

Understanding Moral Injury

A clinical overview for individuals, organisations, and those who support them.



What moral injury is

Moral injury is the lasting psychological, social, and spiritual harm that can follow a betrayal of deeply held moral values, whether by one's own actions, the actions of others, or the demands of a role or system. It is recognised in the DSM-5-TR (Z65.8) as a clinical problem. Almost all moral injury involves a betrayal of values, and it often arises from the tension of being forced to live out one value at the cost of betraying another.

"The 'moral bind': being forced to live out one moral value at the cost of betraying another."

How it differs from PTSD

PTSD

Struggling to **process** the event. The nervous system remains in survival mode, and the event has not been integrated.

MORAL INJURY

Struggling to **live with** the event. The person can understand and process what happened, but it does not sit well inside them.

The moral injury continuum

Not everyone exposed to morally challenging events develops moral injury. Where someone sits on this continuum shapes what kind of support is appropriate.

Living out my Morals

I'm in the green

Moral Discomfort

I'm in the yellow

Moral Distress

I'm in the orange

Moral Injury

I'm in the red

Key principles

- ✓ Everyone faces moral challenges and will experience moral distress. Not everyone develops moral injury.
- ✓ Treatment deals with the **consequences** of moral injury, not its cause, because the event itself cannot be undone.
- ✓ Left unaddressed, moral injury can drive "moral drift", a gradual erosion of the very values that were wounded, and a significant risk factor for suicide.
- ✓ Moral injury is relational. As the clinical observation goes, "morally injured people morally injure people", so untreated injury can ripple outward through teams, families, and organisations.

Four clinical frameworks

Four interconnected frameworks inform Jesse's approach to assessment and treatment.

Moral Contexts & Code Switching

Different contexts carry different moral codes, expectations, and norms. People move between these contexts (work, family, faith, culture) and are required to navigate competing moral demands. Moral injury can emerge when the code demanded in one context fundamentally violates the code held in another, particularly when the person has no agency to exit the conflicted context.

Moral Drift

Moral suffering is an intolerable place to remain. When it cannot be resolved, a person may unconsciously begin to drift away from the values and moral commitments that were injured, not because they have changed their beliefs, but as a form of psychological self-protection. This drift can erode identity, relationships, and vocation over time, and is one of the reasons why untreated moral injury can be so disabling and a significant risk factor for suicide.

Reciprocal Meaning-Making

A person's existing moral worldview shapes how they interpret and integrate new experiences. When a morally injurious event occurs, whether they can integrate it into their existing framework, or whether it shatters that framework, depends substantially on the flexibility and strength of their moral and spiritual identity. Treatment must therefore attend not only to the specific injury but to the broader meaning-making framework within which it is held.

Moral Maturity & Psycho-Spiritual Development

Drawing on Fowler's stages of faith and Kohlberg's theory of moral development, this framework recognises that people progress through stages of psycho-spiritual development that shape how rigidly or flexibly they hold their moral values. Those in earlier, more concrete stages may be more vulnerable to moral injury when their values are violated. Clinical work that supports movement toward greater moral and spiritual maturity can be both protective and healing.

A dual lens, and a response at every level

Jesse Winter's combination of psychological training and theological and chaplaincy background allows him to hold two realities at once. As a clinician, he validates the clinical reality of a person's suffering. Drawing on spiritual and theological understanding, he also validates the moral and existential reality of the wound, addressing both "what is wrong with me?" and "what is wrong with the world?" Jesse also works across the individual, organisational, and government levels, from individual recovery and moral resilience through to leadership, prevention, and policy. The focus depends on what is most relevant to you.

To discuss assessment, treatment, consulting, or professional development: moralinjury@winterpsychology.com.au | winterpsychology.com.au

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