

Moral Injury in People with Serious Mental Illness or Addiction



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1

From the DSM-III Casebook

- 32yo veteran admitted after a suicide attempt.
- He's been depressed since returning from Vietnam in 1972.
- Before Vietnam, he was a good man.
- Hated the war, especially after he went berserk and killed a civilian "for the fun of it."
- Afterward, he punished himself – alone, alcoholic, angry, unemployed, and ultimately disabled.

What is his diagnosis?

2

Why is This Veteran a Broken Man?

- **Moral injury** betrays deeply-held values: perpetrated by oneself, or injustice by an authority, or witnessed atrocities.
- It must be a high-stakes situation.
- The transgression causes deep and lasting wounds to the self.
- It is damage that cannot be undone or repaid.

Shay (1994), Litz, et al. (2009)

3

What is Moral Injury?

4

PTSD and Moral Injury — the most common confusion

- PTSD can be w/o moral transgression; Moral Injury can occur w/o trauma.
- Moral Injury & PTSD use different brain systems.
- The emotions differ: PTSD is mostly fear; moral injury involves guilt or anger.
- Moral injury is about meaning in self, culture, and society.

5

Neuroscience of Ethics

Is ethics rational, emotional, or both?

- Social species evolved to cooperate and help the vulnerable.
- Empathy evolved with oxytocin in early vertebrates (Akinrinade et al., 2023)
- Caring and Reciprocity in elephants, corvids, dolphins, and chimps (DeWaal & Preston, 2017).
- Mentalizing Network (ventromedial PFC, Temporo-Parietal Junction; Aichhorn et al 2009).

6

Can Children Have Moral Injury?

- Moral development (Bandura, 1991; Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1932; Smetana, 2006).
- Toddlers show a sense of right & wrong regarding injury, sharing, stealing.
- With age, moral agency incorporates social norms (e.g., Turiel, 1983; Wainryb, 2020).
- Children can feel guilt even if their guilt is not rational or deserved (e.g., accidental, illusory, or coerced).
- Little is known about moral injury in childhood (Haight et al., 2016; Kidwell & Kerig, 2021)

7

Moral Emotions

Disgust *

Anger *

Guilt / Shame / Embarrassment

Self-loathing

Masochism / Self-Harm

Contempt

Jealousy / Envy

*Some positives: Compassion, Gratitude, Empathy,
Communion, Sympathy, Love.*

8

Some Related Concepts

- **Betrayal Trauma** — Jennifer Freyd (1994).
- **Complex Trauma** — Judith Herman (1994).
- **Moral Distress** – Andy Jameton (1984).
- **Second Victim** – physician errors
- **Post Traumatic Embitterment Disorder** – Michael Linden (2003) of Berlin.
- **Enduring Personality Change after Catastrophic Experience** — ICD-10.
- **CADI (Causing Accidental Death or Injury)** — MaryAnn Gray (2017)
- **Sakit Hati** — Rees & Silove (2011)
- **Transgenerational Trauma** – symbolic, unconscious (not epigenetics)

9

Ordinary People with Moral Injury

10

10



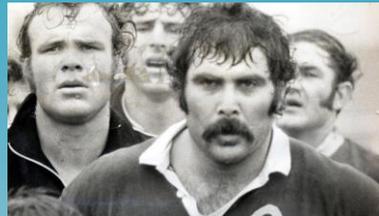
Eleanor Williams

- This teen mother was in a DC bus station in 1983.
- A stranger offered to change the infant's diaper. The baby was never seen again.
- For years she tries to forget, trusts nobody, and considers suicide — she is tormented by nightmares and guilt, (“How could you be so stupid?”)
- Is this PTSD or moral injury?

(Paul Duggan, Washington Post, Jan 12, 2018)

11

Keith Murdoch



- New Zealand All Black rugby star, regarded as “a beast on and off the field” in 1972.
- He got into a bar fight while playing in Wales — vilified in papers and his team fired him
- He 'went bush' in Australia for years until he died.
- “He was a deeply shy person and not very articulate ... There was a real sense of a wound that has never healed.”
- What happened to him?

12



Greg Orr

- UVA English professor and poet.
- As a boy, he accidentally killed his brother.
- This still haunts him after 60 years:

“With the accident that took my brother’s life, my whole world was changed, utterly and to its core. I survived, grew, and perhaps even thrived. But I never healed.”

“When a child kills,” NY Times, Aug 29, 2014

13

Eric Abramovitz



- Auditioned for a full scholarship at a famous conservatory but was surprisingly rejected.
- Years later he learned his college girlfriend faked his rejection. So he sued her.
- “It was not only a stab in the back but in the heart,”
- The court wrote that a “closely held personal dream [was] snatched from him by a person he trusted.”
- His MI is from injustice; ex-GF’s is as a perpetrator.

— Cecco, [The Guardian](#) 6 Jun 2018)

14

Moral Injury in People with Severe Mental Illness and Addiction

15



Michael Stewart

Amy Dempsey, "What Michael did."
Toronto Star, Apr 22 2014

Responding to command hallucinations, he brutally killed his mother in 2002.

Michael now lives in a group home, stable on clozapine.

"How could I have done it? What is wrong with me?"

"When his thoughts wander into uncomfortable territory, he stares out the window, counting birds on a telephone wire, and forces his mind to go blank."

"When they recover, the enormity, the impact of what they've done hits them . . . they can't forgive themselves . . . You've got to get them to redo their thinking: that person wasn't me."

– Dr Bradford

16

Bitter Grandmother

- Mary,* a 60-year-old grandmother, was hospitalized for severe depression.
- She feels guilty about not pursuing charges against the man who molested her daughters.
- For decades she ruminated about killing him, ashamed that she had murderous thoughts and also ashamed that she held back.

17

An Engineer's Guilt

- Alex*, 55 yo engineer, suddenly stopped work, withdrew from everyone, and lost 60# in 3 months.
- He was suicidal when admitted for depression, and confessed to a terrible crime – no details, but the body is buried out back.
- This is a delusional crime — he believes his sin can never be forgiven.
- After treatment, his depression lifted and the crime vanished.

18

An Old Bar Fight

- Old Mike* comes to an outpatient clinic for depression.
- Many decades ago, he and some Army friends were out drinking and they beat a guy up.
- Mike now recognizes this as homophobia and assault; he feels extreme remorse.
- He has nightmares, guilt, and rumination — maybe they killed the guy, maybe Mike's a murderer?
- When did this become a moral injury?

19

A Case from Child Welfare

- Maggie* left her toddler sleeping while she went to the bars.
- A neighbor called police when the child woke up and wandered.
- She is furious with the neighbor, CPS, her family — everyone except herself.
- She benefitted from court-ordered rehab and is genuinely fighting her addiction.
- She deeply regrets the pain she caused.
- When did this become moral injury?

20

Injustice as Moral Injury

- In 1996, Leo Drey, MS4, was committed to the hospital where he did his clerkship.
- He appealed his commitment, arguing that he was set up by the med school
- He had managed his bipolar illness well and did well in school.
- He argued that this injustice cost him 5 weeks of school, a \$39k hospital bill, and perhaps the ruin of his career.

— E Rosenthal, NY Times, Oct 25, 1996.

21

Husband in the Dog house

- After confessing an affair, Peter* began psychotherapy for depression.
- At first, he worked overtime, avoiding his family and sleeping in the basement.
- Then he started missing work, smoking meth, and staying out — as if he wanted to get arrested and blow up his life.
- In therapy, he says, “This isn’t me.”
- Who is he? Is there a moral injury here?
- How is MI related to recovery?

22

American Madness

Koh also told me a story that she'd heard from her mentor, Jim O'Connell, the founding physician at Boston Health Care for the Homeless. The story is about a woman he spent many years caring for on the street, who was often on the psychiatric brink, though O'Connell, determined to honor her autonomy and dignity, never committed her. Finally, the police did it for him. After the hospital, and time spent stably housed, the woman moved on to other systems of support, slowly recovered her balance, began working again, and eventually joined the board of an organization that sponsored the event where she and O'Connell reunited after many years. When the woman saw him—as Koh recalled her teacher's vivid recounting—she said, "You son of a bitch! You left me out on the street for 10 years!" And then a further lesson: "If I were bleeding, you would have taken me in. But since it was my brain, you left me out there."

— Jonathan Rosen, "American Madness." [The Atlantic](#), Mar 2023

23

Treatments for Moral Injury

24

Treating Moral Injury

No validated treatment for MI exists today.

Nearly all MI tx research has been VA-funded.

A focus on cognitive distortions or errors may be harmful (eg, Finlay 2015).

- Adaptive Disclosure
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.
- 12-step programs

In general, therapy should focus on moral emotions:

- Values Clarification and Meaning-Making.
- Appreciating the complexity of moral values.
- Working through betrayal.
- Forgiveness and Self-Compassion.

25

Mentalization

- Moral repair is associated with self-awareness, integration of moral injury into personal schema, and perceived social support (Ferrajao & Oliveira, 2014).
- Some of our child welfare, addiction, and psychiatric patients recover from moral injury through growth of mentalization.
- **Mentalization-Based Therapy** (eg, Peter Fonagy, Patrick Luyten, Jon Allen)

26

Spiritual Treatment of Moral Injury

Chaplains are trained to discuss sins and recovery:

- They recognize distress and offer comfort.
- Their work focuses on recovery, forgiveness, and making amends.

Our patients with moral injury often talked of:
faith, reconciliation, serenity, amends,
good works, repentance, atonement.

Catholic nuns in Ghana seemed very resilient (Haight et al., 2022).

27

Summary

- Moral Injury has moral violation, high stakes, and is severe and lasting.
- MI and PTSD overlap and co-occur but are distinct in significant ways.
- MI has distinct developmental and neural roots.
- MI is determined by both internal and social meaning (culture-bound?).
- MI is rare but occurs in diverse populations.
- Effective treatment changes the meaning of moral injuries, focuses on forgiveness.
- MI in SPMI patients involves real distress, has unique qualities, and deserves your attention.

28