Moral Injury and Addiction

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Objectives

1. Define construct of moral injury
2. Explain moral injury in context of addiction and recovery
3. Apply clinical tools and interventions to address moral injury in treatment and recovery
Definitions and Constructs

- Addiction
- Moral Injury
- Moral Distress
- PTSD
- Self-Compassion
- Self-Forgiveness
- 12 Steps
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Addiction

Addiction is a treatable, chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and an individual’s life experiences [trauma].

People with addiction use substances or engage in behaviors that become compulsive and often continue despite harmful consequences [loss of control].

Prevention efforts and treatment approaches for addiction are generally as successful as those for other chronic diseases.

(American Society of Addiction Medicine, 2019)
1. Impaired control (criteria 1-4)  
2. Social Impairment (criteria 5-7)  
3. Risky Use (criteria 8-9)  
4. Pharmacological (criteria 10-11)  

**DSM 5 Four Categories**

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

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**Diagnostic Criteria**

1. Consuming the substance in larger amounts and for a longer amount of time than intended.  
2. Persistent desire to cut down or regulate use. The individual may have unsuccessfully attempted to stop in the past.  
3. Spending a great deal of time obtaining, using, or recovering from the effects of substance use.  
4. Experiencing craving, a pressing desire to use the substance.  
5. Substance use impairs ability to fulfill major obligations at work, school, or home.  
6. Continued use of the substance despite it causing significant social or interpersonal problems.  
7. Reduction or discontinuation of recreational, social, or occupational activities because of substance use.
Diagnostic Criteria 8-11

8. Recurrent substance use in physically unsafe environments.
9. Persistent substance use despite knowledge that it may cause or exacerbate physical or psychological problems.
10. Tolerance: Individual requires increasingly higher doses of the substance to achieve the desired effect, or the usual dose has a reduced effect; individuals may build tolerance to specific symptoms at different rates.
11. Withdrawal: A collection of signs and symptoms that occurs when blood and tissue levels of the substance decrease.

Moral Injury Definition 1

“Moral injury is the damage done to one’s conscience or moral compass when that person perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent acts that transgress one’s own moral beliefs, values, or ethical codes of conduct.”

Moral Injury Definition 1

(Moral Injury Project., n.d.)
In traumatic or unusually stressful circumstances, people may perpetrate, fail to prevent, or witness events that contradict deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.

When someone does something that goes against their beliefs this is often referred to as an act of commission and when they fail to do something in line with their beliefs that is often referred to as an act of omission.

Individuals may also experience betrayal from leadership, others in positions of power or peers that can result in adverse outcomes.

Moral injury is the distressing psychological, behavioral, social, and sometimes spiritual aftermath of exposure to such events.

A moral injury can occur in response to acting or witnessing behaviors that go against an individual's values and moral beliefs.

Moral Injury Definition 2
(Norman & Manguen, n.d.)

Moral Injury Definition 3
(The Shay Moral Injury Center, 2022)

Moral injury is the suffering people experience when we are in high stakes situations, things go wrong, and harm results that challenges our deepest moral codes and ability to trust in others or ourselves.

The harm may be something we did, something we witnessed, or something that was done to us. It results in moral emotions such as shame, guilt, self-condemnation, outrage, and sorrow.
Who is Affected by MI?

- Originally studied in the context of military combat
- Other professions that may experience MI
  - Healthcare
  - Police
  - Veterinarians
  - Journalists
  - Behavioral Health
  - Clergy
  - Military personnel
  - People with SUD
  - Etc.

Response to MI

(Sperry, 2022; Williamson et al., 2021)

- Strong cognitive and emotional response occurs following events that violate person’s moral or ethical code.
- Profound feelings of guilt and shame result.
  - Alterations in cognitions and beliefs
  - Guilt - “I’ve done something wrong, “I made a mistake.”
  - Shame – “I am a bad person,” “I am a mistake.”
  - Soul anguish

Response to MI

(Sperry, 2022; Williamson et al., 2021)
• **MI as cause** for SUD/Addiction
  - Guilt, shame, remorse, regret, rage, despair
  - Use substances to numb emotional pain
  - Increased vulnerability to additional morally injurious behavior
  - More substance use, and cycle continuous …

• **MI as consequence** of SUD/Addiction
  - Under duress (intoxication, threat, withdrawal, etc.), any of us could violate strongly held values and moral codes
    - Theft, particularly injurious as it relates to family members
    - Overdose and lack of appropriate response (omission)
    - Transmission of disease while under influence
    - Rejection/abandonment of children while using
    - Placing children at risk while under the influence (e.g., drug exposure)
    - Sex work
    - Injury or death caused while intoxicated
    - Violence

**Cause and Consequence**

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**Figure 1.** Model of dynamics involved in moral injury (adapted from Koenig et al, 2017).
Differentiating: Moral Injury, Moral Distress, PTSD

- **Moral distress**
  - Guilt-based, psychological unease, doesn't rise to the level of impairment of MI (BMA, 2021).
  - “You know the ethically appropriate action to take but are unable to act upon it. You act in a manner contrary to your personal and professional values, which undermines your sense of integrity and authenticity” (AACCN, 2006, p. 1).

- **Moral Injury**
  - Sustained moral distress leads to impaired function or longer-term psychological harm.
  - Profound guilt and shame
  - May include sense of betrayal, anger and profound moral disorientation.
  - Has been linked to severe mental health issues (BMA, 2021).

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**PTSD**

(Shay Center for Moral Injury, 2022)

- Moral injury and moral distress are not diagnosable mental health disorders.
- Although similarities exist between PTSD, MI, and MD, they are different but with some overlap.
- PTSD is fear-based.
- Moral injury is based in moral judgment.
- PTSD tx may exacerbate MI sx's
Effects of MI: Social, Spiritual, & Biological Domains
(Griffin et al., 2018)

- **Social:**
  - perceived or actual rejection by family or friends;
  - resentment due to feeling misunderstood;
  - loss of trust in partners, family, friends, community, society, government
  - alienation and isolation

- **Spiritual/religious**
  - S/R distress
  - Cynicism about and doubting beliefs
  - Feelings of abandonment by God
  - Questioning one’s purpose
  - Sense of violating one’s S/R values

- **Biological**
  - Not much research
  - Intersection between MI and stress-related illness

Key Elements for Healing

- Self-compassion
- Self-forgiveness
- Atonement, Amends, Repair
- Acceptance
3 Elements of Self-Compassion

Having compassion for oneself is really no different than having compassion for others. Think about what the experience of compassion feels like.

1. To have compassion for others you must notice that they are suffering. If you ignore person on the street who appears houseless, you can’t feel compassion for how difficult their experience is.

2. Compassion involves feeling moved by others’ suffering so that your heart responds to their pain (“suffer with”). When this occurs, you feel warmth, caring, and the desire to help the suffering person in some way. Having compassion also means that you offer understanding and kindness to others when they fail or make mistakes, rather than judging them harshly.

3. When you feel compassion for another (rather than mere pity), it means that you realize that suffering, failure, and imperfection is part of the shared human experience. “There but for fortune go I.”

Let’s Practice Self-Compassion

(Neff, 2022)
Exercise: How would you treat a friend?

1. First, think about times when a close friend feels really bad about themselves or is really struggling in some way. How would you respond to your friend in this situation (especially when you're at your best)? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you typically talk to your friends.

2. Now think about times when you feel bad about yourself or are struggling. How do you typically respond to yourself in these situations? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you talk to yourself.

3. Did you notice a difference? If so, ask yourself why. What factors or fears come into play that lead you to treat yourself and others so differently?

4. Please write down how you think things might change if you responded to yourself in the same way you typically respond to a close friend when you're suffering.

Self-Forgiveness

Self-forgiveness is typically conceptualized as an abandonment of self-condemnation in the face of acknowledged, self-directed harm-doing that helps the harm:

1. Involves a change in emotions toward self from negative to positive. Involves a change in how we view ourselves. Instead of feeling a lot of guilt, shame, and anger toward ourselves, we begin to replace those feelings with empathy, compassion, and love toward ourselves.

2. A reaffirmation of values. This is the piece that differentiates self-forgiveness from just letting ourselves off the hook. When we hurt someone or commit an offense, we often go against a value that we hold. Our actions went against our cherished values. This part of self-forgiveness involves reaffirming our core values, and making a commitment (as best we can) to align our future actions with our values.

Self-Forgiveness

(Griffin et al., 2015)
1. Receive Divine Forgiveness
2. Repair Relationships
3. Rethink Ruminations
4. REACH Emotional Self-forgiveness
   (recall, empathy, altruistic gift, commit, hold on)
5. Rebuild Self-Acceptance
6. Resolve to Live Virtuously

6 Steps to Self-Forgiveness
(Worthington, 2022)

The Three Pillars ACT: Open, Aware, & Engaged

1. Openness process
   – willingness
   – defusion
2. Awareness processes
   – present moment
   – self-as-context
3. Engagement processes
   – values
   – committed action

(Evans et al., 2020)
Let’s Practice Mindfulness

“What if the constant struggle to control your emotions and thoughts actually is the problem?”

(Evans et al., 2020, p.42-43)
In Closing

• Although the concept of moral injury is not new, it’s new in many areas outside of the military.
• Moral injury is about violating one’s own moral code of conduct and involves profound guilt, shame, regret, rage, anger, alienation and isolation.
• Can be both a cause and consequence of addiction.
• Key interventions, self-compassion, self-forgiveness, and ACT, 12-step work.

Thank You!
References


• Evans, W., Walser, R., Drescher, K., & Farnsworth, J. (2020). The moral injury workbook: Acceptance and commitment therapy skill for moving beyond shame, anger, & trauma to reclaim your values. Oakland: Newharbinger


References, cont.


