



Moral Injury & Sanctuary Trauma:
Perspectives from an Operational Stress
Injury Clinic

2026 CIPSRT Conference
May 6, 2026

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Overview

- Clinical Observations
- Moral Injury
- Other Focused Blame
- Sanctuary Trauma/Institutional Betrayal
- Contemporary Sociocultural Context
- Treatment Implications

Clinical Context – Carewest OSI Clinic

- Funded by Veterans Affairs Canada
- One of a network of 11 clinics across the country (plus 11 satellite clinics)
- Provide services to:
 - CAF members or veterans
 - Current or former members of the RCMP
- Psychiatrists, psychologists, nurse clinicians, social workers, occupational therapists, program evaluators

Clinical Observations

- Treating Criteria A PTSD symptoms relatively straight forward and successful
- Complex interplay
 - traumatic experience
 - the context of broader organizations and institutions
- themes of injustice, betrayal and moral injury drive significant symptoms
- Often the primary barriers to recovery

Moral Injury

- When members are exposed to situations that challenge or **violate** their **deeply held moral** or **ethical values**

Moral Injury

- Varying uses of the term without clear agreement about what Moral Injury is and is not.
- Much of the initial research was
 - the impact of performing moral transgressions in the context of war
 - understanding why war trauma is so damaging to combatants.

Moral Injury

Consensus in the field is that there are **two broad types of Potentially Morally Injurious Events**

Self-directed transgression
Doing or failing to do things

associated with guilt and shame

Other directed transgressions
exposure to failings of others

associated with anger and resentment.

Moral Injury

- **Witnessing or Participating in Harmful Actions**
 - Use of Force
 - Engaging in Violence
- **Failing to Prevent Harm**
 - Inability to Protect Vulnerable People
 - Watching colleagues act unethically
- **Conflict Between Personal Morality and Job Demands**
 - Ethical Dilemmas
 - Enforcing unpopular/unjust laws



Moral Injury

- **Institutional and Systemic Factors**
 - Bureaucratic Pressure
 - Perceived Injustice within the system –
 - The sense of being part of a flawed system can lead to feelings of disillusionment and betrayal
- **Cultural and Societal Tensions**
 - Public Perception and Scrutiny
- **Responsibility and guilt**
 - Internal guilt (even when following protocol)
 - Feeling of betrayal (by their organization, leadership or society when placed in a situation that violates their moral code)



Moral Injury Implications

Moral Injury associated with:

- ↑ severity of PTSD,
- ↑ severity depression and anxiety
- ↑ risk of suicide

Koenig, H. G., & Al Zaben, F. (2021). Moral injury: An increasingly recognized and widespread syndrome. *Journal of religion and health*, 60(5), 2989-3011. Kroenke, K., Spitzer, R. L., & Williams, J. B. (2001). The PHQ-9: validity of a brief depression severity measure. *Journal of general internal medicine*, 16(9), 606-613

“Other Focused Blame” as a Trauma Response

Nature of Other Focused Blame

- Helps individuals make sense of perceived wrongdoing by linking trauma to moral expectations of fairness and loyalty.

Emotional and Physiologic Impact

- Blame is accompanied by anger, resentment and trust difficulties, causing cycles of rumination and sustained physiologic arousal.

Orth, Ulrich, and Elias Wieland. "Anger, hostility, and posttraumatic stress disorder in trauma-exposed adults: a meta-analysis." *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology* 74.4 (2006): 698.

Jordan, Alexander H., et al. "Distinguishing war-related PTSD resulting from perpetration-and betrayal-based morally injurious events." *Psychological trauma: theory, research, practice, and policy* 9.6 (2017): 627.

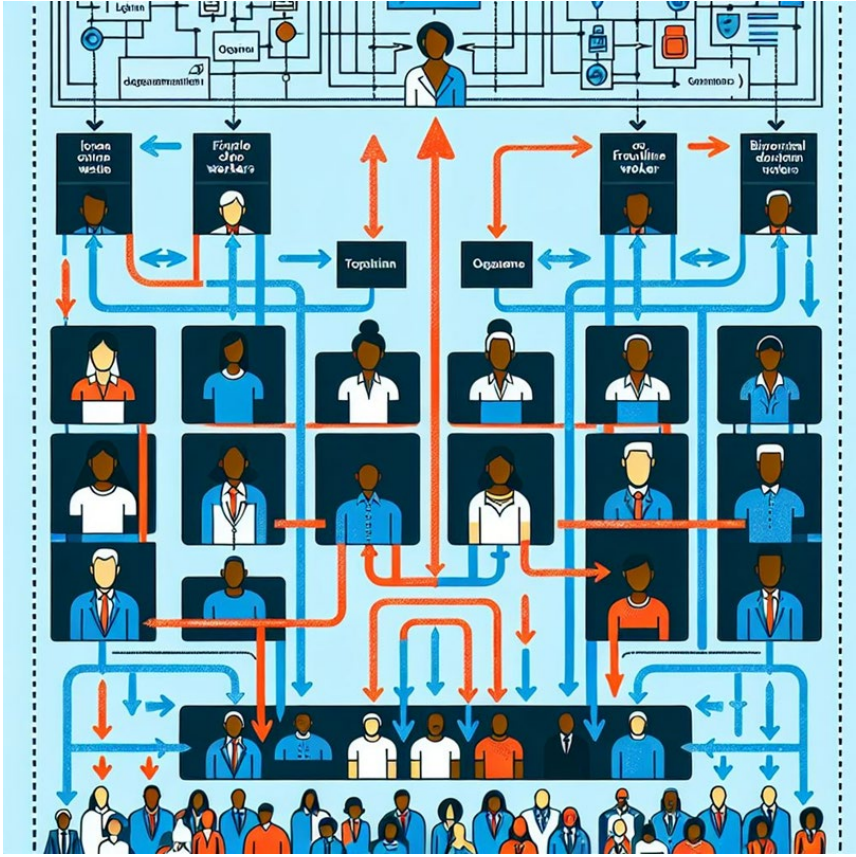
Sanctuary Trauma

- occurs when an individual who has experienced a **traumatic event** goes to somewhere they expect to be **supportive** and healing, only to discover **more trauma and stress**.
 - when a Veteran who has faced either physical or mental injuries find themselves battling stacks of paperwork, endless wait times, and sometimes wrongful denials of initial applications when trying to get services.
- Sanctuary trauma not only impacts the people being served, but also the staff, and the organization itself.
- organizations are **living complex systems** that are vulnerable to trauma and chronic stress.

Bloom, Sandra & Farragher, Brian. (2013). *Restoring Sanctuary: A New Operating System for Trauma-Informed Systems of Care*. Oxford University Press.

<https://casatondemand.org/2023/01/12/what-is-sanctuary-trauma-and-why-is-it-important/>

Sanctuary Trauma - Understanding the problem



System



Frontline Providers



Society

Ways that organizations destroy sanctuary

Organization under constant stress and prolonged crisis



The people within the organization are left **feeling unsafe**



In this environment, staff lose the space to acknowledge and manage their own emotions



In the context of the chronic stress, decision-making abilities are compromised and result in **short sighted policy decisions**



People are unable to talk about things that are bothering them



Results in **chronic unresolved conflict** and unproductive communication



Ways that organizations destroy sanctuary



Communication breakdown leads to **compounding errors**, and continual crisis



In response to these errors, organization leaders become more **controlling and authoritarian**



As communication breaks down, organization become more punitive to maintain control



As the system feels broken, loss is inevitable



There is a **revolving door** of staff and leaders, grief is experienced as people depart



Ways that organizations destroy sanctuary



People feel worn down, exhausted, angry, demoralized and hopeless



This results in **staffing shortages** and a **decline in service delivery**



This ultimately leads to a **loss of meaning and purpose in the work**

This is what I see clinically as driving a significant degree of suffering

Work as Identity in Modern Culture

Work as Core Identity

- Modern culture increasingly defines individuals by their professional roles, fulfilling key psychological needs once met by traditional communities.

Emotional Expectations at Work

- Workplaces now bear emotional burdens, demanding belonging and meaning beyond job functions, especially for first responders.

Impact of Organizational Betrayal

- Betrayal or moral injury at work causes profound identity wounds, threatening individuals' sense of self and well-being.

Path to Recovery

- Effective recovery requires rebuilding identity and community support both inside and outside the workplace environment.

Treatments for Moral injury

- Adaptive Disclosure Therapy (ADT)
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)
- Prolonged Exposure (PE)
- Healing through Forgiveness (HTF)
- Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR)

Moving Forward from Moral Injury

- **Acceptance** organizations are made up of humans and are imperfect
- There can be **meaning** in our work even when the organization has let us down.
 - Helping others
 - Being there for our team
- Don't need to **trust** the organization to do these things

Key Takeaways

- **Moral Injury is distinct from PTSD**
 - Rooted in violations of deeply held values, involving guilt, shame, anger, and betrayal — often the *primary barrier* to recovery.
- **Institutional Betrayal & Sanctuary Trauma amplify suffering**
 - When systems meant to support instead cause harm, individuals experience renewed trauma, disillusionment, and identity wounds.
- **Work as Identity intensifies the impact**
 - Modern culture ties identity to profession; organizational failures therefore strike at the core of self.
- **Growth and Thriving Requires Multi-Layered Approaches**
 - Evidence-based therapies (CPT, EMDR, ACT, ADT) plus meaning-making, community connection, and rebuilding trust in self and others.

Thank you