

A GUIDE TO MORAL INJURY FOR VETERANS AND FAMILIES

This resource can help Veterans and Veteran Family members understand what moral injury is, how it is different from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and what you can do if you think you are experiencing moral injury.

WHAT IS MORAL INJURY?

Moral injury refers to the lasting psychological, social and spiritual distress that someone may struggle with after an experience or set of experiences that challenge deeply held beliefs, such as the way they make sense of the world or what they believe to be “right” or “wrong.”¹ Members of the military and people who work in public safety, including members of the RCMP, may have an increased risk of exposure to these types of experiences. Family members and loved ones of people who have served can feel distress while trying to support their Veteran through the aftermath of moral injury. In addition, Family members can also experience their own moral injury.

“ VOICES OF VETERANS ”

I suffered from shame and guilt for the actions I took based on orders. For a long time I was confused and very self-critical. Discovering that moral injury is part of my condition allowed me to accept what happened and begin healing.



On a visit to Afghanistan I struggled with the orders that did not sit well with me ethically, but I followed them as I was trained to do. After returning home, these memories troubled me. I’ve since accepted this as a “moral injury” and, while I still think about it, I recognize that there was nothing I could have done and that the commanders had a reason for their decision.

In this resource, you will find:

- ▶ [What is moral injury?](#)
- ▶ [What types of experiences are associated with moral injury?](#)
- ▶ [What can moral injury feel like?](#)
- ▶ [Can Veteran Family members experience moral injury?](#)
- ▶ [Can moral injury be treated?](#)
- ▶ [Is moral injury different from PTSD?](#)
- ▶ [I think I’m experiencing moral injury. What can I do now?](#)

If you’re a serving member, Veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) or Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) or Family member experiencing intense guilt, shame or betrayal as a result of things that happened during service, you may be experiencing moral injury.

WHAT TYPES OF EXPERIENCES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH MORAL INJURY?

You may be experiencing service-related moral injury if:

You did not do something, witnessed or are aware of others failing to do something that you think should have been done.

Some examples include:

- Being unable to help ill or wounded civilians, including children.^{2,3}
- Witnessing harmful, illegal or immoral activities, such as child trafficking, and being unable to intervene.²
- Feeling like you could or should have prevented someone's injury or death.^{2,3}
- Not reporting an event that violates the rules of engagement or codes of conduct for service members.^{3,4}

You did something, witnessed or are aware of others doing something that you think you or others should not have done.

Some examples include:

- Giving or carrying out orders that harm civilians/non-combatants.³⁻⁶
- Killing enemy combatants.^{1,3,5,7,8}
- Giving or carrying out orders that result in the death of a service member.^{4,8}
- Encountering child soldiers.^{9,10}
- Carrying out orders that you think are immoral.⁴

You felt and/or continue to feel betrayed by a higher authority (this is sometimes referred to as institutional betrayal or sanctuary trauma).^{3,4,5} Some examples include:

- Receiving orders that you think are immoral.⁴
- Witnessing behaviour that violates the rules of engagement or codes of conduct for service members.^{2,4,6}
- Not receiving support for violence or aggression perpetrated against you during service, including by a fellow service member.^{14,15} This can include milder forms of misconduct that over time could contribute to a sense of moral injury.



Family members can also be affected by moral injury. As a Family member you may:

- Find it challenging to watch your loved one struggle. You may not understand what the issue is and they may not want to talk about it with you.
- Struggle with processing or understanding the experience and context of what your loved one has seen or been part of.
- Have feelings that your worldview, the system or the person you thought they were is not as you believed.
- Experience common signs of moral injury (and have a moral injury) yourself.

WHAT CAN MORAL INJURY FEEL LIKE?

Moral injury can be intense, persistent and distressing for the person experiencing it.^{1,2} Research and lived experience perspectives on moral injury describe some common signs a person has been affected by moral injury. These can include:

- Intense feelings of shame and guilt^{1,5,11,12}
- Sense of betrayal^{7,11,13,14}
- Feelings of anger, anxiety and/or disgust^{5,7,8,11}
- Lost or uncertain sense of personal identity^{4,2,12}
- Loss of meaning or sense of purpose^{5,15,16,12}
- Spiritual struggles (i.e., a sense of confusion about one's beliefs or sense of having lost one's faith)^{12,16,24}
- Self-isolation and/or difficulty with intimate relationships^{5,13,24,26}
- Inability to forgive or trust oneself or others^{1,5,12,16}
- Self-blame and self-criticism, including feeling damaged, unworthy and/or weak^{5,12,15}
- Self-sabotaging behaviour such as self-harming, excessive use of substances and/or uncharacteristic recklessness¹
- Suicidal ideation^{6,27-29}

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I felt helpless as I watched guilt, shame, inner conflict and distress slowly erode his being, and I began to suspect that something more than PTSD was happening.”

FAMILY MEMBER



“ VOICES OF VETERANS ”

At one point, I couldn't bear to look at myself in the mirror to shave because of the shame and self-loathing I was experiencing.



I was so embarrassed and ashamed. I kept what happened to myself for years. To this day, my Family doesn't know anything of these types of incidents. They knew that there was something 'wrong' but it wasn't something that I could discuss with them.

Moral injury is incredibly difficult to overcome. The shame and guilt created trust issues within myself and made it difficult for me to make decisions because I no longer trusted my ability to make safe decisions that aligned with my moral compass.



I felt disgusted with what happened in my part of it. I felt hollow and disappointed in myself.

CAN VETERAN FAMILY MEMBERS EXPERIENCE MORAL INJURY?

If you are a spouse, child or relative of a Veteran, you may identify with some of the experiences describing moral injury. You are not alone — preliminary frameworks and stories shared by Veteran Families suggest that moral injury has implications for Family members.^{17,18} Spouses, children and relatives of a Veteran may have their own ethical concerns about their loved one's activities during service, even if their Veteran Family member is not affected.

Family members of Veterans may also be impacted by a Veteran's moral injury (for example, seeing their loved one experience changes and difficulties related to identity, intimacy and community or Family involvement). Of course, this can affect the well-being of the Family member themselves, and can also create challenges in caring for and supporting their Veteran loved one through their injury.

Currently, there is a lack of scientific research showing the unique ways that moral injury affects Family members of Veterans. Still, the moral injury can be highly distressing and can negatively impact your life.

If you are a Family member of a Veteran and you think you or your loved one are experiencing moral injury, trust your feelings and seek the support you need.

You can find resources for Veterans and Families at atlasveterans.ca/directory-of-services.



What I learned about from my spouse led me to question my own beliefs about the world, humanity, institutions, my loved one —and myself.

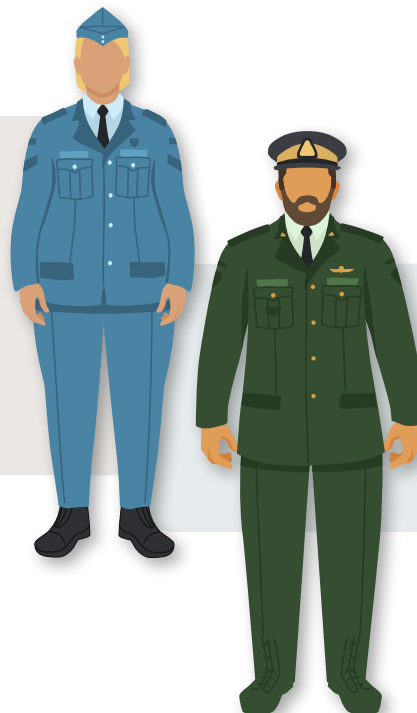


FAMILY MEMBER



“ VOICES OF VETERANS ”

It took time, but learning the difference between PTSD and moral injury helped because I better understood the root of the thoughts, feelings and behaviours I was experiencing and so could do something about what was going on.



Once I learned that PTSD and moral injury are different, that information allowed me to address the shame and guilt. It started a journey to accept myself as a good person again.

CAN MORAL INJURY BE TREATED?

Currently, there are no specific treatments for moral injury that are widely accepted by health care practitioners because moral injury is not formally recognized as a mental health diagnosis. However, many agree that it can be addressed with current mental health treatment options.

Military members and Veterans may experience moral injury differently from those in civilian professions. As a result, they may have unique needs that should be addressed differently in treatment.

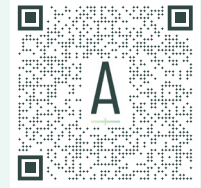
Many service providers address moral injury with therapies and techniques used to treat PTSD because of its similarity to PTSD and because there is a lack of standardized treatment for moral injury. For some people experiencing moral injury, these approaches can be effective. However, since these therapies don't target the specific experiences that define moral injury, such as intense shame and guilt, they are not always effective for treating moral injury.

Researchers and clinicians see the need for effective interventions designed to address moral injury and there is currently research underway on how to best approach moral injury in treatment.

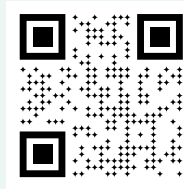
Access mental health supports and services available to Canadian Veteran Families:
atlasveterans.ca/directory-of-services



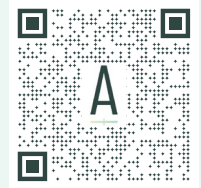
Find a peer support service in your area:
atlasveterans.ca/peer-support-directory



Contact Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services – Military Family Services:
cfmws.ca



Find other information and resources about moral injury:
atlasveterans.ca/moral-injury



IS MORAL INJURY DIFFERENT FROM PTSD?

Moral injury and PTSD are different. Some of their features do overlap, and because situations that challenge moral beliefs can also be traumatic, someone can experience both PTSD and moral injury at the same time. However, the signs (or symptoms) may be for different reasons.

While PTSD often results from a fear-inducing, dangerous situation that threatens someone's life, sense of physical safety or sexual integrity, moral injury can but does not necessarily result from these types of situations so the reason (and the strategies for addressing) what you're experiencing may be different.^{1,29,30}

New and emerging research continues to uncover differences and similarities between PTSD and moral injury. Some key differences that have been documented so far are outlined in the accompanying chart.

MORAL INJURY	PTSD
Hyperarousal (fast-beating heart, sweating, constantly being alert, scanning for threats)	
Can be but isn't necessarily a symptom of moral injury ¹	Common symptom of PTSD
Intense moral emotions like guilt, shame and sense of betrayal by self or others	
Core features of moral injury ^{1,19}	Not required for a PTSD diagnosis
Self-isolation	
Self-isolating because you feel a sense of shame about an event ²⁰	Protecting yourself from dangers you perceive in your environment

I THINK I'M EXPERIENCING MORAL INJURY. WHAT DO I DO NOW?

Whether you're a Veteran or Family member, the personal impacts of moral injury can feel debilitating and isolating – but there is hope.

If you think you are experiencing moral injury, here are a few suggestions for next steps, informed by research and the lived experience of Veterans and Family members:



Learn about moral injury. This can be the first step to feeling validated and understood, which can lead to processing and coming to terms with what happened.



Reach out to someone you trust, if you feel safe to do so. For example, you may want to reach out to someone from the Veteran or Family communities¹³ Hearing about others' experiences and talking to someone who understands your context first-hand can be reassuring and help you cope. It can also help you identify new options for support, and help your loved ones support you.



Reflect on what you're comfortable sharing. You don't necessarily have to disclose the experiences you've had to seek or get support. You may choose to focus on the impacts of the experience, rather than what happened (for example, how you're feeling and how it's impacting your day-to-day activities).



Make sure you and your loved one are in the right headspace to talk. Sharing and hearing about traumatic events can have its own impacts. Before starting the discussion, check in to ensure everyone involved – including yourself – feels safe physically, mentally and emotionally. Ask if it's a good time to talk and what the other person is able to hear or share right now, and respect those boundaries – it's not personal. Sometimes it can be best to reserve discussion about traumatic details for a mental health professional. It's important to not push your loved one to share or listen.



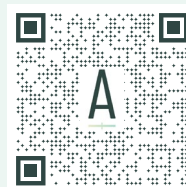
Map out other forms of informal support. Spiritual counselling, peer support, Veterans' retreat programs, and service animals are just some of the informal supports used by Veterans to ease the burden of moral injury.^{13,16, 21-23}



Consider professional support. A mental health professional may be able to help you manage difficult emotions and other impacts of moral injury on your daily life.

Healing from moral injury is possible. In the face of moral pain, self-compassion and self-forgiveness can support rebuilding the sense of belonging and esteem.^{31,32}

Find more information about moral injury here:
atlasveterans.ca/moral-injury



Scan the QR code or visit:
atlasveterans.ca/moral-injury-guide-veterans-families-contributorship



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