



# Moral Injury and Moral Healing in Military Veterans

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# Agenda

- Definitions and Distinctions
- Conceptual Frameworks
- Choose Treatments and Targets
  - Moral injury, PTSD, grief/loss, etc.
- Assessments
  - PMIE exposure and moral injury
- Interventions
  - Existing and emerging
- Q&A

# Potentially Morally Injurious Events

- A betrayal of **what is right** by someone in authority or one's self in a *high stakes* situation (Shay, 1994, 2014).
- "...perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress **deeply held moral beliefs**..." (Litz et al., 2009, p. 697).
- "...bearing witness to perceived **immoral acts**, failure to stop such actions, or perpetration of immoral acts, in particular actions that are inhumane, cruel, depraved, or violent, bringing about pain, suffering, or death of others" (Drescher et al., 2011, p. 9).
- "...a situation occurring in a *high-stakes* environment where an individual perceives that an important **moral value** has been violated by the actions of self or others" (Farnsworth, Drescher, Evans, & Walser, 2017, p. 392).
- **Next Step**: Clarifying the scope of potentially morally injurious events.

# Moral Pain

- "...the experience of dysphoric moral emotions and cognitions (e.g., self-condemnation) in response to a morally injurious event" (Farnsworth et al., 2017, p. 392).
- Moral pain is:
  - Natural
  - Healthy/Adaptive
  - Enhancing
  - An indicator of an intact moral compass

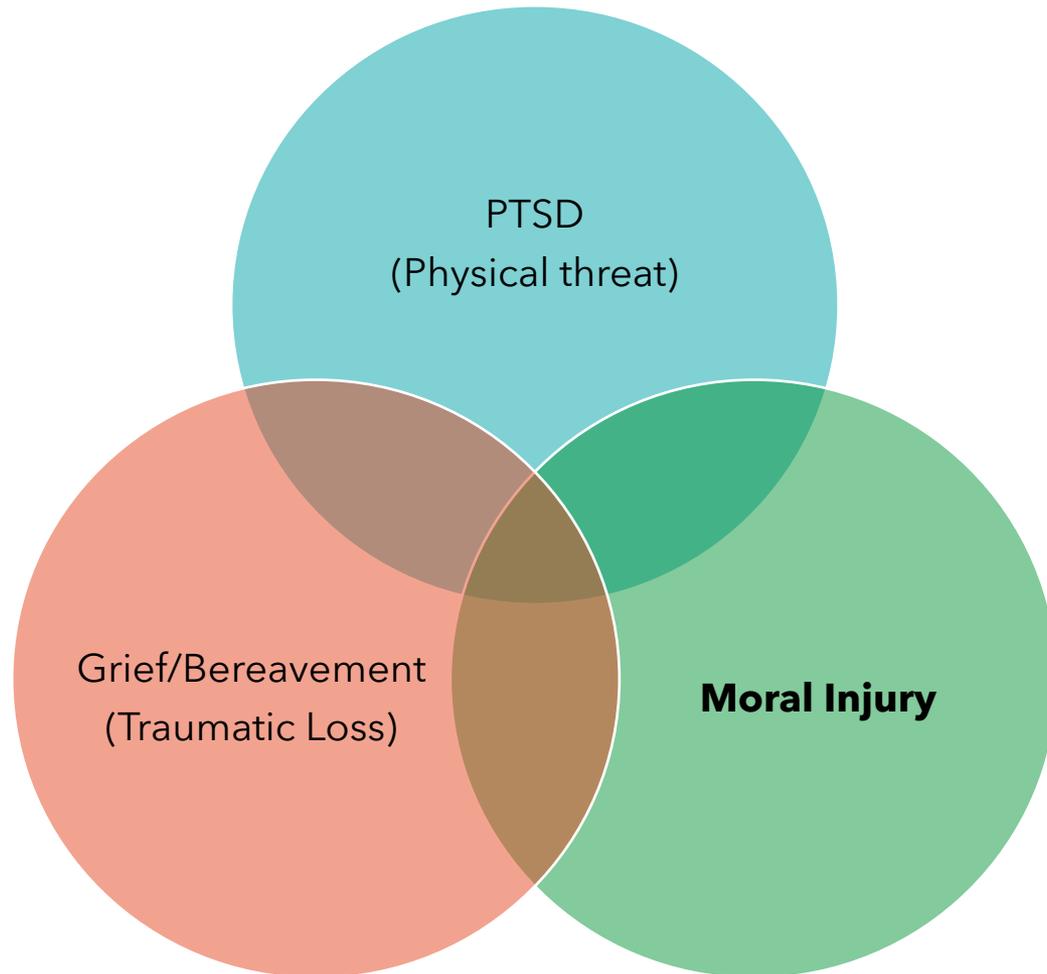
# Moral Injury

- "...the lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and social impact of [exposure to PMIEs]." (Litz et al., 2009, p. 697)
- A trauma syndrome including psychological, existential, behavioral, and interpersonal issues (Jinkerson, 2011)
  - Core symptoms include guilt, shame, spiritual/existential conflict, loss of trust
- "...expanded social, psychological, and spiritual suffering stemming from costly or unworkable attempts to manage, control, or cope with the experience of moral pain." (Farnsworth et al., 2017, p. 392).
- Associated with PTSD, depression, anxiety, substance use, suicide (see Griffin et al., 2019)

# Conceptualizing Moral Injury

- Syndromal (Jinkerson, 2011; Litz et al., 2009)
- Psycho-spiritual development (Harris et al., 2015)
- Stress injury (literal wound; Nash, 2007, 2019)
- Heuristic continuum (Litz & Kerig, 2019)
- Social functional (Farnsworth et al., 2014, 2017, 2019)
- *The question remains an empirical one*

# Choosing Treatment Targets



# Why Target/Tailor Interventions?

- Neurobiology of PTSD appears to differ based on trauma type (danger, non-danger; Boccia et al., 2016; Ramage et al., 2016)
- Moral injury and PTSD have distinct neural underpinnings and subtypes (perpetration, betrayal) of morally injurious events are different in neural responses (Sun et al., 2018).
- Behaviors driving distress have different functions across distinct experiences
  - Avoidance, Avoidance, & Avoidance

# Assessments of MI & MIE exposure

- Moral Injury Events Scale (Nash et al., 2013)
- Moral Injury Questionnaire (Currier et al., 2015)
- Moral Injury Symptom Scale (Koenig et al., 2017)
- Expressions of Moral Injury Scale (Currier et al., 2017)
  
- Upcoming:
  - Moral Injury Outcomes Scale (Litz Consortium)
  - Expanded MIES & MIQ (Frankfurt)
  - Non-military adaptations of EMIS, MIES, and MISS

# EMIS-M (Currier et al., 2017)

Final items	Gen.	F1	F2	IECV
<b>Factor 1: Self-directed moral injury</b>				
1. I am ashamed of myself because of things that I did/saw during my military service.	.64***	.30***	–	.83
4. Because of things that I did/saw in the military, I doubt my ability to make moral decisions.	.61***	.62***	–	.49
5. In order to punish myself for things that I did/saw in the military, I often neglect my health and safety.	.60***	.59***	–	.51
7. I feel guilt about things that happened during my military service that cannot be excused.	.74***	.33***	–	.83
8. Because of things that I did/saw in the military, I am no longer worthy of being loved.	.61***	.62***	–	.49
11. I sometimes feel so bad about things that I did/saw in the military that I hide or withdraw from others.	.73***	.50***	–	.42
12. Because of things that I did/saw in the military, I sabotage my best efforts to achieve my goals in life.	.68***	.50***	–	.65
14. I am an unforgivable person because of things that I did/saw in the military.	.61***	.49***	–	.60
16. I sometimes lash out at others because I feel bad about things I did/saw in the military.	.73***	.43***	–	.75
<b>Factor 2: Other-directed moral injury</b>				
2. I feel anger over being betrayed by someone who I had trusted while I was in the military.	.58***	–	.46***	.61
3. My military experiences have taught me that it is only a matter of time before people will betray my trust.	.59***	–	.46***	.63
6. I sometimes enjoy thinking about having revenge on persons who wronged me in the military.	.49***	–	.56***	.44
9. My military experiences have caused me to seriously doubt the motives of people in authority.	.72***	–	.33**	.83
10. The moral failures that I witnessed during my military service have left a bad taste in my mouth.	.83***	–	.16	.96
13. No matter how much time passes, I resent people who betrayed my trust during my military service.	.67***	–	.56***	.59
15. Things I saw/did in the military have caused me at times to lose faith in the basic goodness of humanity.	.77***	–	.18	.95
17. When I look back on my military service, I feel disgusted by things that other people did.	.83***	–	.05	.99

# Interventions that (may) Facilitate Moral Healing



Prolonged Exposure (Evans et al., in press; Held et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2013)



Cognitive Processing Therapy (Koenig et al., 2017; Wachen et al., 2020)



Adaptive Disclosure (Gray et al., 2012; Litz et al., 2016)



Impact of Killing (Burkman et al., 2021; Maguen et al., 2017)



Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (Borges, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Farnsworth et al., 2017)



Trauma Informed Guilt Reduction (Capone et al., 2020)



Spiritual & Pastoral Care (Harris et al., 2011; Kopacz et al., 2017)



Integrated Care (Antal et al., 2019, Cenkner et al., 2020; Smigelsky et al., 2020)

# Traditional CBT Interventions

Look for cognitive errors  
(e.g., hindsight bias, oversimplification)

Restructure distorted cognitions leading to shame and isolation

“Right size” exaggerated guilt by evaluating responsibility distribution

Incorporate omitted information  
(e.g., context) into understanding of event

Engage in relaxing, pleasurable, or meaningful activities

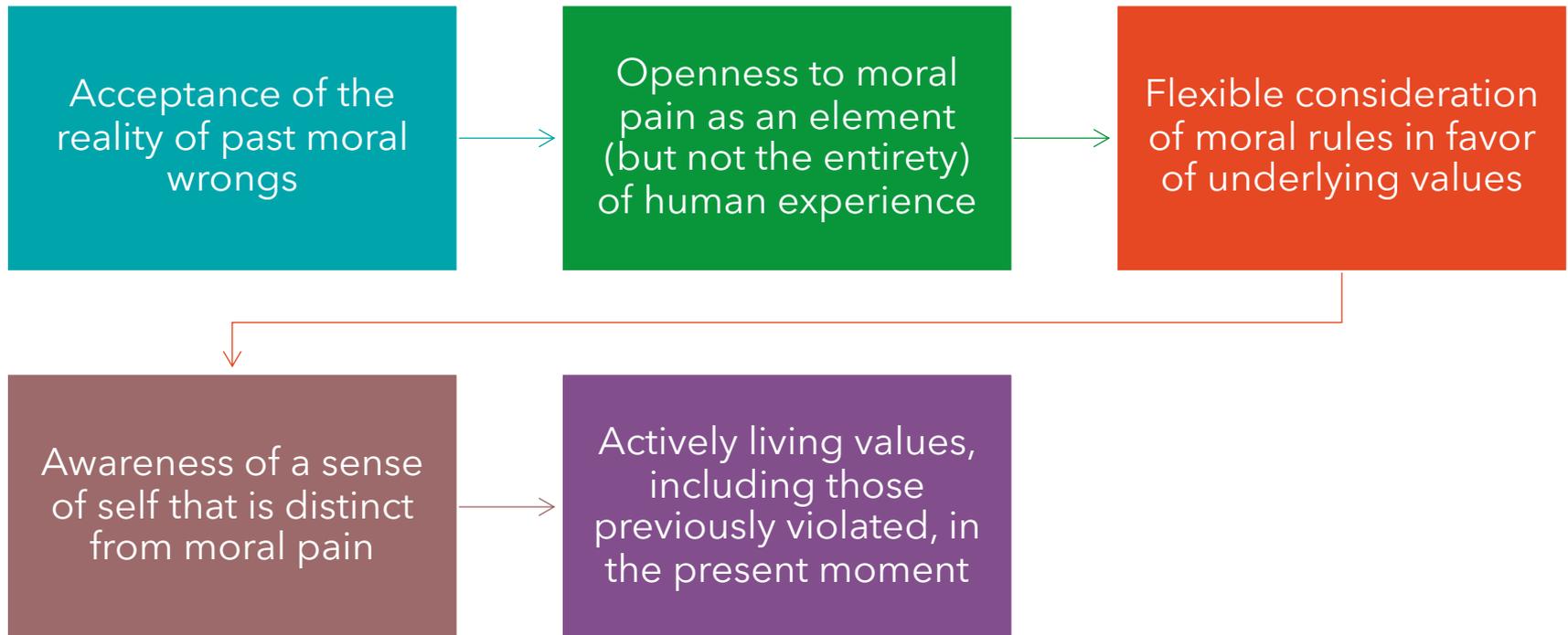
Exposure targeting reduction of maladaptive behaviors  
(often via extinction)

If the distress can be alleviated by contextualizing, clarifying, or changing distorted beliefs, GREAT! But...

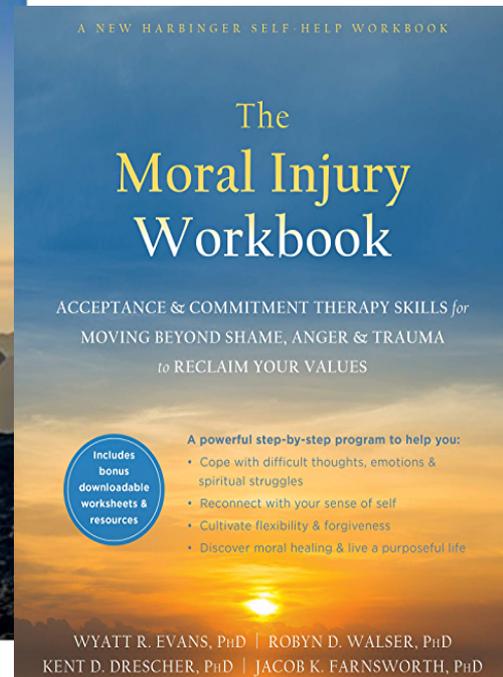
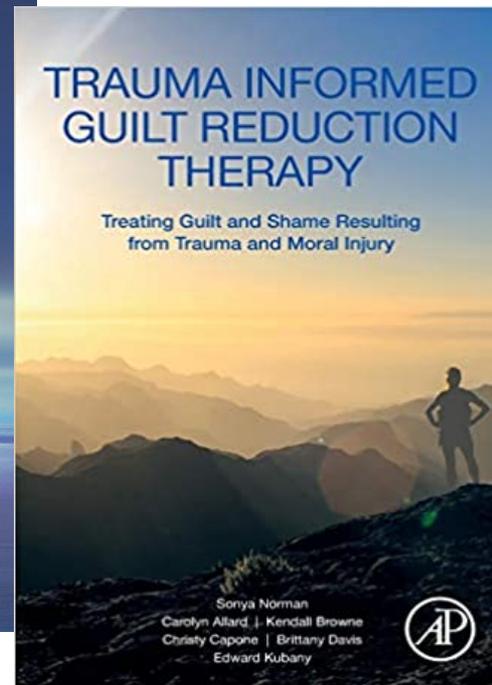
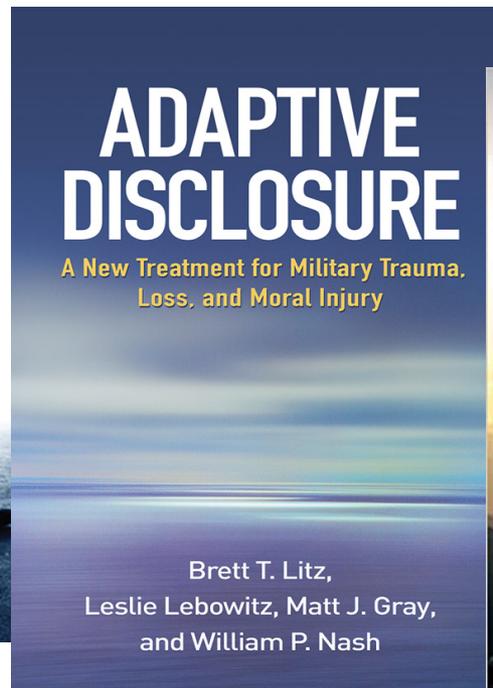
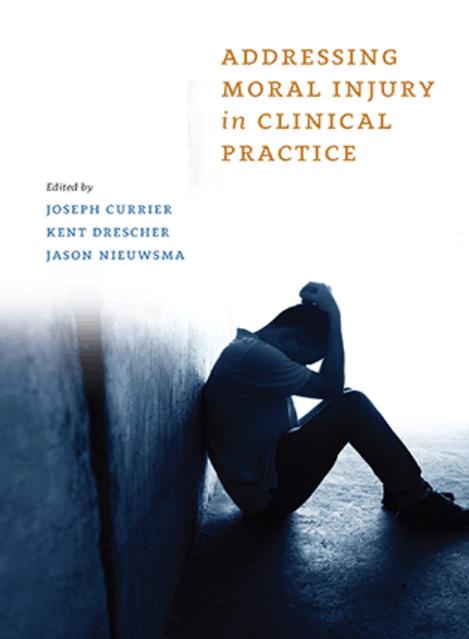
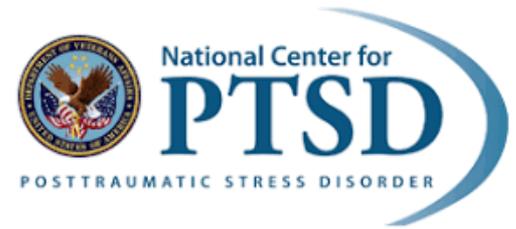
# Therapeutic Stance

- Even with the presence of evidence to the contrary, patients may firmly experience their moral judgments as being appropriate (Farnsworth et al., 2017)
- Ill-targeted attempts to restructure or reduce perceptions of culpability may be perceived as an affront to personal values, potentially damaging the provider's perceived credibility (Gray et al., 2011)
- May also be interpreted as an attempt to minimize or "launder" the patient's experience of moral pain (Singer, 2004)
- Gentle exploration → compassionate challenging → **willingness to sit with moral pain**

# Psychological Flexibility



# Resources\*



# Questions! Answers?

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