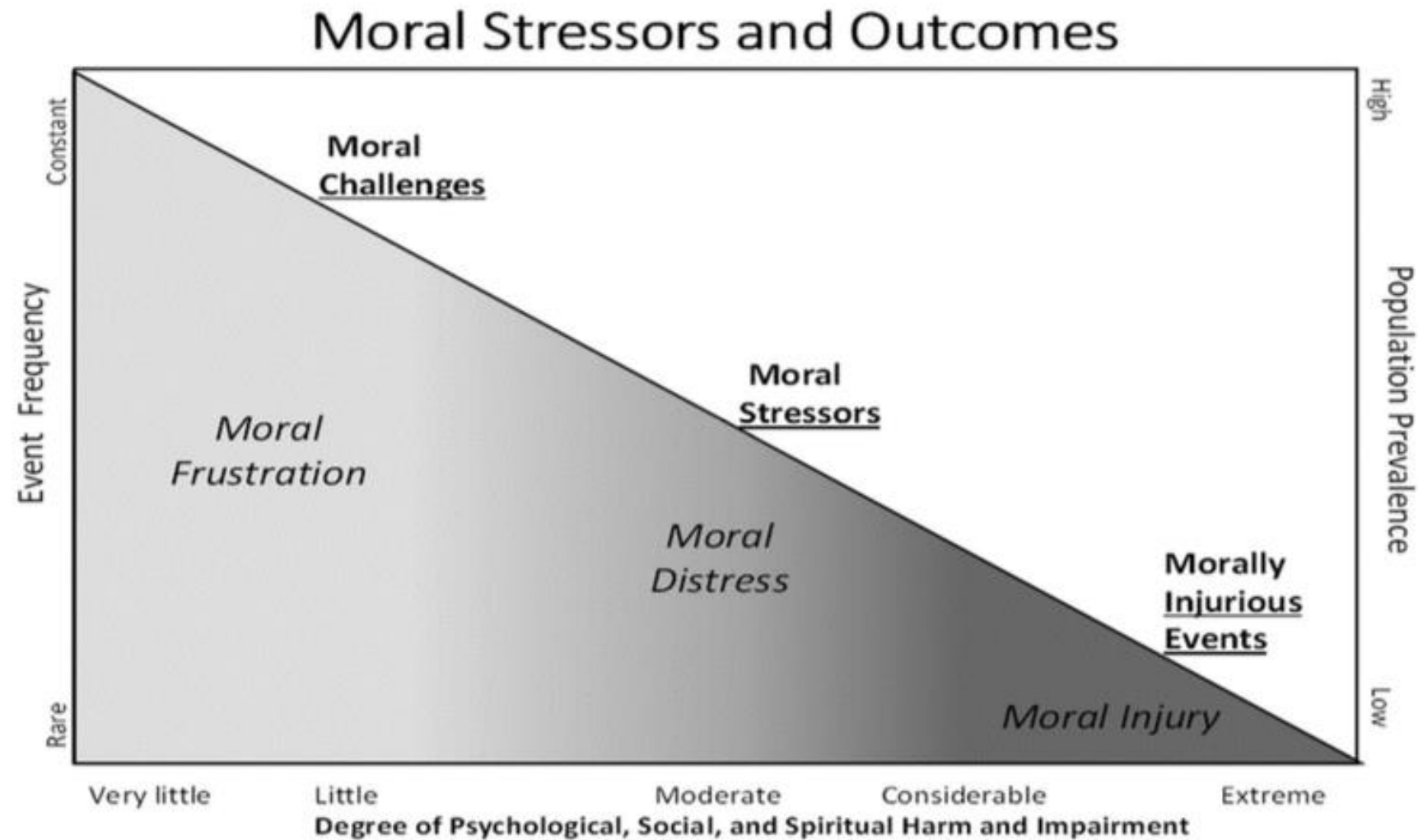
- Risk of moral injury in health care workers
  - Role of health care workers is healing
  - COVID-19 creates circumstances that may undermine this
  - Range of moral stressors and Potentially Morally Injurious Events:
    - Difficult decisions as to who receives life-saving treatment
    - Not enough personal protection equipment
    - Exposure to virus puts loved ones at risk
    - Delay of non-COVID related procedures and treatments
    - Witnessing widespread suffering and death



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# Continuum of Moral Stressors and Distress



Litz & Kerig, 2019

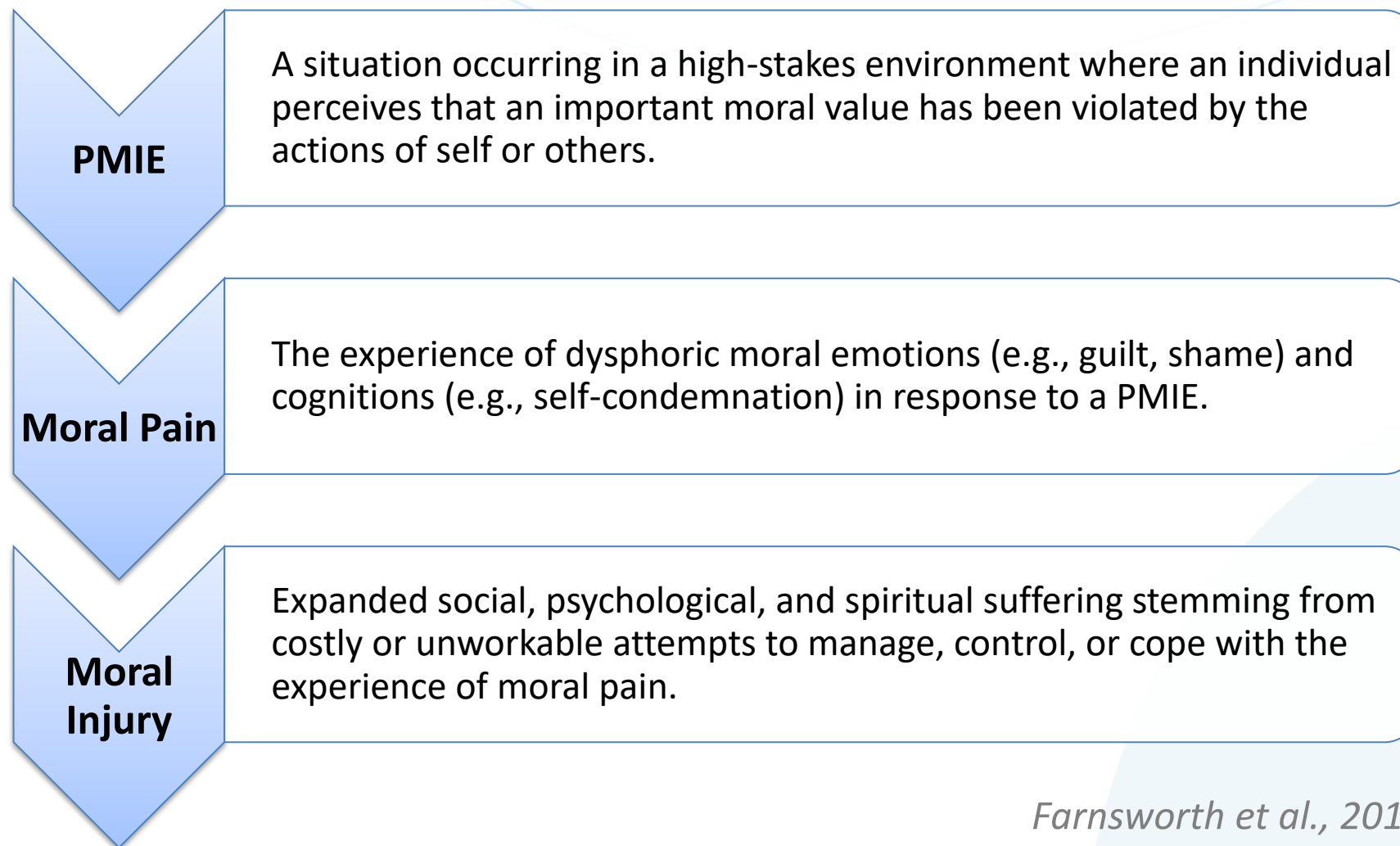


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# From Moral Pain to Moral Injury



*Farnsworth et al., 2017*



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# What is Moral Injury?

- Core features:
  - Guilt
  - Shame
  - Inner conflict or sense of loss relating to ones' identity, spirituality, or sense of meaning
  - Loss of trust in self, others, institutions and/or transcendent beings

*Adapted from Jinkerson, 2016*



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# What is Moral Injury?

- Secondary features:
  - Depression (demoralization, dysphoria)
  - Anxiety (e.g., about others discovering event)
  - Anger
  - Re-experiencing Potentially Morally Injurious Events (e.g., dreams, rumination)
  - Self-harm (e.g., suicidal ideation, substance abuse)
  - Social problems (e.g., isolation)

*Adapted from Jinkerson, 2016*



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# Research on Moral Injury

- Potentially Morally Injurious Events type and Moral Injury features
  - Self-transgressions associated with numbness, sadness, guilt, shame, reexperiencing, hindsight bias
  - Other-transgressions and betrayal-based events associated with anger

*Jordan et al., 2017; Stein et al., 2012*



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Table 1  
*Description of Trauma Typology*

Category	Description	Example
Life threat–self	Personal exposure to the threat of death or actual or threatened serious injury.	SM was awakened at night because his base was under attack.
Life threat–others	Personal exposure to the actual or threatened death of others.	SM saw truck behind him explode. He assisted in treating the injured service members.
Aftermath of violence	Personal exposure to grotesque/haunting images, sounds, or smells of dead or severely injured humans or animals.	SM saw many dead bodies while on patrol.
Traumatic loss	Witnessed or learned about the death of a family member, friend, or unit member.	SM received news that a good friend was killed in action when her vehicle was hit by an IED.
Moral injury–self	Committing an act that is perceived to be a gross violation of moral or ethical standards (e.g., killing or injuring others); an SM who nearly committed these acts could also experience moral injury.	SM gave an order to fire on attacking insurgents that resulted in a civilian being shot.
Moral injury–others	Witnessing or being the victim of an act that is perceived to violate moral/ethical standards (e.g., rape, atrocities); events can also be indirectly experienced (i.e., learned about) if they are directly relevant to the individual.	SM witnessed a police officer go through the pockets of a man who had just been shot and throw his body in the back of a truck.

*Litz et al., 2018; Stein et al., 2012*



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# Research on Moral Injury

- Suicidality

- Rates among military personnel and Veterans have increased significantly in Canada and the US since missions to Afghanistan and Iraq

(Department of Defense, 2011; Hoge & Castro, 2012; Kang et al., 2015; Sareen et al., 2016)

- Potentially Morally Injurious Events -exposure (e.g., killing, atrocities) consistently associated with suicidality

(LeBouthillier et al., 2015; Maguen et al., 2011, 2012, 2012; Sareen et al., 2007; Stein et al., 2012; Wisco et al., 2017; Yehuda et al., 1992)



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# Research on Moral Injury

- Suicidality
  - Severity of Moral Injury distress associated with history of suicidality, regardless of PTSD severity (Bryan et al., 2018)
  - Established risk factors for suicide (e.g., guilt, shame, loss of spirituality, perceived burdensomeness) appear to overlap with Moral Injury (Bryan et al., 2014)



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# Moral Injury vs. PTSD

- Differences:
  - Etiology (i.e., events involving moral transgressions vs. physical threat)
  - Core emotional reactions (i.e., fear vs. guilt and shame)
  - Cognitions/attributions about event may not be distortions
  - Association with physiological stress response systems (e.g., hyperarousal may not be associated with potentially morally injurious events)
  - Function of symptoms and how they are maintained in the individual (e.g., avoidance of threat vs. avoidance of social judgement)



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# Moral Injury vs. PTSD

- Similarities
  - Extremely stressful event prompts psychological distress
  - Re-experiencing (nightmares, intrusive memories, thoughts and images)
  - Negative thoughts about self, others, world
  - Negative emotions, feeling detached from others



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# Moral Injury vs. Other classifications

- Additional considerations
  - Depression
  - Complex PTSD (ICD 11)
  - Complicated grief (traumatic loss, loss of identity/spirituality)



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# Moral Injury - What Don't We Know?

- What's left to understand about MI?
  - Experiences/consequences of Potentially Morally injurious events in non treatment seeking individuals
  - Application outside military – does it hold?
  - Elucidating types of PMIEs and associated features of MI
  - Gender/sex differences in exposure and sequelae (mostly men)
  - Correlates, risk and protective factors
  - Clinical utility (re: nosology) TBD
  - Understanding post-PMIE growth



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# Moral Stress Amongst Healthcare Workers During COVID-19

- What can be done?
  - Organizational level:
    - Establish evidence-based policies to help guide ethically difficult decision-making
    - Rotate staff between high and low stress roles
  - Team level:
    - Provide strong leadership, promote cohesion and morale
    - Be prepared to discuss moral and ethical challenges
  - Individual level:
    - Access psychoeducational materials on moral stressors and distress
    - Self-care and stress reduction activities (e.g., meditation, exercise)



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# A Veteran's Experience with Moral Injury



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# Brian McKenna C.D., Strategic Advisor - Veterans



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# Recognizing Moral Injury & Promoting Moral Healing



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# Recognizing Moral Injury

- Before we continue...



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# Recognizing Moral Injury

- Behavioural features
  - Isolation/withdrawal
  - Lack of purposeful behavior
  - Anger/aggression



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# Recognizing Moral Injury

*“I think my gut instinct is probably a big thing, I used to trust that, I used to know that, you know. My gut would never lie to me [...] Now I question my own gut. [...] I would avoid making the deci-, actually, avoid the decision that my gut was giving me, I would go the other way. Which is not the right thing to do, so.”*

*Houle et al., 2020*



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# Recognizing Moral Injury

*“I really have just gotten to the point where I just don’t believe anymore, I really don’t. I don’t know. I don’t even know if it’ll change, like I’m in a good place now with it, and I’m comfortable believing that, but at the same time I don’t want to believe it.”*

*Houle et al., 2020*



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# Recognizing Moral Injury

*“Well I’ve always known that, known the difference between right and wrong. But I think that line just got thicker, like between the two.”*

*“So I think I have a gloomier outlook on, I’m gonna say not on life, but on, mankind as a whole kind of thing. It changed your perspective.”*

*Houle et al., 2020*



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# Recognizing Moral Injury

*“Do what is right. That’s really the only standard. [...] now it goes to the more subtle things, like “it’s your job to show up on time, it’s rude to be late for an appointment.” [...] I’m majoring in the minor, if you will. Whereas before, meh whatever.”*

*Houle et al., 2020*



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# Creating A Safe Space to Discuss Moral Injury

- Acknowledge the morally difficult nature of military service to encourage conversation
- Patience and compassion
  - If willing to discuss, can divulge as much or as little as you like, at your own pace
- Promote self-care, personal meaning-making, social connection, non-judgment



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# Assessing for Possible Moral Injury

- Clinical interview:
  - Did you ever experience an event:
    - ...that was a serious challenge to your sense of who you are, your sense of the world, or your sense of right and wrong?
    - ...when you thought that you or others failed to fulfil a responsibility or duty?
    - ...where you felt betrayed by people you once trusted?



# Assessing for Possible Moral Injury

- Clinical interview:
  - Did you ever experience an event:
    - ...where you betrayed people that trusted you?
    - ...where you witnessed other people act in ways that violated your moral code or value system?
    - ...where you acted in ways that may have violated your own moral code or value system?





# Assessing for Possible Moral Injury

- Clinical interview
  - How do you feel now when you think about the event?
  - Do you find yourself preoccupied by the event?
  - Have you noticed any changes in your relationships since the event?
  - Any changes in your view of yourself? Of the world?
  - Any changes in spirituality? Or your sense of right and wrong? Your sense of meaning/what's important in life?
  - Any changes in your ability to trust (self or others)?



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# Assessing for Possible Moral Injury

- Questionnaires:
  - Moral Injury Events Scale (Nash et al., 2013)
  - Moral Injury Questionnaire - Military Version (Currier et al., 2015)
  - Moral Injury Symptom Scale - Military Version (Koenig et al., 2018)
  - Expressions of Moral Injury Scale – Military version (Currier et al., 2018)
  - Moral Injury Outcome Scale (validation in progress; Moral Injury Outcome Study Consortium)



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# Moral Healing

- Acceptance
  - Reality of past moral wrongs
  - Moral pain
- Forgiveness (self & others)
- Meaning-making
  - Flexible consideration of moral rules in favour of underlying values
  - Actively living values, including those previously violated, in the present moment.



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# Moral Healing

- Self-compassion:
  - Openness to moral pain and associated cognitions as an element (but not the entirety) of human experience
  - Awareness of a sense of self that is distinct from moral pain
- Therapeutic/Social relationship
  - Create an atmosphere of acceptance, non-condemnation



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# Moral Healing

## Treatment approaches:

- **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy** (Nieuwsma et al., 2015; Farnsworth et al., 2017)
- **Adaptive Disclosure** (Litz et al., 2016)
- **Impact of Killing in War** (Maguen et al., 2017)
- **Prolonged Exposure Therapy** (Foa et al., 2007; Paul et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2013)
- **Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT; Resick et al., 2016) & Spiritually-Oriented CPT** (Koenig et al., 2017)
- **Others** (see Smith-MacDonald et al., 2017) - less support/poor quality studies
  - Mantram Repetition
  - Building Spiritual Strength



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# QUESTIONS



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# THANK YOU



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# Crisis numbers

**Crisis Services Canada** (Crisis services for all Canadians)

Call 1-833-456-4566 *(available 24/7)*

Text 45645 - *(available 4pm to Midnight Eastern Time Zone)*

**VAC and Canadian Forces** (Member Assistance Program & Assistance Services for Families)

1-800-268-7708 | TDD/TTY 1-800-567-5803 *(available 24/7)*

**Canadian Forces Morale & Welfare Services** (Family Information Line)

1-800-866-4546 *(available 24/7)*

**The Hope for Wellness Help Line for all Indigenous peoples**

Call 1-855-242-3310 *(Available 24/7)*



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