

What is Moral Injury?

Imagine being a soldier, and in a critical situation being ordered to do an unconscionable act of violence from a superior you trusted and looked up to. Ever since, you now daily question the fundamentals of right and wrong, and basic structures of the world you thought were dependable. You don't know who or what you can believe or trust. You feel alone in a hellish nightmare.

The phenomenon described above is known as "moral injury" or sometimes, "spiritual injury" or "inner conflict." It frequently is caused when one is an immediate victim of, participant in, or even witness to great trauma or abuse of one's deeply held moral convictions, especially if perpetrated by a respected authority or superior. Moral injuries are most often suffered by combat veterans, first responders, women who had abortions, emergency medical staff, pilots, and victims and witnesses of domestic abuse. Left untreated, they can be like a wound that continues to bleed, ultimately infecting the entire person, and can lead to death, often by suicide. You very well may know someone like this in your congregation. That is why this topic is included here, as the NID Life Task Force's monthly "Life issue."

The concept of "moral injury" has been noted for centuries and is evidenced multiple times in the Bible itself. In recent years the U.S. military, psychologists, and physicians after gaining new insights have termed it as such. They likewise have determined better ways for treating it. But they themselves have not been completely able, at least so thoroughly. Why not? These cannot offer forgiveness with a firm basis, as well as a firm moral foundation, reconciliation, or renewal.... which only Christ's Church can. Therefore, this is a great opportunity for us to serve!

Conscience is at the nexus of moral injury. Albeit potentially misinformed, to a person's peril, conscience is always to be obeyed. But sometimes a conscience might be overridden or unwilfully suppressed, especially in a sudden crisis or vital situation. Unlike a mortal sin, where one willingly violates God's Law and one's conscience, in moral injury a person is complicit with or forced into actions against one's will and conscience. With mortal sin a person damages their conscience and expels the Holy Spirit, being unconscious of having done such. In a moral injury, a person's conscience has been damaged, and they likely feel God has abandoned them.

Similar to Post Traumatic Stress (PTS), and with some overlapping symptoms, such as rage, anxiety, insomnia, night terrors, depression, and substance abuse, moral injury also involves a shattering of one's sense of goodness and trust. It is additionally characterized by guilt, shame, humiliation, grief, sadness, feeling betrayed, alienation and/or despair. PTS is a physical phenomenon, where parts of the brain have actually shrunk. Moral injury is more spiritually centered, though no less real and diagnosable. And it, too, can have physical and neurologically-evident consequences. As one's traumatic memories are deeply set in, this causes the rational part of the brain to be inhibited by the emotional parts, which in turn leads to strain on the body.

God's word bears witness to many incidents of moral injuries, especially in the Old Testament. Israel's warriors had to undergo, as the Lord commanded, a seven day "purification" after battle. One of the Lord's purposes in this ceremonial law very well may have been to help soldiers recover from moral injury and re-assimilate to civilian life. Psalms, such as 7, 17, 73, 74 among other passages, especially those expressing lament, relate the thoughts and feelings of one who has endured moral injury, and/or speak of hope and help in the Lord for this. All find their basis and fulfillment in our Lord Jesus' Passion, death, and resurrection, as He was wounded and forsaken on our behalf.

A moral injury sufferer may feel unforgivable or doubt God's love and goodness. Reading Scripture and psalms such as those mentioned above can lead a moral injury sufferer to renewed faith and understanding. Private Confession and Absolution can be of immense benefit in ministering, and "deep listening" is critical for healing. Those ministering should be sure to ask respectful, appropriate, compassionate questions that help the sufferer talk out their experiences without deepening their injury. It is important to do so in a non-judgmental manner, while acknowledging good and evil for what it is.

To learn more on moral injury, ministering to those who have it, or to get help, search for books by authors Johnathan Shay or Elizabeth Sherman among others, or go to websites www.va.gov , www.vfw.gov , www.honoringthecode.com , www.militaryoutreachusa.org , www.heroescare.org.

LCMS–affiliated resources include a new book for study by Kristin Vargas, *How Long, O Lord?* (CPH 2018); Chaplain Johnathan Shaw’s presentation at Concordia Theological Seminary (video) https://video.ctsfw.edu/media/Moral+Warriors++A+Contradiction+in+TermsF/1_suzmw31b/86967941; and websites www.lutheranchurchcharities.org/kare9-about.html , and www.lcms.org/ministry-to-the-armed-forces/operation-barnabas.

Sources for this article:

Palmer, Joseph, *They Don’t Receive Purple Hearts*, Northbrook, IL: Military Outreach USA, 2015.
Vargas, Kristin, *How Long, O Lord: Hope and Help When You Have Been Deeply Hurt*, St. Louis: CPH, 2018.