



Human Performance Office, TECOM
Quantico, VA

Moral Injury & Moral Resilience

Objective: To provide information to Marines leaders and chaplains to deliver training on moral injury and moral resilience to their Marines.

Summary: Moral injury, while not a formal diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V Manual), is widely accepted across multiple fields as a root cause of stress and trauma symptoms. Moral injury, in simple terms, is a betrayal of what is “right.” There are two prevalent definitions of Moral Injury:

- Betrayal of what’s morally right, by someone who hold legitimate authority, in a high-stakes situation. (Shay, 2010)
- Perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. (Litz, Nash, et. al, 2009)

When manifest, moral injury will present symptoms similar to any stress-related or trauma-based incident. However, typical approaches to addressing stress and trauma are often not effective when moral injury is the cause of those symptoms. In order to address moral injury from a human performance perspective, instilling ways to build and maintain moral resilience is critical. Moral resilience is the capacity of a person to sustain, restore or deepen his or her integrity in response to moral complexity, confusion, distress, or setbacks. (Rushton, 2018) Practices and concepts for moral resilience are similar to other means of building resilience, but intentionally focus on the relationship between one’s values and intentions/action. Additionally, experts in the field recognize the importance of the role spirituality plays in recovery from moral injury and building moral resilience.

Suggested Application: This topic applies to all Marines with respect to character and moral/ethical conduct. However, this topic is one best suited for senior leaders (Senior Enlisted Leader/Command 1Sgt/SgtMaj, Field Grade Officers and above), who through their actions and decisions have the agency to prevent or cause moral injury in their subordinates.

Suggestions for delivery: Standard training methods apply. While an enormously complex topic, it is worth at least familiarizing Marines with this concept and continuing to discuss throughout the training cycle. For Senior Leaders, it is recommended training be held in a seminar format, facilitated by a chaplain and/or embedded mental health provider.

Information for Presentation/Training

We all know that nagging feeling we get when we regret something we did. Maybe we hurt someone directly. Maybe we didn’t act when we should have. That kind of feeling has value.



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We call it guilt. And when we learn from such mistakes, we learn to adapt, to think twice the next time, to be prepared to act morally and courageously if we are again confronted with such a situation.

But what if it was more serious than that? What if it was a life-or-death situation? What if at the time the act was deemed to be justifiable, but with the benefit of hindsight it wasn't? And what if the guilt that builds gets more distressing over time and gets mixed up with emotions of shame, avoidance, and despair?

Moral injury is different from Post Traumatic Stress (PTS). Generally speaking, those with PTS symptoms have fear triggers from their experience, where moral injury sufferers have shame triggers, because the events they endured are ones which harmed their sense of right and wrong, such as killing or wounding others, engaging in retribution, disproportionate violence, or torture, or failing to save the life of a comrade or noncombatant.

While there is not complete understanding of moral injury, what is known is that those suffering from it and failing to address it can lead to difficulties coping with everyday life, withdrawal from social interaction, unhealthy relationship functioning, and risky or self-destructive behaviors.

The reality is that the high level of guilt symptoms among veteran populations is significant, and that many counselors and clinicians have not developed proven techniques to help. Moral injury provides an opportunity to investigate multidisciplinary approaches that include spiritual, societal, and psychological components. Resilience is at the center of combat readiness, and that includes reconciling our past service and decisions. We need to be open to talking with each other about what we experienced, and yes, perhaps being open to counseling when we recognize that we are struggling to reconcile our experiences. Remember, being part of this fraternity of the Marine Corps means caring for each other, lifting each other up, and helping each other when we are down.

For further reading:

Litz, Brett. "Adaptive Disclosure." (Guilford Press, 2017)

McDonald, Joseph, ed. "Exploring Moral Injury in Sacred Texts" (Jessica Kingsley, 2017)

Meagher, Robert Emmet, ed., Pryer, Douglas, and Nash, William, "War and Moral Injury: A Reader" (Cascade Books, 2018)

Ramsay, N. & Doehring, C., ed. "Military Moral Injury and Spiritual Care." (Chalice Press, 2019)

Rushton, Cynda. "Moral Resilience: Transforming Moral Suffering in Healthcare." (Oxford University, 2018)



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Shay, Jonathan. "Achilles in Vietnam" (Simon & Schuster, 1995) & "Odysseus in America" (Scribner, 2003).