This presentation will focus on the following:

- What is moral injury
  - Defining moral injury and different aspects related to moral injury
- Is moral injury the same thing as PTSD?
- Military moral injury
- Civilian moral injury
- Misdiagnosing or misunderstanding moral injury
- Resolution or coming to terms with moral injury
What is moral injury

Moral injury dates back to 416 BCE

Athenian tragedy play, Herakle describes moral injury

"What can I do? Where can I hide from all this and not be found? What wings would take me high enough? How deep a hole would I have to dig? My shame for the evil I have done consumes me... I am soaked in blood-guilt, polluted, contagious... I am a pollutant, an offense to gods above." (Euripides, 416 BCE)

However, the research on moral injury has increased as more discipline explore the sequela of moral injury not just related to the military environment. The following are researcher for moral injury:

Dr. Jonathan Shay MD and PhD Clinical Psychiatrist
Dr. Brett Litz, PhD Clinical Psychology
Dr. William Nash, MD psychiatrist
Dr. Sonya Norman, PhD Counseling Psychology
Dr. Shira Maguen, PhD Clinical Psychology
Dr. Harold Koenig, MD Psychiatrist
Dr. Faten Zaben, MD Neuropsychiatry
Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock, PhD psychology of religion
Definition of moral injury over time

Dr. Jonathan Shay’s definition of moral injury:

- A betrayal of what’s right; by someone who holds legitimate authority (e.g., in the military—a leader); In a high stake’s situation.

“How does moral injury change someone”?

- It deteriorates their character; their ideals, ambitions, and attachments begin to change and shrink…and sometimes destroy the capacity for trust.
- Shay emphasis that MI impairs the capacity for trust and elevates despair

(Source: Shay (2014, P 182)
**Dr. Brett Litz and Colleagues define moral injury:**

“An act of transgression that creates dissonance and conflict because it violates assumptions and beliefs about right and wrong and personal goodness...”.

“Acts that violate deeply held moral values:

(source: Litz, Stein, Delaney, Lebowitz, Nash, Silva & Maguen, 2009)

**Drs. Norman and Maguen**

Act of Commission: When someone does something that goes against their beliefs

Act of Omission - fail to do something in line with their beliefs

Individuals may also experience betrayal from leadership, others in positions of power or peers that can result in adverse outcomes

Moral injury is the distressing psychological, behavioral, social, and sometimes spiritual aftermath of exposure to such events

A moral injury can occur in response to acting or witnessing behaviors that go against an individual’s values and moral beliefs.

Source: [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral_injury.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral_injury.asp)
Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock

Moral injury comes in the wake of high stakes situation in which things go very wrong and harm results.

It can emerge in:

- Those who do the wrong
- Those who are harmed by those they trust who have power or authority
- Those who are witnesses
- Those who have an emotional investment in an event and later hear about the harm
- It disrupts our love and meaning systems.

(Source: Dr Rita Brock [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJtuUguqVVo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJtuUguqVVo); May 12, 2020)
What are morals?

- Morals are defined as the personal and shared familial, cultural, societal, and legal rules for social behavior, either tacit or explicit.
- Morals are fundamental assumptions about how things should work and how one should behave in the world.
- If an individual does not act within his/her moral code they deserve to be punished.

(source of the above In the seminal article by Litz et al., (2009))

- MI occurs when moral distress is experienced repeatedly, and the effects are long lasting (Koenig & Al-Zaben, 2021)
What is Moral distress?

- Moral distress is the inability of a moral agent to act according to his/her core values and perceived obligations due to internal and external constraints.

Example of moral distress:

- Moral Distress that nurses might face include (1) inappropriate use of healthcare resources, (2) inadequate staffing, (3) inadequate patient pain relief, and (4) giving false hope to patients and their families.

- Nurses have dealt with moral distress by having resentment, anger, job-hopping, casting blame on themselves and others, reducing hours to part-time, leaving the bedside for a position that involves no direct patient care or leaving the profession completely.

What are Guilt and Shame?

### Guilt

**Guilt = bad behavior**

- Guilt is a painful and motivating cognitive and emotional experience tied to specific acts of transgression of a personal or shared moral code.
- Guilt is associated with a decreased likelihood of participating in risky or illegal behavior and often results in the making of amends.

### Shame

**Shame = Bad feeling about self (deeper than guilt)** *Shatters your sense of self*

- Shame involves global evaluations of self along with behavioral tendencies to avoid and withdraw.
- Shame can result in toxic interpersonal difficulties, anger and decreased empathy for others.
- In general, shame is more damaging than guilt to emotional and mental health and therefore be more integral to moral injury.

Is Moral injury the same as PTSD?
(source: Litz, Stein, Delaney, Lebowitz, Nash, Silva & Maguen, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post Traumatic Stress Disorder</th>
<th>Moral Injury</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predominant painful emotion; fear, horror, helplessness</td>
<td>Guilt, shame, and anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is lost is <strong>safety</strong></td>
<td>What is lost is <strong>trust</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual or threatened death or serious injury</td>
<td>“requires an act of transgression that severely and abruptly contradicts an individual’s personal or shared expectation about the rules or the code of conduct, either during the event or at some point afterwards” (p.700).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| | Shay indicates it is external conditions that impose on the individual (i.e. betrayal)  
Litz indicates it is internal. |
| **PTSD** is a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, or rape or who have been threatened with death, sexual violence or serious injury.  

(source: https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd) |
| **Moral injury** is the erosive diminishment of our souls because our moral actions and the actions of others against us sometimes have harmful outcomes. It rises from our attempts to do the right thing as individuals and communities. Moral injury is personal, interpersonal, and collective. None of us escapes moral injury. We all bear the costs of attempted goodness.  

(source: Litz, Stein, Delaney. Lebowitz, Nash, Silva & Maguen, 2009) |
Less likely to be related to life-threatening event

- Less Research
- Less consensus
- Narrower Focus

Identify focus

Avoidance: wish to protect others

Spiritual focus

More likely to be related to life-threatening events

- Re-Experiencing
- Hyperarousal
- Avoidance: Preventing re-injury

- More research
- More consensus
- Broader focus

Reminders
- Avoidance/denial
- Intrusive thoughts
- Sleep issues
- Substance use

Negative cognitions:
- Guilt/shame
- Anger
- Disgust
- Betrayal
- Negative view of self

Social problems
- Trust issues
- Spiritual changes
- Fatalism or sorrow

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Who is at risk for moral injury?

Occurs in people who are repeatedly exposed to Suffering & Evil in the world
- Military members
- Veterans
- Family members of military/veterans
- Healthcare workers
- Civilian/general populations
Military moral injury

- Sgt Corey R. Barnes
- Birth Dec 28, 1978
- Death June 14, 2006 (age 27)
Healthcare provider moral injury
Civilian Moral Injury
Reasons moral injury is misdiagnosed or misunderstood

- Moral injury is not a disorder it is a “soul wound”
- MI can include moral and ethical challenges
- Transgress of deeply held moral beliefs
- Grasping the unethical behaviors of others
- Witness suffering and cruelty
- Over time an individual will be convinced their actions are unforgiveable
- Service member/veterans with moral injury will fail to see a path toward renewal and reconciliation;
- they will fail to forgive themselves and experience self-condemnation.
Figure 1. Model of dynamics involved in moral injury (adapted from Koenig et al, 2017).
MI treatment options

Therapists, counselors, social workers, and clergy are often at the front lines of addressing moral injury; however, the larger community can also take part. Consider that moral injury affects and is affected by the moral codes across a community for a shared process of healing.

- There is not a standardized treatment for moral injury related mental health problems
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secular</th>
<th>Spiritual/religious</th>
<th>Pastoral care</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive disclosure therapy (ADT)-Litz et al, 2017</td>
<td>Building spiritual strength (BSS) Harris et al., 2011, 2018</td>
<td>Healing through forgiveness Grimsley &amp; Grimsley, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acceptance and Commitment therapy (ACT)-Hayes et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2020</td>
<td>Spiritually integrated cognitive processing therapy (SICPT) Koenig et al., 2017; Pearce et al., 2018</td>
<td>Structured pastoral care (SPC) Ames et al., 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive Behavior theory (CBT) Maguen &amp; Burkman 2013; Maguen et al., 2017; Purcell et al., 2018</td>
<td>Religiously integrated cognitive behavior therapy (RCBT) Koenig et al., 2015</td>
<td>Pastoral narrative disclosure (PND) Carey &amp; Hodgson, 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prolonged exposure (PE)-Held et al., 2018; Paul et al., 2014</td>
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<td>Moral injury reconciliation therapy (MIR) Lee 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alternative therapies (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) Shapiro &amp; Laliotis, 2015; Hurley 2018</td>
<td></td>
<td>Moral injury group (MIG) Cenkner et al., 2021</td>
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Resolution or coming to terms with moral injury

For resolution one must understand the Core Issues of Moral Injury

1. Injury to an individual’s moral conscience and values
2. Moral transgression
3. Unresolved loss - as mentioned the Corey Barnes story is an example

3. Disenfranchised Grief
   - denied the right to grieve,
   - denied the social support necessary to overcome the loss
   - deprived of the social validation necessary to heal

4. Complicated Grief
   - unable to accept the reality of a death/action;
   - mourning gets derailed
   - adaptation process does not occur

If the grief process is blocked = numbing (to survive) = helplessness and emotional numbing into Rage/Hate/Payback = Moral Injury
To Heal and Goals

To heal:
- To heal unresolved loss, we must grieve.
- To heal the breach in relationship because of our own transgression we must ask for forgiveness.
- To heal from interpersonal betrayal, we must take our power back from those who took it.
- To heal from institutional betrayal, we must remove the institutional perpetrators from between ourselves and those who were harmed or wronged—refocus from blame to empathy for the victims which give you power to change the outcomes.

Goal of treatment:
- Reduce guilt and shame to mild remorse.
- Modify and reframe amplifying cognitions.
- Return to seeing goodness of the world and self that existed prior to the experience.
Thoughts to consider in Treatment

- Connection
- Preparation and education
- Modified exposure component
- Examination and integration
- Dialogue with moral authority
- Reparation and forgiveness
- Fostering reconnection
- Plan for a long haul
Summary

- Moral Injury is a betrayal of what an individual feels is right
- Trust is questioned or lost.
- MI can deteriorate one’s character
- It disrupts our love and meaning not only for the individual but for family and community

- Everyone can be affected by moral injury

- There is no standardized treatment of MI however the following need to be considered
  - Start a conversation
  - Provide support
  - Identify recourses
  - Provide ethics counseling
  - Ensure the message from leadership reflects an understanding of moral injury
References


Moral Injury: A Working Definition by Dr. Rita Brock https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJtuUguqVVo; May 12, 2020)


https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd