

Moral Injury & Suicide Prevention: Building Moral Resilience and Community Healing in Diverse Montana Populations



Presented By

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VOA

NORTHERN ROCKIES

We serve to harness hope and re-shape futures through a faith-based ministry.

Session Objectives



Define Moral Injury

Understand the definition and impact of moral injury as a complex soul wound.



MI vs. PTSD

Distinguish the key differences, similarities, and treatment approaches.



MI & Suicide

Recognize the critical connection between moral injury and suicide risk.



MI in Diverse Populations

Explore the connection between moral injury and diverse Montana populations,



Moral Injury Stress Continuum and Resilience Strategies

Explain the varieties of moral stress and how to build moral resilience,

Definition

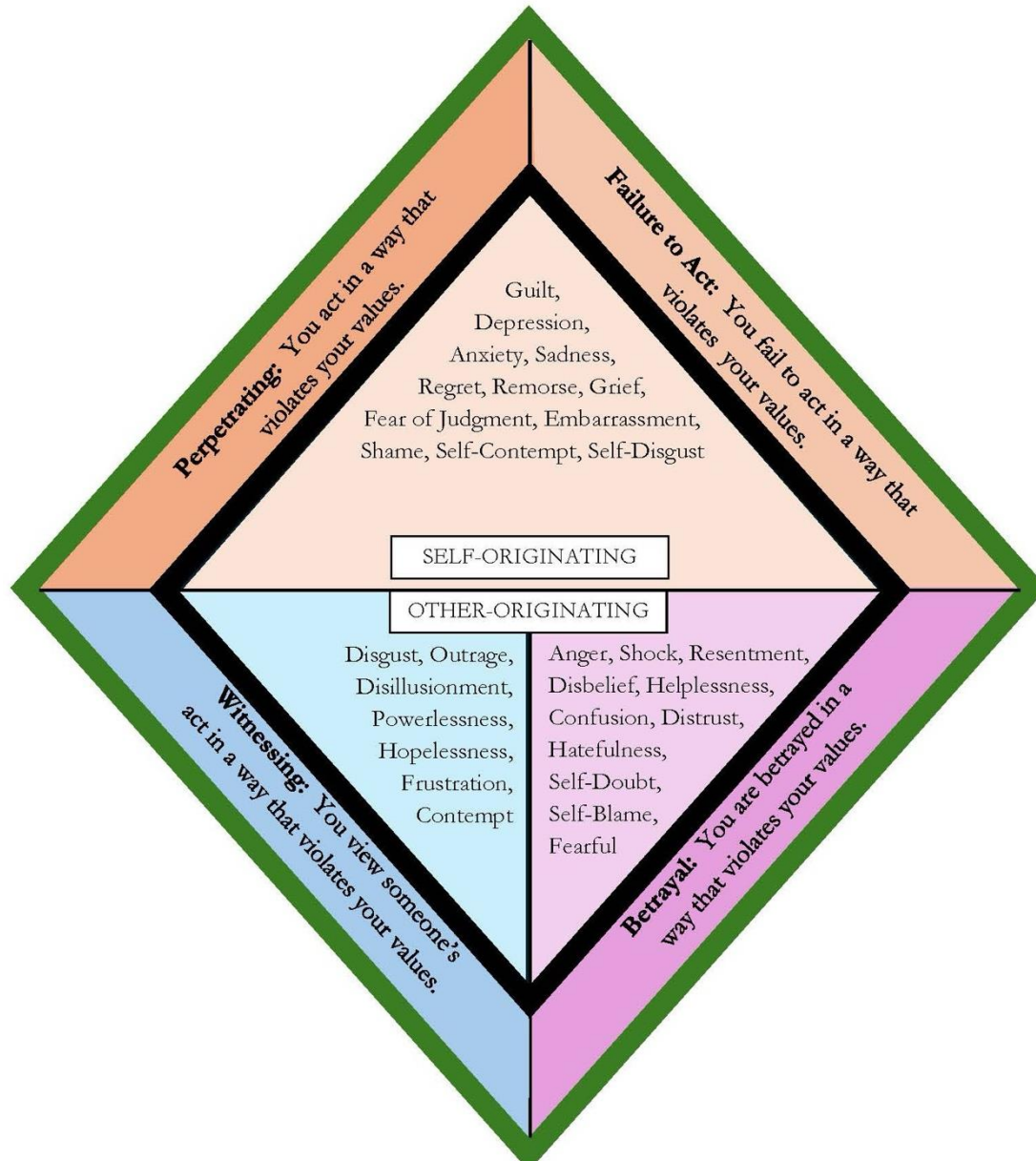


Soul Wound

Moral injury is a complex **soul wound** resulting from perpetrating, failing to act, witnessing, or experiencing betrayal that conflicts with one's deeply held values and moral beliefs.

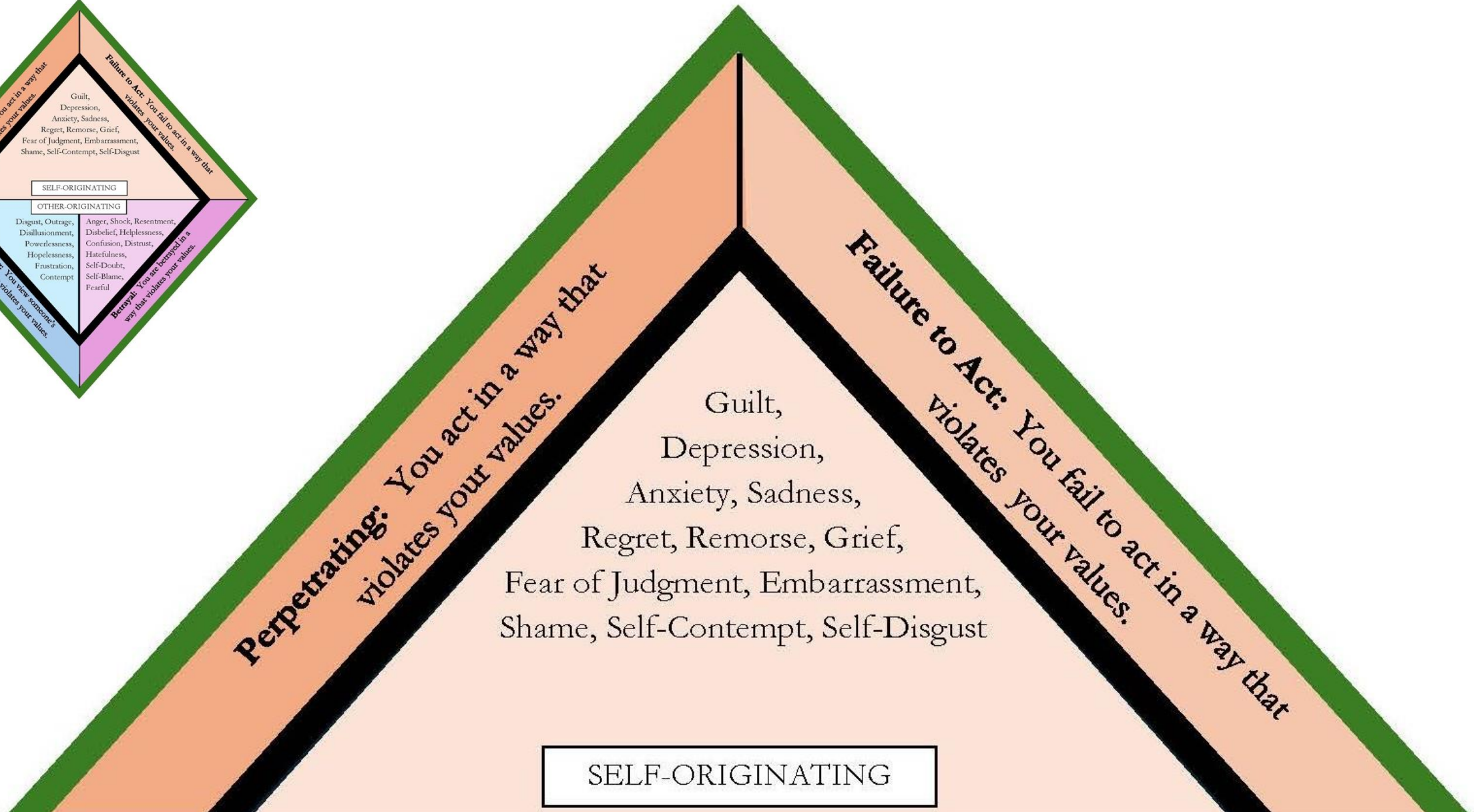
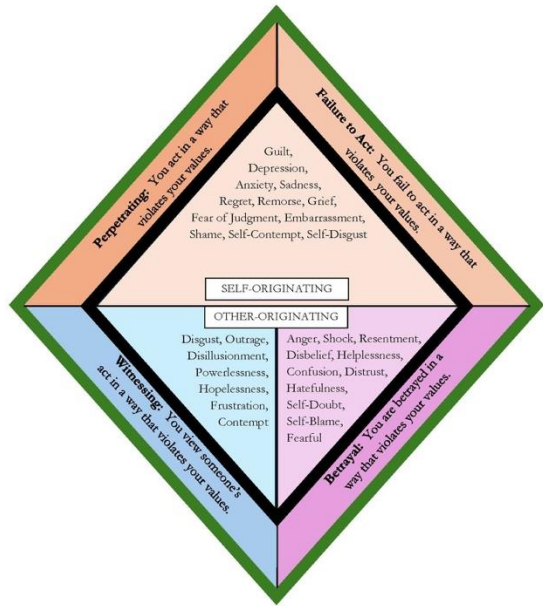
This type of injury can lead to psychological, emotional, spiritual, and relational pain.

Moral Injury Diamond

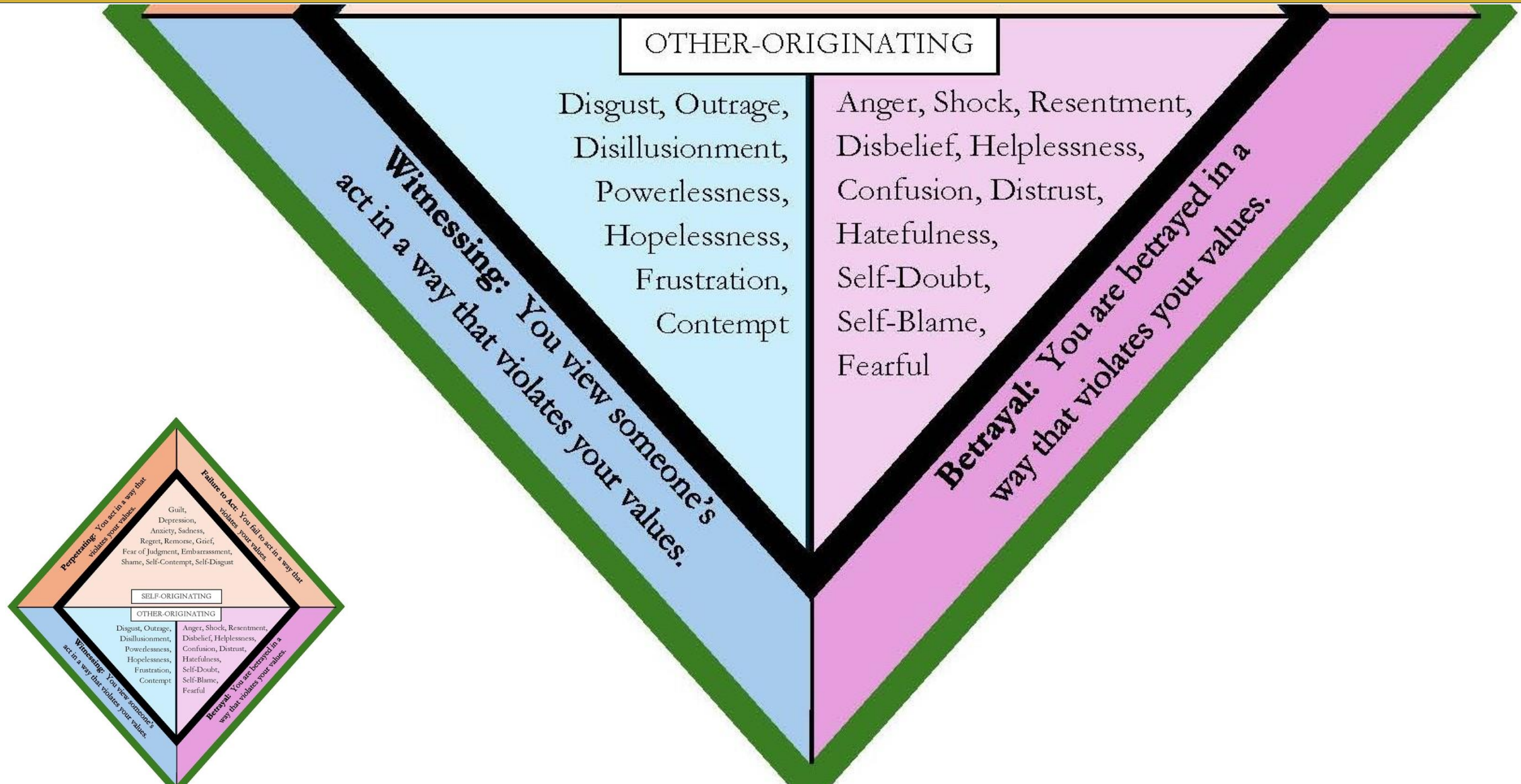


“Moral injury is a complex...
soul wound...”

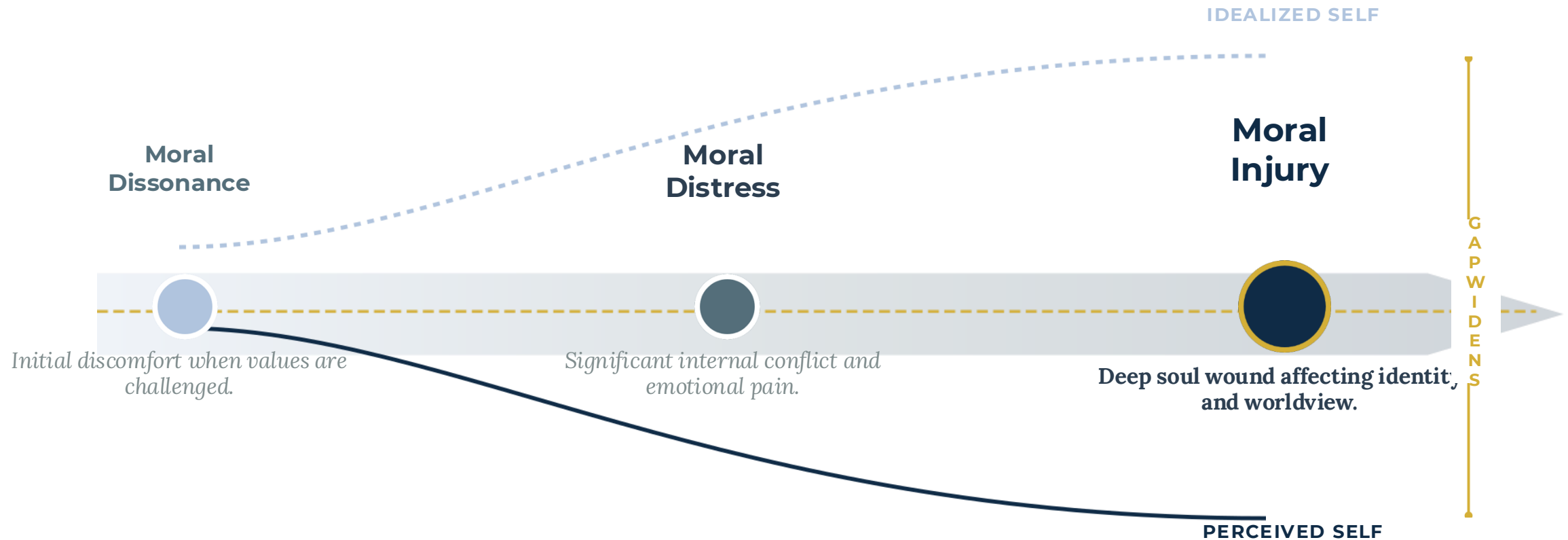
Moral Injury Diamond



Moral Injury Diamond



Development of Moral Injury



When actions, inaction, or betrayal violate core values, the gap between who we think we should be and who we perceive ourselves to be widens, intensifying distress.

Moral Injury Pain

Psychological

Shame
Guilt
Regret
Disgust

Emotional

Grief
Anger
Sadness
Numbness

Spiritual

Crisis of faith
Loss of meaning
Loss of purpose
Spiritual alienation
Anomie

Relational

Isolation
Loss of trust
Abuse/neglect

Behavioral

Withdrawal
Avoidance
Substance misuse
Self-sabotage

Sounds like...

What I've done is unforgivable.

It was my fault.

You can't unsee what I have seen.

They were my responsibility.

I made the decision, and it's all on me.

I should have done something, anything.

I promised to bring them all home but didn't.

They didn't deserve what we did.

We were all following orders.

Why were we even there?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Origin

Begins with exposure to a life-threatening or horrifying event. Often associated with direct experience, witnessing, or learning about traumatic events.

Re-experiencing

- Flashbacks
- Nightmares
- Intrusive thoughts
- Distress at cues

Avoidance

- Avoiding memories
- Avoiding reminders
- Emotional numbness
- Social withdrawal

Cognition & Mood

- Negative beliefs
- Distorted blame
- Detachment
- Inability to feel joy

Arousal & Reactivity

- Hypervigilance
- Startle reflex
- Irritability/Anger
- Sleep problems

PTSD Physiology: Body & Brain

Autonomic Nervous System

PARASYMPATHETIC

Rest & Digest

Pupil Constriction
Stimulate Saliva
Constrict Bronchi
Slow Heart Rate
Stimulate Digestion
Increases Blood Flow



SYMPATHETIC

Fight or Flight

Dilated Pupils
Inhibit Salivation
Relax Bronchi
Increase Heartbeat
Slows Digestion
Reduces Blood Flow
Adrenaline and Glucose Production

The PTSD Brain

Prefrontal Cortex

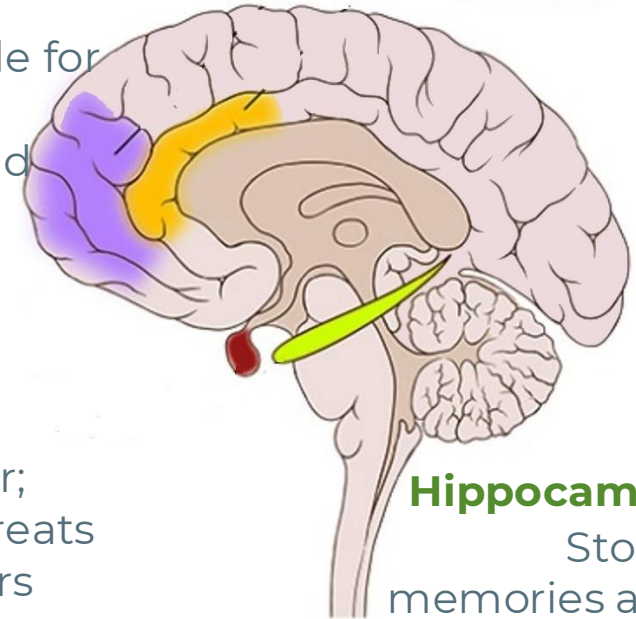
Responsible for decision making and emotional regulation

Amygdala

Fear center; detects threats and triggers fight/flight

Hippocampus

Stores memories and distinguishes past from present



PTSD vs Moral Injury

PTSD

Clinical Disorder (DSM-5)

Trigger: Life-threatening event (fear-based)

Primary Emotions: Fear, Horror, Panic, Paranoia (present AT the event)

Symptoms: Hypervigilance, Startle reflex, Flashbacks

Treatments: EMDR, Prolonged Exposure, CPT

Biology: Changes in amygdala, hippocampus, prefrontal cortex

Similarities

Anxiety

Depression

Anger

Sleep Problems

Nightmares

Intrusive Thoughts

Relationship Issues

Substance Abuse

Suicidality

Moral Injury

Soul Wound (Not a Disorder)

Trigger: Violation of deeply held moral values/beliefs

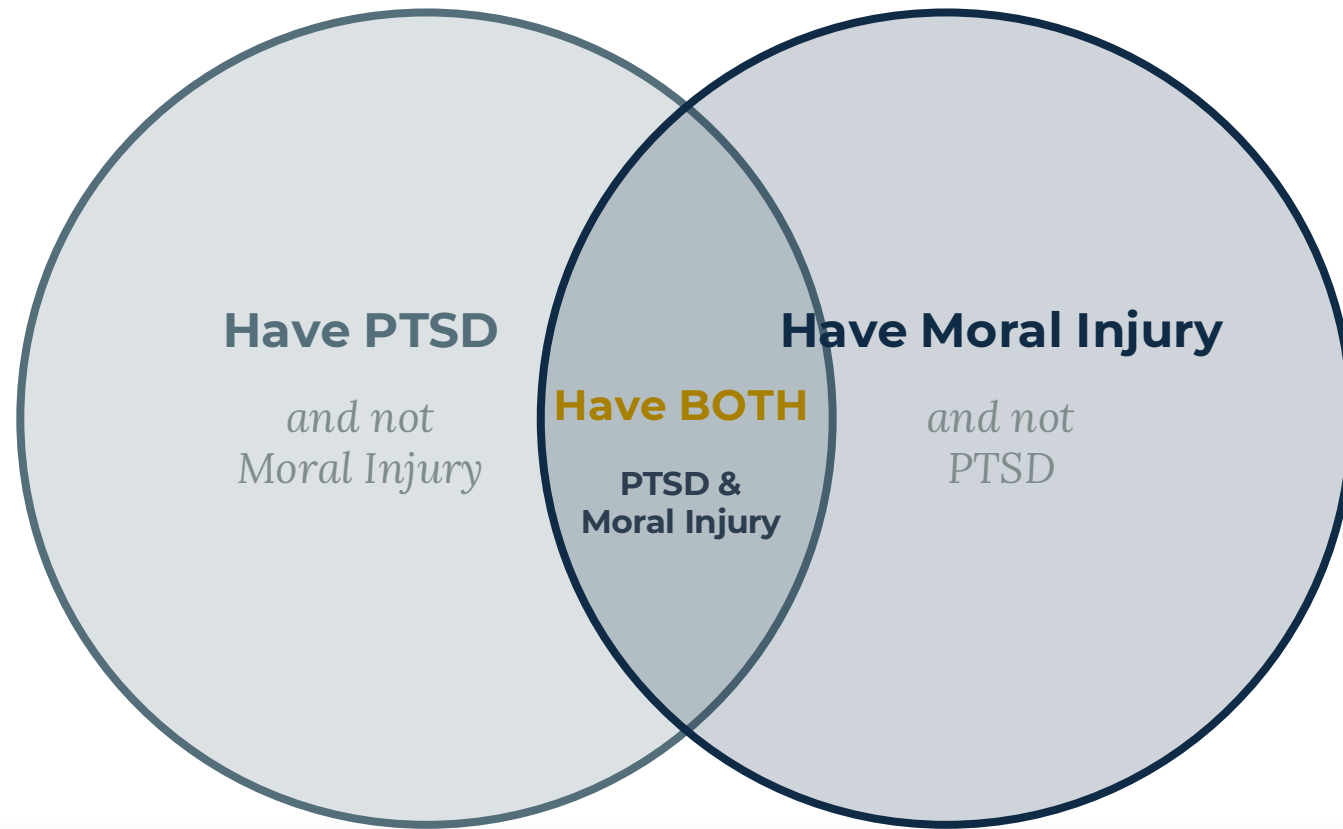
Primary Emotions: Shame, Guilt, Regret, Disgust (strongest AFTER event)

Symptoms: Crisis of faith, Loss of trust, Isolation, Anomie

Healing: Forgiveness, Self-compassion, Grief work

Biology: No specific chemical changes; "heart/soul" wound

Co-occurring or not?



"Unless attended to, moral injury may block the successful treatment of PTSD."

Boscarino JA, Adams RE, Wingate TJ, et al. Impact and Risk of Moral Injury Among Deployed Veterans: Implications for Veterans and Mental Health. *Front Psychiatry*. 2022 Jun 6;13:899084.

Moral Injury and Suicide



An Independent Risk Factor

Moral injury is a significant predictor of suicide risk and attempts among veterans, **distinct from and independent of** the effects of PTSD severity, depression, and substance use.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS



Wisco et al., 2017

Found that moral injury was significantly associated with **suicide attempts** among combat veterans, even after strictly controlling for PTSD symptom severity.



Kelley et al., 2019

Demonstrated that moral injury-based **shame** and **guilt** act as unique drivers of suicidality, separate from fear-based trauma responses.



Jamieson et al., 2023

Recent meta-analysis confirming the robust link between potentially morally injurious events and **suicidal ideation**, highlighting the need for targeted MI screening.

Moral Injury and Sexual trauma

?%

of sexual trauma survivors that
screen positive for "clinically
meaningful" moral injury
symptoms

While population-level prevalence estimates are not yet available, multiple studies show **elevated moral injury symptoms among survivors**, independent of PTSD.



Moral injury is increasingly recognized as a **common and clinically significant outcome** of sexual trauma.

Among female Recent Veteran VHA Users in

2022, those who screened positive for Military Sexual Trauma (MST) had a suicide rate of 18.7 per 100,000 — compared to 12.9 per 100,000 for those with negative screens.

45.3%

Higher rate of suicide
National Veteran Suicide Prevention
Annual Report, December 2025

10x **Sexual assault survivors** are more likely to attempt suicide than those who haven't been sexually assaulted. National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2018). *What puts survivors at increased risk for suicide and how to help.* https://www.nsvrc.org/blog_post/what-puts-survivors-increased-risk-suicide-and-how-help

Moral Injury and Homelessness

60%

of homeless presented with
Moral Injury

Significantly higher than non-homeless
groups

Cameron, Holly (2024). Prevalence and contributing factors towards moral injury within a homeless population. University of Southampton, Doctoral Thesis, 132pp.



According to the Montana Continuum of Care Coalition: 2,263 people experienced homelessness during the 2025 count, up from 2,008 in 2024. **That means, 1,358 unhoused may experience significant moral injury symptoms in Montana.**

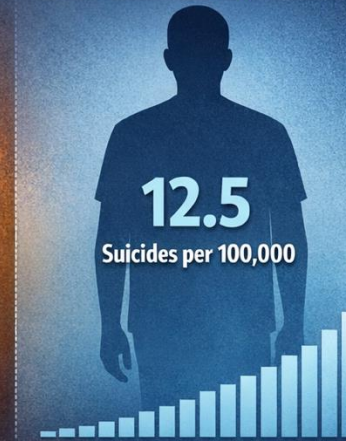
Suicide Rates

Among Homeless vs. General Population

Homeless Population



U.S. General Population



Homeless Suicide Rate: 9 Times the National Average

Source: CDC, 2014; Peate, 2013.

Moral Injury and Veterans

6.5%

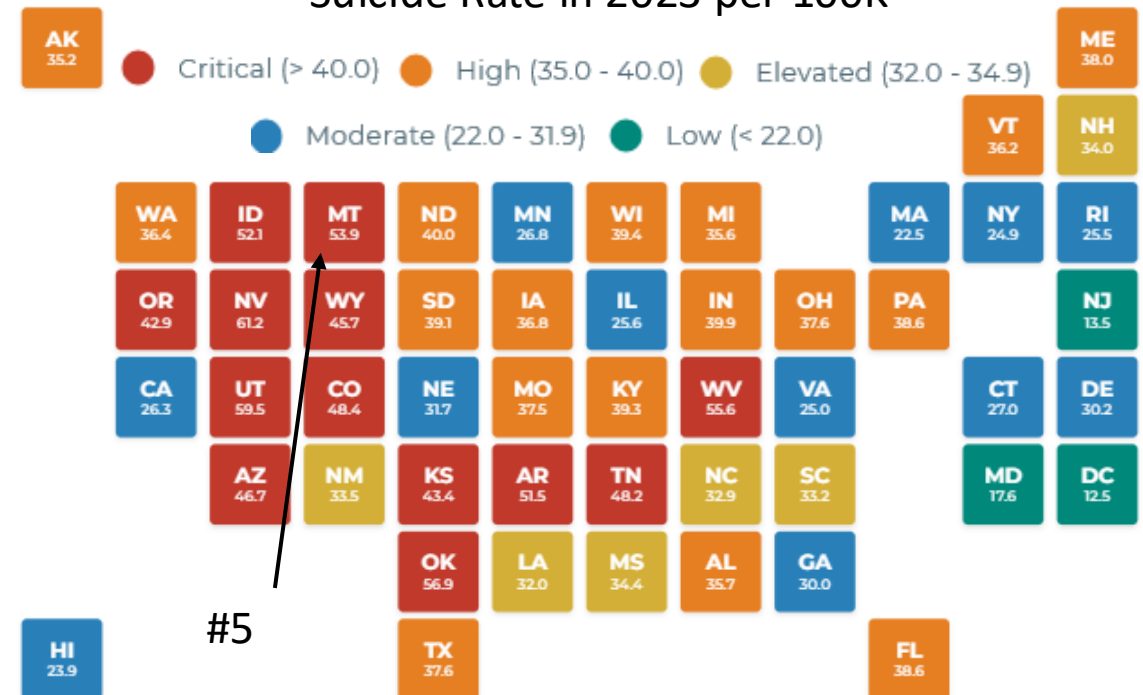
of **combat veterans** screen positive for "clinically meaningful" moral injury symptoms

Maguen S, Griffin BJ, Pietrzak RH, McLean CP, Hamblen JL, Norman SB. Prevalence of Moral Injury in Nationally Representative Samples of Combat Veterans, Healthcare Workers, and First Responders. *J Gen Intern Med.* 2026 Jan;41(2):424-430. doi: 10.1007/s11606-024-09337-x. Epub 2025 Jan 29. PMID: 39881119; PMCID: PMC12894541



According to the Montana Veterans Affairs Division: in 2025, MT had 85,871 veterans. **Potentially, 5,152 veterans with functionally impaired moral injury.**

Suicide Rate in 2023 per 100K



#5

Moral Injury and Healthcare Workers

7.3%

of healthcare workers screen positive for "clinically meaningful" moral injury symptoms

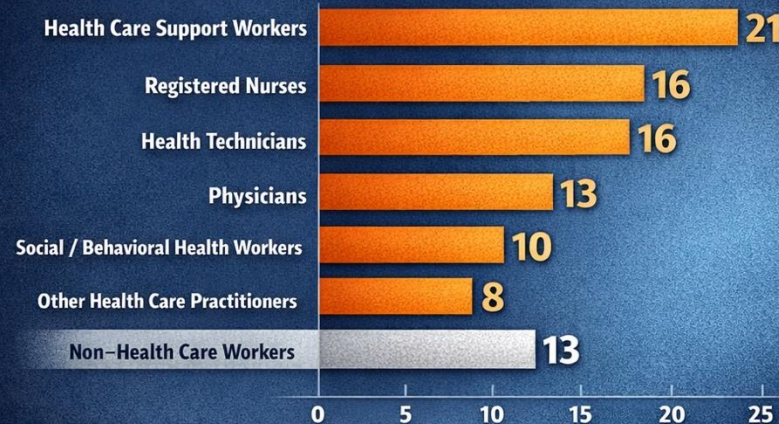
Maguen S, Griffin BJ, Pietrzak RH, McLean CP, Hamblen JL, Norman SB. Prevalence of Moral Injury in Nationally Representative Samples of Combat Veterans, Healthcare Workers, and First Responders. *J Gen Intern Med.* 2026 Jan;41(2):424-430. doi: 10.1007/s11606-024-09337-x. Epub 2025 Jan 29. PMID: 39881119; PMCID: PMC12894541.



According to a 2024-25 Montana Healthcare Workforce report, there are more than 70,000 healthcare workers in Montana. **That means roughly 9,600 healthcare workers may have significant moral injury symptoms.**

Suicide Rates by Occupation in Health Care vs. Non-Health Care Workers

Suicide Deaths per 100,000 Person-Years



Olfson M, Cosgrove CM, Wall MM, Blanco C. Suicide Risks of Health Care Workers in the US. *JAMA.* 2023;330(12):1161-1166. doi:10.1001/jama.2023.15787

Moral Injury and First Responders

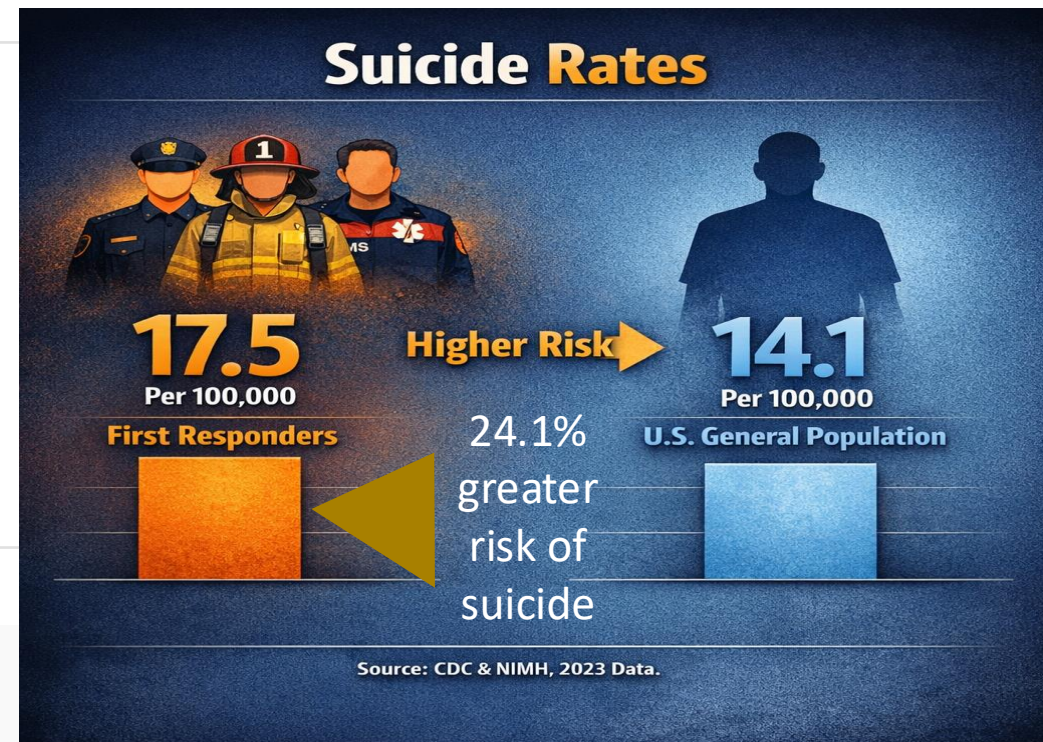
4.1%

of first responders screen positive for "clinically meaningful" moral injury symptoms

Maguen S, Griffin BJ, Pietrzak RH, McLean CP, Hamblen JL, Norman SB. Prevalence of Moral Injury in Nationally Representative Samples of Combat Veterans, Healthcare Workers, and First Responders. *J Gen Intern Med.* 2026 Jan;41(2):424-430. doi: 10.1007/s11606-024-09337-x. Epub 2025 Jan 29. PMID: 39881119; PMCID: PMC12894541.



Montana has approximately 18,500 first responders. **That means 760 first responders may have significant moral injury.**



Moral Injury and American Indians

?%

American Indians screen positive for "clinically meaningful" moral injury symptoms

- Highest per capita of veterans in any racial group
 - Historical trauma
 - Cultural disruption
- Systemic and institutional betrayal

Yellow Horse Brave Heart, M. (2003). Historical trauma response among Natives and its relationship with substance abuse: A Lakota illustration. *Journal of Psychoactive Drug*, 35, 7-13.



22% of American Indians have PTSD*. 30-50% of people with PTSD have moral injury. Conservatively, **That means 5,150 American Indians in Montana may have significant moral injury.**

Suicide Rates: Montana vs U.S.

22.1

Montana
American Indian /
Alaska Native

Deaths per 100,000

14.2

U.S. National
Average

Deaths per 100,000

Highest suicide rate of any racial or ethnic group in the United States

Moral Stress Continuum



Building Moral Resiliency

Moral Agency

The capacity to make ethical choices and take responsibility for one's actions, even under pressure. Moral agency empowers individuals to act in alignment with their values and resist compromising their integrity.

Meaning-Making

The process of finding purpose and significance through moral experiences. By reframing hardship and connecting it to deeply held values, individuals can transform suffering into personal growth and renewed direction.

Mercy

The practice of extending compassion and forgiveness to oneself and others. Mercy helps release the burden of guilt, shame, and resentment, opening the door to healing and restoration of the soul.

Hoover, T. D., & Metz, G. A. S. (2024). What Comes after Moral Injury?—Considerations of Post-Traumatic Growth. *Trauma Care*, 4(3), 219-228. <https://doi.org/10.3390/traumacare4030020>

Evans, W. R., Smigelsky, M. A., Frankfurt, S. B., Antal, C. J., Yeomans, P. D., Check, C., & Bhatt-Mackin, S. M. (2023). *Emerging interventions for moral injury: Expanding pathways to moral healing. Current Treatment Options in Psychiatry*, 10(4), 431–445. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40501-023-00303-8>

Moral Agency

Moral Stress Shows Up As:

Moral Confusion:

I don't know what the right thing is.

Moral Challenge:

I know the right thing, but it's hard to do.

Moral Temptation:

I know the right thing, but the wrong thing is tempting.

Moral Dilemma:

Every option violates a core value.

What Strengthens Moral Resilience?

Moral COMPASS → Less Confusion

Having clear values and internalized ethics guides decisions and prevents moral confusion. This preserves personal integrity under stress, reducing the struggles of disorientation.

Moral COURAGE → Less Guilt

Acting despite fear or pressure prevents later remorse. Moral courage in the moment means fewer moral compromises, which lowers lasting guilt and builds confidence for future challenges.

Moral CHARACTER → Less Shame

Habitually aligning actions with core values (doing the right thing even when unobserved) creates a stable moral identity. This consistency builds resistance to temptation and prevents the dissonance that can fracture one's sense of self during crises.

Moral CONTEMPLATION → Less Angst

Careful moral reasoning through dilemmas helps make sense of moral adversity. It enables the individual to find meaning or the “least bad” option, aiding psychological recovery and learning rather than moral injury.

Moral Agency: Building Resiliency

Before moral injury occurs build these skills and beliefs....

Moral Compass — TRUE NORTH

- N**otice the tension
- O**rient toward purpose
- R**eflect on values
- T**rust your conscience
- H**old onto grace

Moral Courage — CODE

- C**ourage to be moral requires:
- O**bligations to honor
- D**anger management
- E**xpression and action

Moral Character — PACT

- P**ractice the pause and visualize consequences
- A**sk how giving in impacts relationships and self-respect
- C**ommit to action that aligns with values
- T**urn to people with like values for support

Moral Contemplation — CAP

- C**onsider code of ethics
- A**ppeal to dominant value
- P**onder ethically

Meaning-Making

Trying to understand, interpret, and integrate a difficult experience into one's life story and beliefs.

1. Disruption

Core values are violated, creating a fracture between what one believed and what was experienced. This disruption triggers the need to reconcile the gap.

2. Appraisal

Negative self-judgments take hold: "I am a bad person." "I can't trust others." "God should have done something." These appraisals deepen the wound. Positive appraisals lead to recovery.

3. Meaning-Making Efforts

Reflecting on the disruption, beliefs, and values. Reframing toward the positive and identifying lessons, purpose, and opportunities for growth.

4. Meaning Made

"I did something I shouldn't have, but that doesn't define me." "I was betrayed and will use that to help others." "God doesn't prevent the storm but rather calms me in the storm to get through it."

Meaning-Making: Building Resiliency

Before moral injury occurs build these skills and beliefs....

1. Reframing

- Flexible and open-minded.
- Is there a positive way of looking at this?
- What's the bigger picture?
- What advice would I give to someone else in this situation?

2. Finding Purpose and Growth

- Mindset shift from “Why did this happen?” → “What will I do with this?”
- Turn Pain into Purpose
 - What does this teach me about what matters most?
 - What good can come from my pain that helps others?
 - How can I grow into a better human?

• PTG Principles

- What inner strengths have I experienced I didn't know about?
- Is there a new path or possibilities emerging that I haven't considered before?
- How can I connect with loved ones in more meaningful ways?
- How can I appreciate life more deeply?
- What spiritual changes might move me forward?

Mercy

“Mercy” literally means showing compassionate forgiveness or leniency towards someone.

Self-Forgiveness

Practicing compassion toward oneself by acknowledging mistakes without allowing them to define personal identity. Self-forgiveness breaks the cycle of shame and opens the path to healing.

De Souza Ferreira, Mario S., "Self-Forgiveness as a Moderator Between Moral Injury and Posttraumatic Growth Among Veterans" (2024). *Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies*. 15490.
<https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations/15490>

Other-Forgiveness

Extending compassion to those who caused harm or failed to act. Releasing resentment toward others frees the individual from the weight of bitterness and restores relational trust.

The International Journal of Indian Psychology ISSN 2348-5396 (Online) | ISSN: 2349-3429 (Print) Volume 13, Issue 1, January- March, 2025 DIP: 18.01.231.20251301, DOI: 10.25215/1301.231 <https://www.ijip.in>

God's Forgiveness

Rebuilding a positive image of God and spiritual connection. Reconciling faith after moral injury restores meaning, purpose, and a sense of divine compassion rather than judgment.

Nguyen, T. T. (2014). *Images of God, resilience and the imaginary: A study among Vietnamese immigrants who have experienced loss* [Doctoral dissertation, Saint Paul University]. Université Saint-Paul. [ruor.uottawa.ca]

Mercy: Building Resiliency

Before moral injury occurs build these skills and beliefs....

Self-Forgiveness

- Affirmations
- Hold Both

Other-Forgiveness

- Forgiveness Facts
- Name the Cost

God's Forgiveness

- Beliefs Deconstruction / Reconstruction
- Scriptural Affirmations / Memorization

Moral Stress Continuum

Ready

- Hopeful
- Trust in Higher Power
- Purpose Oriented
- Connected with Community
- Value-Based Decision Making
- Emotionally Stable
- Peace
- Self-Worth

Reacting

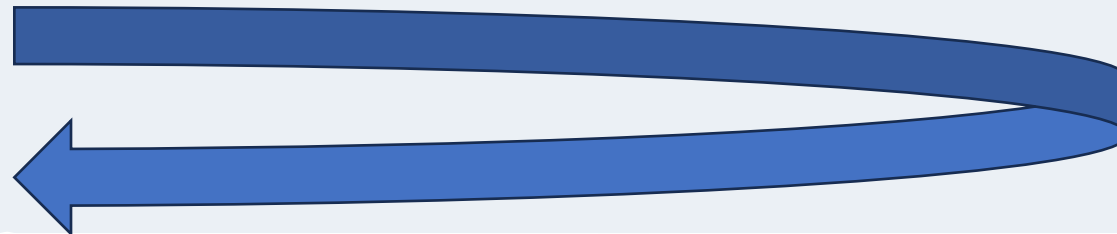
- Confusion
- Questioning
- Purpose Disoriented
- Interpersonal Conflict and Distancing
- Disturbance in Value-Based Decision Making
- Slight Emotional Distress

Rattled

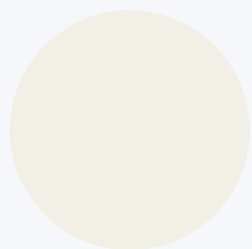
- Angst
- Diminished Sense of Hope
- Doubt
- Dissolving of Purpose
- Prolonged Conflict and Withdrawal
- Emotionally Distressed

Riven

- Agitated
- Irreconcilable Despair
- Alienation
- Loss of Purpose
- Estranged Relationships
- Anomie
- Disconnect from Moral Compass
- Self-Harming Behaviors
- Anguish



Questions?



Contact Information

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