



Moral Injury

What is Moral Injury?

Moral injury can happen after someone takes part in, fails to prevent or witnesses an event that goes against their morals or values. Although some distress is common after an event like this, moral injury refers to possible psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual concerns related to the event that contribute to difficulties in day-to-day life, such as at work or school and in close relationships.

Who Is at Risk for Moral Injury?

Anyone who experiences a stressful or traumatic event that goes against their deeply held morals and values may be at risk for moral injury. For example:

- Combat veterans who injure or kill people during war, especially if vulnerable civilians or children are harmed.
- Healthcare workers who feel unable to provide the best possible care, sometimes because of institutional policies or limited resources.
- First responders who make life or death decisions, with limited time and information, often during disasters or crises.
- Civilians who cause or witness harm or death to others (for example, driver kills a pedestrian in a motor vehicle accident).

How Does Moral Injury Affect Someone?

Moral injury can change how you think or feel about yourself. People with moral injury often feel guilt, shame, disgust and/or anger. Another common reaction is believing you are unforgivable or should be punished.

Moral injury also can affect your behavior. People sometimes withdraw from close relationships or valued communities. Someone with moral injury may end a relationship because they do not believe they are worthy of love. They may not seek help because they do not believe they deserve to feel better. Moral injury might also affect your work, school or other day-to-day activities, especially if you feel a lack of meaning or purpose in life.

Moral injury can occur together with mental health conditions like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, insomnia, or substance use disorders. Your healthcare professional can screen you for these.



In some instances, people with moral injuries can be at risk for thinking about suicide. If you or someone you know might be at risk of suicide, don't wait — get help right away. Contact the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988) or chat with a counselor at 988lifeline.org.

How Do I Know If I Have Moral Injury?

A mental health provider or chaplain can help to assess whether you have moral injury. If you suspect moral injury may be impacting you, you can bring it up with a trusted professional.

Should I Get Treatment for Moral Injury?

It can be difficult to talk about the events that led to moral injury. It is common to wonder about how a therapist will react. Therapists are trained to be accepting and non-judgmental. They have experience supporting people who disclose very troubling and horrible situations.

Although treatment cannot undo events that happened in the past, it can help people come to terms with what happened and find a way to live a meaningful, fulfilling life going forward.

If you experienced an event in which a moral line was crossed and you continue to feel distressed about it, treatment can help. Start by talking to a mental health provider or chaplain.

Adapted from: [National Center for PTSD](#)