

EXPERIENCES OF MORAL INJURY IN CANADIAN PUBLIC SAFETY PERSONNEL

What do you need to know?

Public safety personnel (PSP) experience potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs) in their jobs. PMIEs are situations that violate an individual's core beliefs, morals, or values. For PSP who participated in this study, PMIEs are related to:

- the nature of the job (e.g., providing treatment that is seen as harmful or futile to patients)
- the organizational culture (e.g., complaints or concerns not being taken seriously by leadership)
- the health care system (e.g., policies PSP may not agree with but must implement)

PMIEs left PSP feeling as though they could not exercise professional judgement and created inner conflict for them. This led to many negative consequences in their personal and professional lives. PSP sought the support of their peers, but did not talk about the moral or ethical parts of an experience.



What is this research about?

PSP are often exposed to events in their jobs that may be distressing or traumatic. These events can lead to serious mental health impacts.

If PMIEs are left unaddressed, they can cause a moral injury. Moral injury can include intense feelings of shame, guilt, or inner conflict. Other characteristics of moral injury include distrust of authority or spiritual distress.

The goal of this study was to understand the types of PMIEs Canadian PSP experience and the associated impacts. The study focused on paramedics, communications officials, and logistics technicians. The study also explored if and how PSP used peer support to manage their reactions to PMIEs.

Keywords: Moral Injury, Potentially Morally Injurious Events, Canada, Public Safety Personnel, Peer Support, COVID-19

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What did the researchers do?

In 2021, researchers at the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families interviewed 38 PSP from an organization in Ontario, Canada. PSP included paramedics, communication officials, logistics technicians, and leadership. PSP shared work events that went against their morals, values, or ethics, and provided explanations about why these events were troubling. PSP also described how they reacted to the event, and how these events affected their work and their well-being. Interviews also explored how PSP coped with PMIEs, including if they used peer support.

What did the researchers find?

PSP experienced PMIEs in their jobs. PMIEs appeared related to the nature of the job, the organizational culture, or issues with the healthcare system. PMIEs reduced the trust PSP had in their leadership and the healthcare system to protect the public and themselves. PMIEs were associated with feelings of anger, frustration, resignation, and helplessness. The impact of PMIEs could also build up over time. PMIEs could cause serious internal struggles marked by inner conflicts and self-doubt.

PSP reported using strategies to cope with PMIEs and other traumatic job experiences. For example, PSP used humour, exercise, taking breaks, and spending time with friends and family as coping strategies. Not enough time between calls, stigma, and COVID-19-related restrictions were factors that prevented some PSP from using these strategies.

PSP sought the support of their peers, but they did not talk about PMIEs. When PSP talked to peers about other concerns, peers were able to relate, listen to, and validate the PSP experience. Some PSP were reluctant to use the organization's official peer support program. They were skeptical about confidentiality and the qualifications of peer supporters.

What did we learn from this research?

Peer support: More research is needed to determine if peer support can help PSP manage the impacts of PMIEs. Workplace peer support programs should assess their processes for how PSP access support. Peer support programs should highlight the qualifications of peer supporters and communicate to how peers will maintain confidentiality.

PSP organizations: Leaders can use these findings to help identify PMIEs within their own workplace. Knowing what types of PMIEs may arise is an important first step towards addressing them.

Policy makers: PSP regulatory bodies should recognize the impact that competing policies and priorities can have on PSP mental health. High demands on the healthcare system are putting additional pressure on PSP. PSP may be more strongly distressed by PMIEs related to their organization and broader healthcare system.

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Moral Injury in PSP Advisory Committee

This committee was composed of frontline public safety personnel, public safety leadership, psychologists, and researchers. The committee co-developed the research and interview questions, supported PSP recruitment, provided feedback on early observations and findings, and co-created the knowledge mobilization plan.

This summary was written by Tracey, S., and reviewed by Rodrigues, S., Mercier, J-M., Hosseiny, F., and the Moral Injury in PSP Advisory Committee.

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