

Moral Stress and Moral Injury in Public Safety Personnel

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Learning Objectives

- Understand what moral injury (MI) is and how it differs from other responses to stress and trauma
- Learn about examples of potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs) reported in research on MI in public safety settings
- Learn about the mental health outcomes associated with MI and how to recognize them in yourself and others
- Learn practical approaches to address the potential mental health impacts of PMIEs and to prevent moral injury, whether you're on the frontlines or a manager



WHAT IS MORAL INJURY?

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Defining Moral Injury

- “Moral injury” was first identified and studied in the Military and Veteran context
- No consensus definition, but measures to assess MI are in development
- Some existing treatments have been adapted for MI and emerging treatments are being studied

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Evolving Definitions of Moral Injury

“A **betrayal** of what’s right, by someone who holds legitimate **authority**, in a **high stakes situation**”

(Shay, 2002)

“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**”

(Litz et al., 2009)



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Evolving Definitions of Moral Injury

“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**...but also from **passive behaviour**...it can (also) involve feeling betrayed by persons in authority”

(Brock & Lettini, 2012)

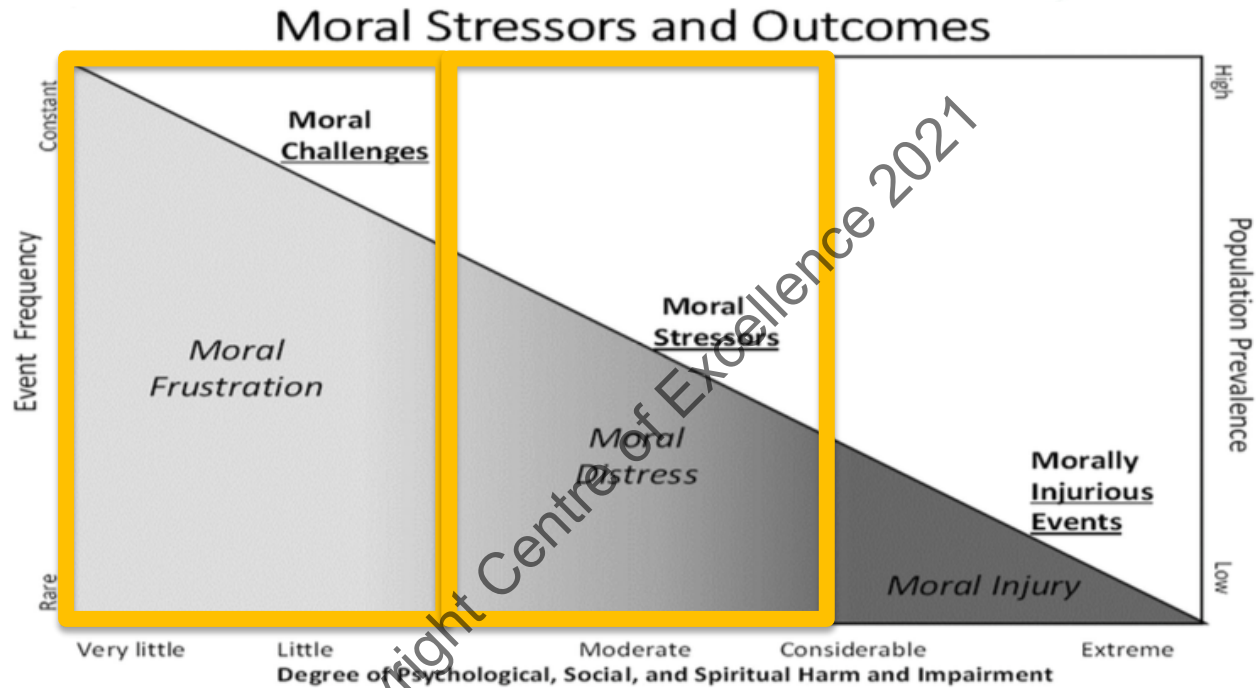
A “**syndrome** including psychological, existential, behavioural, and interpersonal issues that emerge following perceived violations of deep moral beliefs by oneself or trusted individuals (i.e., morally injurious experiences). These experiences cause significant moral dissonance, which **if unresolved, leads to the development of its core symptoms.**”

(Jinkerson, 2016)



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Continuum of Moral Injury



Moral injury is a psychological, behavioral, and spiritual condition that results from exposure to events that challenge one's moral beliefs or force one to act in ways that are inconsistent with one's moral beliefs and values occurring in high-stakes situations



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Continuum of Moral Injury

Moral Injury

- Emerges from PMIEs, followed by internal moral conflict
- Results in deep emotional wound

Moral integrity

Shared psychological consequences (guilt, self-blame, blaming others, anguish, sense of powerlessness)

Moral Distress

- Emerges from moral conflict in morally distressing situations
- Results in psychological imbalance and negative feeling state

Interplay between moral injury and moral distress

Adapted from Čartolovni et al., 2021



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Addressing the “Moral” in Moral Injury



(Haidt, 2012)



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WHAT IS A POTENTIALLY MORALLY INJURIOUS EVENT (PMIE)?

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Potentially Morally Injurious Events (PMIEs)

- Being directly or indirectly involved in, or witnessing, acts that violate your moral beliefs
- Includes acts of perpetrating harm or failing to prevent harm
- Can be expected or unexpected
- You can perceive harm at time of event or in retrospect

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Potentially Morally Injurious Events (PMIEs)

Examples of PMIEs:

- Witnessing atrocities
- Making a decision that results in harm to others
- Deliberately or inadvertently killing/wounding others
- Harming yourself or others as a result of being directed to complete tasks for which you are not prepared/resourced to complete



From Moral Pain to Moral Injury

Where these PMIEs lead to lasting psychological, social and spiritual harm, with adverse impacts on mental health, relationships and quality of life...

...you have sustained a moral injury.



From Moral Pain to Moral Injury

PMIE

- A situation in a high-stakes environment where you feel that an important moral value has been violated by your actions or the actions of others.

Moral Pain

- Experiencing uneasy moral emotions (e.g., guilt, shame) and judgments (e.g., self-blame) in response to a PMIE.

Moral Injury

- Increased social, psychological, and spiritual suffering arising from costly or unsuccessful attempts to manage, control, or cope with your experience of moral pain.



WHY DOES MORAL INJURY MATTER FOR PUBLIC SAFETY PERSONNEL?

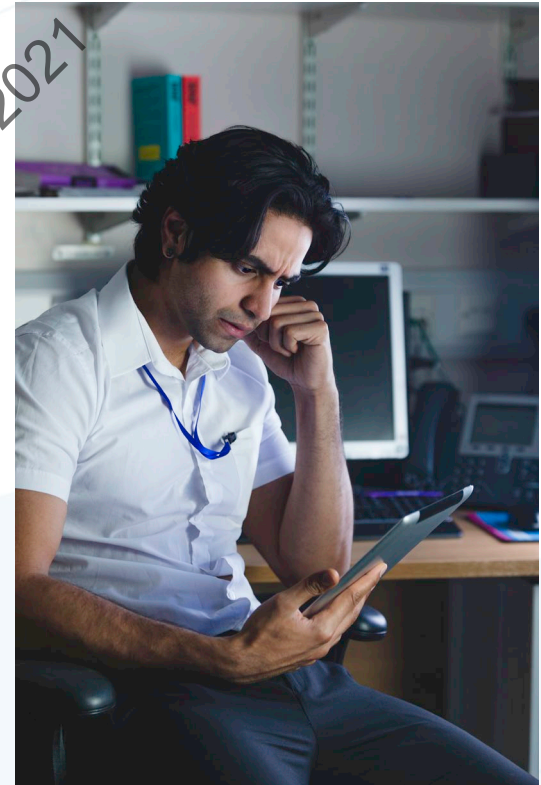
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Populations at Risk for Moral Injury

- Military members
- Veterans
- Professionals in high-risk and helping occupations:
 - Police officers
 - Firefighters
 - Paramedics
 - Healthcare workers
 - Journalists



Feinstein et al., 2018; Murray 2018, 2019; Papazoglou et al., 2017



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PSP and the Risk of Moral Injury

- Public safety roles are instilled with notion that “dedication, integrity, and even self-sacrifice ought to play a prominent role in their conduct, and that their objective is to save and support civilian victims.” (Papazoglou et al., 2019)
- Exposure (direct or indirect) to psychologically traumatizing experiences is common
- PSP may be traumatized by their own actions or those of their colleagues, on- or off-duty



Potential Moral Stressors for PSP

- Duties that contribute to serious injury or death
- Errors that cause injury or death
- Failure (actual or perceived) to protect the public or “do enough”
- Doubt in your tactical decision-making
- Enforcing a law that conflicts with your values (e.g., arresting protesters whose cause you support)
- Continual exposure to social problems
- Aiding perpetrators or people you find reprehensible
- Decline in willingness to help people who are suffering
- Incidents involving harm to children and youth
- Inability to complete mission/job as intended
- Corruption in the organization



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THE IMPACTS OF MORAL INJURY ON WELLBEING



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Core Domains of Moral Injury



(Nash, 2017)



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How is Moral Injury Similar to PTSD?

- Involves an extremely stressful event that produces psychological distress
- Re-experiencing (nightmares, intrusive memories, thoughts and images)
- Negative thoughts about yourself, others, world
- Negative emotions, feeling detached from others

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PTSD vs. Moral Injury

PTSD

- You experience or witness actual or threatened death or serious injury
- You feel fear, horror, helplessness
- You experience unwanted memories
- Psychological arousal
- **Loss of safety**

Moral Injury

- You experience or witness something that violates your deeply held morals or values
- You feel guilt, shame, anger
- No psychological arousal
- **Erosion of trust**

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Moral Injury vs. Other Diagnoses

- Significant overlap between elements of moral injury and those of other diagnoses:
 - **Depression:** guilt, shame, lack of interest/purpose
 - **Complex PTSD:** emotion dysregulation, disorganization
 - **Complicated grief:** inability to resolve event, grief of traumatic loss, loss of identity or spirituality



RECOGNIZING MORAL INJURY, PROMOTING MORAL REPAIR

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Recognizing Moral Injury

- Not all PMIEs result in moral injury
- Be attentive to behavioural signs/changes:
 - Isolation or withdrawal
 - Lack of purposeful behaviour
 - Anger or aggression
- Create a safe space to discuss PMIEs or moral injury
 - Acknowledge the moral stresses or difficulties inherent in the work
 - Show patience and compassion
- Promote self-care, personal meaning-making, social connection, non-judgment



Promoting Moral Repair

- Accept reality of past moral wrongs and moral pain
- Forgive self and others
- Meaning-making
 - Prioritizing one's own values over strict or prescribed moral rules set by society.
 - Actively living values, including those violated, in the present



Promoting Moral Repair

- Practice self-compassion:
 - Be open to moral pain and associated judgments as one element of human experience
 - Be aware of your sense of self that is distinct from moral pain
- Identify therapeutic social relationships
 - Create an atmosphere of acceptance
 - (Re)build strong social attachments
- Consider professional support



Individual Treatments

Developed for PTSD:

- Prolonged Exposure Therapy
(Foa et al., 2007; Paul et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2013)
- Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)
(Resick et al., 2016)

Developed for moral injury:

- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
(Nieuwsma et al., 2015; Farnsworth et al., 2017)
- Adaptive Disclosure
(Nash & Litz)
- Impact of Killing (IOK)
(Maugen)

Others:

- Mantram Repetition
- Building Spiritual Strength



RESPONDING TO MORAL INJURY IN PUBLIC SAFETY ORGANIZATIONS

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What Organizations Can Do

Cultivate a psychologically safe workplace

- Implement strong empathetic leadership
- Identify positive role models and mental health champions
- Encourage comradery and team-building
- Celebrate successes
- Allow for decompression time between exposures to stressors
- Monitor stress and enable flexible schedules where possible
- Provide support to families of frontline personnel where necessary



What Organizations Can Do

Promote transparency and trust

- Engage in regular communications with personnel, including honest and timely crisis-focused communications
- Communicate organizational ethics and value frameworks that drive decision-making
- Engage in proactive collaborative planning and decision making involving frontline and administrative personnel.



What Organizations Can Do

Engage in moral resilience training

- Discuss moral and ethical challenges
- Discuss PMIEs and potential responses to exposures
- Facilitate ethics scenario training to safely expose personnel to PMIES and debrief them in a supportive manner
- Partner less experienced personnel with experienced personnel

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What Team Leaders Can Do

- Promote cohesive teams with high morale
- Cultivate a culture of safety, non-judgment and care
- Discuss moral and ethical challenges
- Discuss PMIEs and potential social, emotional, and behavioural responses to exposures
- Check-in with personnel regularly
- Encourage debriefing
- Acknowledge and affirm experiences shared with you
- Model positive coping skills and encourage self-care and help-seeking



What Individuals Can Do

- Learn more about moral stressors and moral injury
- Take care of yourself by eating well, exercising, maintaining social connections, and resting
- Engage in stress reduction activities (relaxation therapy, mindfulness, or meditation)
- Engage in self-reflection and expression activities
- Connect with peers and support colleagues during shared experiences
- Seek professional support if you are feeling distressed or troubled by your experiences





Download the *Guide* and other resources at moralinjuryguide.ca



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THANK YOU!



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