



FIVE EYES
MHRIC

A MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH AND INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE IN MILITARY, VETERAN AND FAMILY MENTAL HEALTH

Plain language summary

TOWARDS BETTER OUTCOMES: STRATEGIES TO PREVENT AND ADDRESS MORAL INJURY AMONG MILITARY PERSONNEL

THE ISSUE

When military personnel face moral or ethical dilemmas through high-stakes events that clash with their sense of right and wrong, they are at risk of a lasting impact on their mental well-being. This lasting harm is known as moral injury and it can affect people psychologically, socially, and spiritually. In the short-term, these events lead to moral distress.

The idea of moral injury is not new, but it's receiving greater attention from researchers and clinicians who are looking at the link between moral injury and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among active military personnel and veterans. To date, research has looked at the causes and symptoms of moral injury. It's now time to explore prevention and early intervention strategies that will make a difference in the mental health of military personnel and other occupational groups at risk from moral injury.

Moral injury can occur in three ways: commission, omission, or betrayal by a trusted person or organization in a high-stakes situation. Commission is when the person or another commits an act that goes against their moral code. Omission is when steps are not taken in a situation that violates the person's sense of right and wrong. For example, some healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic may have suffered moral injury from dealing with life-and-death decisions around assigning limited respirators to patients in distress.

WHY IT MATTERS

Better strategies to prevent moral injury and to intervene earlier can lead to better outcomes for military personnel. With the right support processes in place, related problems such as substance misuse, mental disorders, family breakdowns, and suicide are likely to be greatly reduced.

Common symptoms of moral injury can include long-term feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and disgust. People living with the weight of a moral injury may feel unworthy and lose their faith, sense of trust in others, and belief in a just world. Further research is needed in military populations to understand the relationship between moral injury and PTSD, depression, suicide, and substance use disorders.

WHY WE DID THIS RESEARCH

Our research aimed to provide guidance on the design, implementation, and evaluation of early moral injury interventions in the military. We wanted to learn more about military leaders and their role, training, discussions about moral dilemmas, and strategies to prevent moral injury.

WHAT WE DID

We focused on recent research that has been published internationally. The research team of military and veteran mental health experts took an approach that combined:

- current research on moral injury
- best practice approaches in the field of psychological resilience
- principles of effective implementation and evaluation

The Five Eyes Mental Health Research and Innovation Collaborative is composed of thought leaders from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States. These experts conduct research and provide advice to governments on mental health issues. Our shared goal is to improve mental health outcomes for past and present military personnel and their families.

We looked at training in military ethical practice. We also examined the role leaders play in creating cohesive teams and promoting open discussions on the moral and ethical challenges that military personnel face.

WHAT WE FOUND

Prevention of Moral Injury

Integrate moral issues into military leadership training and mission command

Military leaders need to be equipped to prepare their teams for operational moral dilemmas. This starts with understanding aspects of a mission that are morally challenging and could threaten the mental health of members. Leaders should build strong team morale and cohesion, support open discussions, and refer members to mental health supports if needed.

Enhance military ethics training with complex scenarios

Military ethics training should include situations that are complex, unclear, and lack enough information to make a sound ethical decision. Values-based approaches to ethics training can prepare personnel for complex situations where rules and laws are unclear or ambiguous.

Prepare personnel for possible moral dilemmas prior to deployment

Resilience and pre-deployment training should explore the moral issues around traumatic events. This means integrating ethics into resilience training offered before deployment, training members to:

- postpone judgment and examine personal values in relation to events
- share thoughts on moral choices, particularly those they are unsure about
- link their own experience to ethics theory so that moral struggles are not seen as personal but understood within the context of culture and social values

Interventions To Manage Moral Injury

Timing of early intervention is critical

Leaders should be proactive and initiate difficult conversations about potentially harmful moral situations before a mission. Waiting for a problem to arise or questioning the morality of a situation in the field might detract from the mission and do more harm than good.

Team cohesion is protective

Keeping unit members together through training, deployment, and the return home after a mission is important for team cohesion and people's well-being. Teams should be supported to talk openly about what they have experienced.

Leaders can help members process their experiences

Strong, ethical leaders are honest and truthful. They should support open discussions about decisions made and strategies that could have been considered in morally difficult situations. This helps teams understand and process their experiences.

KEY MESSAGES

- **Effective change relies on the support of leadership at all levels.** Senior leaders need to understand moral injury and commit time and resources to address it.
- **Success requires a team approach.** The planning, design, implementation, and evaluation of initiatives to address moral injury should involve military personnel and their families, military leaders, chaplains, and mental health practitioners.
- **Strategies should identify and address inequality.** Consider racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identification in developing strategies for moral injury prevention and intervention.
- **Approaches need to be flexible and ongoing.** Efforts to prevent moral injury must consider capacity and capability to deliver. Moral injury strategies should also be flexible so they can be applied in different circumstances.
- **Strategies for prevention and early intervention of moral injury need to be evaluated.** This will allow researchers to gather and share evidence for what works. Ultimately, this will help shape future interventions and ensure a cycle of continuous improvement.

This is a plain language summary of Addressing moral injury in the military

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