



Understanding Moral Injury

Facilitator Guide

FOR THOSE WHO SERVE AND THOSE WHO SUPPORT
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Understanding Moral Injury

Facilitator Note:

The following two symbols are used as indicators:

 (computer) indicates it is time to advance the slide on the associated PowerPoint;

 (hand) indicates there is an exercise associated with the content.

*Essential class content is noted in **bold**.*

All class handouts are available for download on the [YRRP website](http://www.yellowribbon.mil/cms/event-handout) at www.yellowribbon.mil/cms/event-handout. Unless otherwise specified as online only in the Materials section below, all handouts should be printed for distribution to class participants.

Please note that this topic may be potentially disturbing or upsetting to some participants. Assistance for participants is available at the Veterans Crisis Line via the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. If the Service member would rather communicate by text with someone, he or she can text 838255.

Class Description:

This class introduces information concerning moral injury. Participants will learn about common characteristics of and feelings and consequences associated with moral injury, and they will discover strategies they could use to help them heal and recover from moral injury.

Stage:

During deployment, Post-deployment

DoDI:

1342.28 DoD Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP)

The content of this class has been developed for the Department of Defense Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program. The Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State has reviewed the class and is responsible for content management.

Audience:

YRRP attendees

Time:

45 minutes

Equipment:

- Projector
- Laptop
- Pens
- Paper

Materials:

- Facilitator Guide
- Core Material Checklist
- PowerPoint Presentation
 1. Understanding Moral Injury
 2. Objectives
 3. Introductory Questions
 4. Moral Injury Quotes
 5. Moral Injury Definition
 6. Potentially Morally Injurious Experiences
 7. True or False
 8. Moral Injury Scenario
 9. Consequences of Moral Injury Quote
 10. Consequences of Moral Injury
 11. What to Look For
 12. Healing Moral Injury: Moral Repair
 13. Supportive Behaviors for Others
 14. Supportive Behaviors for Self
 15. Resources
 16. Review of Objectives
 17. Understanding Moral Injury
- Handouts
 1. Introductory Questions
 2. Moral Injury Scenario (multiple versions; choose 1 based on audience)
 3. What You Can Do
 4. Resources (online only)

Exercises:

1. Introductory Questions
2. Moral Injury Scenario
3. What You Can Do

Objectives:

After completing this class, participants will be able to do the following:

1. Define moral injury.
2. Understand the causes and consequences of moral injury.
3. Identify strategies to heal and recover from moral injury.

Facilitator Note:

Moral Injury by Self:

- *Committing an act that may lead to “serious inner conflict because the experience is at odds with your core ethical and moral beliefs” (Maguen & Litz, 2012, p. 1) (e.g., physically harming others even when justified). “A Service member who nearly committed these acts could also experience moral injury. Example: Service member gave an order to fire on attacking insurgents that resulted in a civilian being shot” (Stein et al., 2012, p. 802).*

Moral Injury by Others:

- *Witnessing or being the victim of an act that is perceived to be “at odds with your core ethical and moral beliefs” (Maguen & Litz, 2012, p. 1) (e.g., witnessing injury to fellow Service members, betrayal). “Events can also be indirectly experienced (i.e., learned about) if they are directly relevant to the individual. Example: Service member 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” (Stein et al., 2012, p. 802).*

An experience of moral injury does not require that the Service member has done something morally wrong. Moral injury can result from a morally permitted and even morally praiseworthy act (e.g., someone may feel remorse or guilt in defending his or her loved ones from a thief. This is an act that is morally praiseworthy but may still result in feelings associated with moral injury).

Some participants may wonder what the difference is between moral injury and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The following information has been provided to help you distinguish between the two.

- *PTSD is a diagnosable mental health disorder (Maguen & Litz, 2012; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). “Moral injury is a dimensional problem. There is no threshold for establishing the presence of moral injury; rather, at a given point in time, a Veteran may have none, or have mild to extreme manifestations” (Maguen & Litz, 2012, p. 1).*
- *“Transgression is not necessary for a PTSD diagnosis nor does PTSD sufficiently capture moral injury, or the shame, guilt, and self-handicapping behaviors that often accompany moral injury” (Maguen & Litz, 2012, p. 1).*

Introduction

SHOW Slide 1: Understanding Moral Injury

Facilitator Note:

Introduce yourself as the facilitator. State your name, military experience or affiliation, and perhaps one additional brief bit of relevant personal information that establishes your credibility (i.e., your professional training or experience).

Please limit your personal introduction to no more than 2 minutes to maximize the time attendees are able to engage with course content, practice skills, and participate in self-reflection activities.

Welcome to Understanding Moral Injury. In this class, we will spend time talking about how military-related experiences can morally injure Service members.

Moral injury is not discussed often, and someone suffering from it may not even know he or she has a situation called moral injury. Questions, such as “Why do I feel *off*, even though I did the right thing according to procedure? Why do I feel sadness or guilt from what I witnessed? I did something I knew was wrong, and now I feel guilty. How do I get these feelings to stop?,” may be on the minds of people who are experiencing moral injury. This class will help you understand how you can be affected, in lasting ways, by actions you take, fail to take, or witness.

SHOW Slide 2: Objectives

Let’s review our objectives. After completing this class, you will be able to do the following:

1. **Define moral injury.**
2. **Understand the causes and consequences of moral injury.**
3. **Identify strategies to heal and recover from moral injury.**

Today, we will focus on moral injury as experienced by Service members. Civilians may also experience moral injury, but the focus of this class will be the experiences of Service members.

During your time as a Service member, **you may perform or witness actions that “lead to serious inner conflict because the experience is at odds with your core ethical and moral beliefs”** (Maguen & Litz, 2012, p. 1). **The guilt, shame, and inner conflict you experience is moral injury** (Litz et al., 2009; Maguen & Litz, 2012; Norman & Maguen, n.d.).

Facilitator Note:

It is important to recognize that an experience of moral injury does not require that the Service member has done something morally wrong. Moral injury can result from a morally permitted and even morally praiseworthy act (e.g., someone may feel remorse or guilt in defending his or her loved ones from a thief or harms caused protecting other Service members during combat operations. These are acts that are morally praiseworthy but may still result in feelings associated with moral injury).

Defining Moral Injury

SHOW Slide 3: Introductory Questions

EXERCISE 1: Introductory Questions

Facilitator Note:

Handout 1 will be used. The purpose of this exercise is for participants to reflect upon and consider open-mindedness, empathy, and a non-judgmental stance towards the possibility that even doing your job in a morally praiseworthy way could be morally injurious for some Service members (or that some Service members may be suffering because of actions they may have taken or witnessed). This should take approximately 5 minutes.

Let's begin by answering the questions on **Handout 1: Introductory Questions**. These questions were designed to help you think about how you may have been affected, in lasting ways, by actions you took, failed to take, or witnessed. **This exercise is for your reflection only and will not be shared with others.** Service members, family members, and friends are encouraged to participate in this exercise. Any questions before you begin?

The following questions are listed on Handout 1:

- 1. Have you ever done something that you felt was morally right but also felt that it challenged you emotionally, psychologically, or spiritually?*
- 2. Have you ever done something that is at odds with your core code of ethics and values? How?*
- 3. Have you ever witnessed an act that challenged your ethical beliefs or values?*
- 4. Have you ever been affected by these experiences for a long time afterward?*
- 5. How have your sense of self and your outlook on life been shaped by your own*

or others' moral choices?

STOP the participants after 5 minutes.

Thank you for taking time to reflect on your experiences.

SHOW Slide 4: Moral Injury Quotes

The following quotes demonstrate how Service members have experienced moral injury, and this injury can occur through Service members' own actions or omissions of action and/or the actions of others.

"You are praying that the decision you make is the right one, and if it is the wrong one – which a couple of decisions were the wrong ones – you are paying the price and you are living with it" Former Service member Sendio Martz (Wood, 2014a).

"Moral injury does not necessarily imply that the injuries are inflicted by others, like when a soldier is ordered to perform a morally dubious task...in some cases, we injure ourselves through acts of commission or omission, through direct participation or indirect approval" Former Service member Tyler Boudreau (Boudreau, 2011, p. 753).

SHOW Slide 5: Moral Injury Definition

Moral injury is "the lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (Litz et al., 2009, p. 697). In other words, the aftermath of doing things, failing to do things, or being the victim of others' actions can challenge an ethical code of conduct.

Now, we understand what moral injury is, so let's talk about what causes it.

SHOW Slide 6: Potentially Morally Injurious Experiences

There are many experiences that have the potential to cause moral injury. **Experiences that can cause moral injury involve the following** (Bryan et al., 2016; Nash & Litz, 2013):

- **Causing injury or pain to others, even when ethically justified in doing so**
- **Betrayal by leaders who make bad decisions with disastrous consequences**
- **Witnessing harm of fellow Service members**

"Longer and more frequent deployments" (Litz et al., 2009, p. 697) and "unanticipated moral choices and demands" (Litz et al., 2009, p. 697) are also factors that have the potential to cause moral injury.

Some experiences that are shrugged off, or not considered in the moment, can have a delayed impact. Service members sometimes find it hard to accept what they have experienced.

SHOW Slide 7: True or False

True or false – moral injury can be determined by reviewing a list of a Service member's experiences. Raise your hands if you think this statement is true.

PAUSE for show of hands.

How many of you think this statement is false?

PAUSE for show of hands; CLICK to bring up answer.

Does it surprise you to learn that this statement is false? **You cannot look at a list of experiences and determine which ones cause moral injury. The individual and his or her ethics or morals must be taken into consideration when determining if he or she has experienced moral injury.** An experience that may cause moral injury in one person may not have the same impact on someone else.

Consequences of Moral Injury

SHOW Slide 8: Moral Injury Scenario

EXERCISE 2: Moral Injury Scenario

Facilitator Note:

Handout 2 will be used. The purpose of this exercise is for participants to explore the consequences of moral injury. This should take approximately 10 minutes.

Additional Handout 2 scenarios are available in the class folder on the [YRRP website](http://www.yellowribbon.mil/cms/event-curriculum) at www.yellowribbon.mil/cms/event-curriculum. Facilitators may choose either the original scenario below and presented in Handout 2 or one of the alternate Handout 2 scenarios. If an alternate version is chosen, all applicable text below should be adjusted accordingly, and the chosen version of Handout 2 should be used in the class.

Now that we have talked about what moral injury is, let's think about what the consequences of moral injury might be. Service members, family members, and friends are encouraged to participate in this exercise. Read the scenario on **Handout 2: Moral**

Injury Scenario. Then, discuss the questions that follow. If you feel more comfortable working alone, you may do so.

STOP the participants after 5 minutes.

The following scenario is described on Handout 2 (adapted from Harris et al., 2015):

Nhean was raised in a large, Cambodian, Roman Catholic family. His family fled to the United States as refugees when Nhean was just a boy and not long after his father had been killed in the Cambodian-Vietnamese war in the late 1980s. The family was extremely thankful for the U.S. humanitarian aid during their time as refugees, and, after coming to the U.S., the family frequently expressed their gratitude.

As Nhean grew up, he had no father, but several men assumed important roles in his spiritual and social development. One was a local parish priest who helped the family access food and other resources. Another was a teacher and veteran, who took special interest in Nhean's assimilation into the American culture.

During his senior year of high school, Nhean could imagine no higher calling than that of a Soldier. Inspired by his teacher and the wave of patriotism following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, he enlisted in the Army right after graduation. After completing his training, he was assigned to an infantry unit that soon deployed to Iraq. He took tremendous pride in his job and service in combat. He stayed in close touch with his unit chaplain and attended Mass whenever possible during his deployment.

One day, while 18-year-old Nhean was on checkpoint duty, a large truck loaded with crates came barreling toward his checkpoint. It disregarded all signs and signals to stop. Recognizing the likelihood this was a suicide attack, Nhean attempted to disable the vehicle by shooting the tires. When that did not work, he shot into the engine, which caused the truck to start burning. The resulting fire killed the driver, his two young sons, and the livestock being taken to market. Follow up revealed no evidence the family was involved in terrorist activities, and it was not clear why they had ignored warning signs and signals to stop at the checkpoint.

After the incident, Nhean became preoccupied about the well-being of the driver's surviving family members, whose fate in Iraq was likely similar to his family's fate had they stayed in Cambodia. He was reassured by his commander, the investigating intelligence officer, and the chaplain that he had acted within the rules for use of force; however, Nhean could not shake the cloud of enormous guilt that he felt. He tried to locate the man's family to see if there was anything he could do, but he was unsuccessful.

Because he no longer felt that he could accept the Eucharist (Holy Communion), he stopped attending Mass. He withdrew from friends in his unit and tried to deal with

growing doubts about his ability to make rapid decisions under duress. He became convinced he was putting others in his unit at risk and asked for transfer to a different type of duty. His commander simply reassured him that he had acted appropriately and was an effective Soldier, and he kept Nhean on checkpoint duty through the end of his unit's deployment.

Although Nhean had joined the military with a plan to pursue a long-term career, he left the Army at the end of his enlistment and went to work in an Asian grocery owned by his uncle. He did not go back to church despite pressure from his family to do so.

His family also expected him to marry and father children, but Nhean felt so worthless he did not feel that he could commit to a marriage. He was so ashamed of the incident in Iraq. He never spoke with his family about it, even though his young nieces and nephews would often ask him what it was like to be a Soldier. Nhean became increasingly withdrawn and began missing work because of frequent headaches. His uncle threatened to fire him if he did not get help and do something about his absenteeism.

Can I get a volunteer from each group who feels comfortable sharing some of what was discussed with your group?

PAUSE for responses.

The following questions are listed on the PowerPoint slide and in Handout 2:

1. *What would you recommend to a friend to heal and recover from something that strongly violated his or her moral core?*
2. *What do you think a person needs from friends and family after seeing or doing something that violated his or her moral core?*

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us.

Please consider how you would answer the following question. **While we will not be discussing your responses as a group, your answer to this question could make a big difference in how well you can support someone who struggles with moral injury.**

The following question is listed on Handout 2:

3. *Is there a limit to your compassion for those who struggle with what they have witnessed or done?*
 - a. *Can any moral breach be forgiven?*
 - b. *What about violence and killing?*

The next couple of slides will continue to discuss consequences of moral injury.

SHOW Slide 9: Consequences of Moral Injury Quote

This quote discusses the consequences of moral injury from the perspective of a staff psychologist.

“People try to make sense of what happened, but it often gets reduced to, ‘It was my fault,’ ‘the world is dangerous,’ or, in severe cases, ‘I’m a monster’” Peter Yeomans, Staff Psychologist, VA Medical Center in Philadelphia (Wood, 2014b).

The statement above lists some of the consequences of moral injury. **Moral injury causes Service members to no longer “trust in previously deeply held beliefs about one’s own or others’ ability to keep ... shared moral covenant[s]”** (Nash & Litz, 2013, p. 368).

SHOW Slide 10: Consequences of Moral Injury

Consequences of moral injury include the following (Drescher & Foy, 2008; Litz et al., 2009):

- **Feeling haunted, avoiding reminders of actions**
- **Experiencing disinterest, detachment from family and friends**
- **Having low motivation or experiencing alienation, purposelessness**
- **Having a broken moral compass – This is a metaphor for changes in ideas about morality and the expectation that doing the right thing is worth it or whether others can be relied upon to do the right thing. In the worst case, a Service member or veteran may be less likely to conform to moral rules and guidelines, and he or she may reject the idea that following these rules of guidelines matters**
- **Suffering shame and guilt**
- **Experiencing a reduced trust in others and in social contracts**
- **Engaging in poor self-care**
- **Creating self-handicapping through careless and reckless behaviors or low motivation for improving situation**
- **Undergoing loss of faith**

With some Service members, it may take some time for these consequences to occur, but, in others, they may appear immediately.

SHOW Slide 11: What to Look For

In addition to the consequences already mentioned, **family members and other important people in a Service member's life may notice significant changes in behavior**, which could include the following (Drescher et al., 2011; Litz et al., 2009):

- **Withdrawal and disconnection**
- **Problems communicating about inner experience**
- **Problems expressing caring feelings**
- **Problems feeling good in situations that used to bring pleasure**
- **Poor self-care**
- **Self-handicapping**

These changes in behavior can be indicators that the Service member is avoiding and concealing his or her experiences and not processing them in a helpful, healthy way (Steenkamp et al., 2011).

Healing Moral Injury

SHOW Slide 12: Healing Moral Injury: Moral Repair

In the following slides, we will learn more about the healing process. **Service members and loved ones need to know that *pain means hope*** (Litz et al., 2017). **The fact that Service members are conflicted by their experience(s) means that healing is possible.** Service members need to be open to the fact that forgiving themselves and others is possible, regardless of the act.

Service members should **remember the following** (Gray et al., 2012; Litz et al., 2017):

- **Goodness is reclaimable**
- **Forgiveness and repair are possible**
- **Healing is a process – there is no quick-fix**

SHOW Slide 13: Supportive Behaviors for Others

EXERCISE 3: What You Can Do

Facilitator Note:

Handout 3 will be used. The purpose of this exercise is for participants to explore their social network's approach to providing support. This should take approximately 10 minutes.

Now that you have more of an understanding of the consequences of moral injury, let's talk about what ideal support looks like to you and how you can be ideally supportive to others.

As an introduction to the exercise, remember that a variety of strategies can be used to help Service members with moral injuries (Gray et al., 2012). **There is no one strategy that works best for everyone, and unintended consequences (e.g., increased isolation) may result from well-meaning but misdirected support behaviors** (Afifi et al., 2013; Joseph & Afifi, 2010). As such, you should consider support behaviors that are within your comfort level and ability to manage and ensure the strategy you select is a good fit for you and the person you are attempting to help. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, continue to assess whether you and your Service member or veteran feel your efforts are in line with what your Service member or veteran needs and that your efforts are helpful.

Service members, family members, and friends are encouraged to participate in this exercise. Form groups of two or three, and discuss the questions on the **Handout 3: What You Can Do**. Write down your answers on the handout. If you feel more comfortable working alone, you may do so.

STOP the participants after 5 minutes.

Can I get a volunteer from each group who feels comfortable sharing some of what was discussed?

The following questions and information are listed in Handout 3: What You Can Do.

Some support strategies are listed below:

- *Be non-judgmental, patient, compassionate*
- *Give small, but consistent, doses of loving and caring*
- *Make yourself available to talk about what is bothering the Service member or veteran*
- *Get in touch with Service branch or VA care providers who can advise you*
- *Foster help-seeking by the Service member or veteran*

In general, what type of support do you prefer?

1. *Having a support person present who is not actively involved in problem-solving*
2. *Having a support person who is proactively involved in problem-solving*
3. *Having a support person who is ready to be actively involved in problem-solving but only when asked*

In general, what type of support do you, the support individual, prefer to provide to others?

1. *Being present and not actively involved in problem-solving*

2. *Being proactively involved in problem-solving*
3. *Being ready to be actively involved in problem-solving but only when asked*

Can you be flexible in the support you provide depending on the type of support the other person wants? (Yes/No)

Are you able to talk with members of your social support network about what types of support you need? (Yes/No)

Are you able to recognize when your attempts at support are not working for the person you are trying to support? (Yes/No)

If you answered *No* to any or all of the three questions listed at the bottom of your handout, you may want to consider identifying another source of support – professional or otherwise.

SHOW Slide 14: Supportive Behaviors for Self

Potential options in the healing process for an individual who may be suffering from moral injury include the following:

- **Sharing experiences with existing support systems.** These support systems may include family, friends, or clergy, and sharing your experiences could include disclosing that you are struggling, understanding how your consequential actions may be having an impact on others, sharing the source of inner conflict that is the moral violation, and seeking compassion and understanding.
- **Doing things that correct harm done** (e.g., giving to others, doing good deeds). One way to heal and recover from moral injury is to do things and have things done to you that are the opposite of doing harm or seeing harm done to others. Some examples include doing good, giving back, volunteering time to the needy, and letting others care for you.
- **Connecting to faith communities.** If a person has a particular religious or other faith, being with other like-minded people, informally or formally, may be helpful.
- **Getting in touch with Service branch or Veterans Affairs (VA) care providers who can help you.** Seek help and support when you are suffering.

An important part of the healing process is continuously learning “better ways of coping with and managing ... stress reactions” (Steenkamp, 2011, p. 101).

As discussed during this and the previous exercise and to provide clarity if things are not improving, **evaluate your social support network. Is your network being beneficial, or is it doing any of the following:**

- **Being judgmental, impatient, uncompassionate**
- **Being overwhelming in attention, love and care**
- **Being unavailable**

Remember, **your social support network may not be able to provide the support you need. You may consider contacting a trained professional to get the help that you need and deserve.**

SHOW Slide 15: Resources

You can learn more about moral injury and resources available to Service members and loved ones by utilizing Handout 4: Resources. It is available on the [YRRP website](http://www.yellowribbon.mil/cms/event-handout) at www.yellowribbon.mil/cms/event-handout. **Although some of these are not resources specific to moral injury, resources that aid in PTSD recovery may be able to provide support.**

Summary

SHOW Slide 16: Review of Objectives

Let's see if we met our objectives:

1. **How do you define moral injury?** *PAUSE for responses.*
(Possible answer: moral injury is “the lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations”)
2. **What are the causes and consequences of moral injury?** *PAUSE for responses.*
(Possible answers for causes: causing injury or pain to others; betrayal by leaders who make bad decisions with disastrous consequences; witnessing harm of fellow Service members)

(Possible answers for consequences: being haunted by and avoiding reminders of actions; disinterest, detachment from family and friends; low motivation, alienation, purposelessness; broken moral compass; shame and guilt; reduced trust in others and in social contracts; poor self-care; self-handicapping; loss of faith)
3. **What are some strategies you can use to heal and recover from moral injury?** *PAUSE for responses.*
(Possible answers for Service members: sharing experiences with natural support systems such as family, friends, clergy; doing things that correct harm done like giving to others, doing good, and volunteering; connecting to faith communities informally or formally; getting in touch with branch or VA care providers who can help you)

(Possible answers for friends and family members: be non-judgmental; be patient; be compassionate; give small, but consistent, doses of loving and caring; make yourself available to talk about what is bothering the Service member or veteran; get in touch with branch or VA care providers who can advise you; foster help-seeking by the Service member or veteran)

SHOW Slide 17: Understanding Moral Injury

What questions do you have about anything we discussed today?

PAUSE for responses.

Thank you, and please complete your evaluation for this class.

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