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THE INVISIBLE ENEMY



Photo design by Matthew Ikenoyama

Special Operations Forces Moral Injury Fact Sheet

SOF Moral Injury— The What

Current SOF operators are not the first generation to face the invisible wounds of war. However, many SOF warriors are unfamiliar with the term or concept of *moral injury* (MI). “When I first heard about it, I really had no idea what it was,” said retired Army Sergeant Major Mike R. Vining. “I later heard a concise way to describe moral injury, ‘You saw wrong,’ ‘did wrong,’ or ‘didn’t stop wrong.’”¹

Moral injury is a soul wound where the sufferer feels and believes there has been a traumatic violation and transgression of their deep, personal moral values. It is characterized by feelings of anger, guilt, shame, disorientation, and disgust within the individual. Individual perception is the key. Others cannot tell the individual

how they feel or what the traumatic experience means to them. It is *their* experience, and they are the expert of their own individual wounds. SOF MI results from an individual being exposed to events that involve their perception of either personally perpetrating (commission), witnessing (association), failing to do (omission), or a leader ordering them (direction) to violate or transgress their moral values.²

Four Main Categories of Moral Injury—SOF Examples:

- **Commission:** Marine Raiders come under fire from a building. They throw grenades into the building but later discover that insurgents were using women and children as human shields.

Scan here to see the
digital version.



“Moral injury is a soul wound where the sufferer feels and believes there has been a traumatic violation and transgression of their deep, personal moral values.”

- **Association:** A SEAL team takes up position near a village. While children are talking with them, they come under mortar fire. One SEAL team member sees a little girl get wounded by a mortar.
- **Omission:** A Pararescue Jumper is unable to save the life of a wounded Ranger caught in an ambush.
- **Direction:** A Green Beret is directed to evacuate the area of operation leaving indigenous partner forces to fight alone.³
- 5. Failing to protect a comrade or civilian
- 6. Witnessing or experiencing an act of retribution
- 7. Experiencing an act of disproportionate violence
- 8. Dehumanizing others
- 9. Experiencing rape or torture (victim or perpetrator)

SOF Potentially Morally Injurious Events and Causes

There are at least nine potentially morally injurious events (PMIE) recognized⁴ in the SOF community:

1. Witnessing others violate moral codes (especially leaders)
2. Making decisions that affect the survival of others
3. Being unable to care for all who are harmed
4. Freezing or failing to perform when in danger

SOF Moral Injury Symptoms

Recent comprehensive research has demonstrated that at the core of MI are spiritual and religious symptoms. Consequently, such issues in SOF MI are often best addressed by military chaplains, especially in terms of prevention, identification, and treatment.⁵ With the understanding that MI involves a constellation of persistent distressing psychological, spiritual, and religious symptoms, an interdisciplinary team developed a descriptive framework of the causes, symptoms, and consequences manifested in 10 major MI symptom domains.⁶ See Fig. 1.

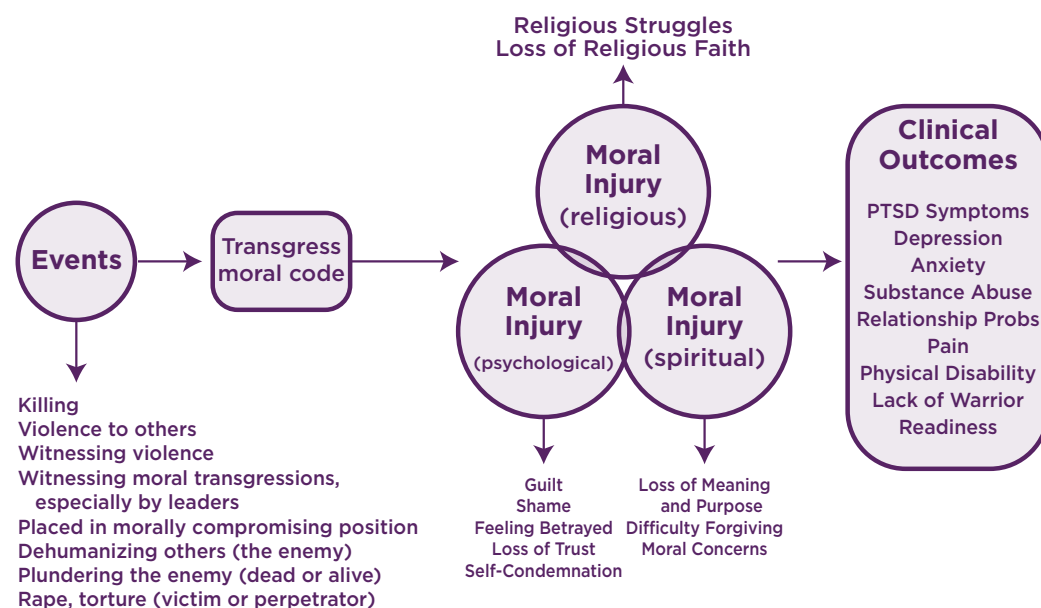


Figure 1. An illustration depicting the framework leveraged and utilized by JSOU researchers based on the Koenig model (2017) of the causes, symptoms, and consequences manifested in 10 major moral injury symptom domains. Source: Koenig, 2017

SOF Moral Injury and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

This distinction is important for the SOF community. Simply stated, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a traumatic threat to personal well-being based on fear and adrenaline. It is a physical and psychological wound that can result from or be maintained by MI. In contrast, MI is a traumatic violation or transgression of personal values based on morals and ethics. It is a spiritual or soul wound that can be a precursor to PTSD.⁷ See Fig. 2.

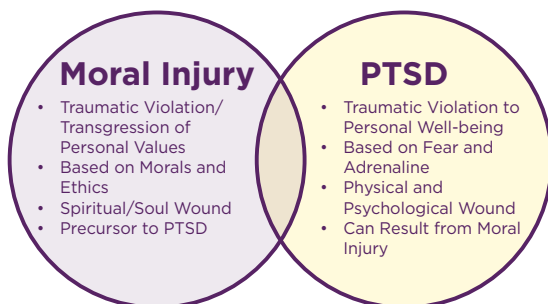


Figure 2. The distinctions between moral injury and posttraumatic stress disorder. Source: John Edgar Caterson and Matthew Ikenoyama

SOF Moral Injury Prevalence and Measurement

The prevalence of MI in SOF is higher than originally thought. Research from military-specific MI measures and scales concluded that an estimated 50–65 percent of active-duty U.S. service members have experienced some degree of MI. Further, 25–34 percent of incidents that cause or contribute to PTSD can also result in MI. Qualitative research at Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) has confirmed similar percentages of MI in the SOF community.⁸

The Moral Injury Self-Assessment questionnaire (see Figure 3) was adapted from the 10-item Moral Injury Symptom Scale – Military Version Short Form (MISS-M-SF)⁹:

SOF Moral Injury and Factors in Healing

The moral terrain, ethical decision-making, and PMIE that the SOF community faces can increase the risk of MI. The SOF warrior's culture, spiritual beliefs, and upbringing can affect how they process events. Research has demonstrated that even the experience, background,

MORAL INJURY

SELF-ASSESSMENT

I feel betrayed by leaders I once trusted

A

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

I feel guilty over failing to save the life of someone in war

B

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

I feel ashamed about what I did or didn't do during this time

C

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

I'm troubled because my actions violated my morals or values

D

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

Most people aren't trustworthy

E

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

I don't have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful

F

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

I can't forgive myself for what happened to me/others in combat

G

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

All in all, I feel that I'm a failure

H

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

I wonder what I did for God to punish me

I

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

Since I first joined the military, my religious faith has weakened

J

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

INSTRUCTIONS

With 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest, indicate to what degree each statement applies to your situation or mindset.

Consider contacting your chaplain if you score one or more items a 9 or 10, or if three or more questions score more than 5.

You are not alone

Figure 3. Moral Injury Self-Assessment questionnaire. Source: Adapted from the MISS-M-SF

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The SOF warrior's culture, spiritual beliefs, and upbringing can affect how they process events.

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and distinctions of prototypical junior versus senior operators can factor into their susceptibility of MI.¹⁰

Like all humans, SOF warriors are meaning-makers—and they don't just stop making meaning once they put their uniforms on or take them off. It is essential to discover what helps each individual SOF warrior to both make sense of and find meaning from the chaos of war. This points to the importance of narrative and meaning-making in the healing process where there is a difference between the sacred and the profane.

United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has reimagined SOF MI professional military education,

creating a new paradigm that leverages a 'living-narrative' methodology and shaping the critical conversations necessary to influence the future of the Joint special operations community. The advent of approaching SOF MI through unconventional, experimental methodologies—individual stories of SOF MI—has had great impact on the SOF community. LEGO® Serious Play, white-board narrative drawing assignments, mini-whiteboard narrative scenarios, visual expression story journals (see Fig. 4), storyboards, storybooks, and story mind-maps have facilitated SOF MI conversations that would never have been possible otherwise.¹¹

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Figure 4. Story journal assignment in visual expression. Source: Timm Beasley

NOTES

- ¹ M. Vining crediting Don Western (personal communication, March 17, 2025).
 - ² John Edgar Caterson, "SOF MI" (class lecture, SOC5851 SOF Chaplaincy Spiritual & Moral Resiliency, Joint Special Operations University, Tampa, FL, 25 April 2024).
 - ³ Caterson, "SOF MI."
 - ⁴ Norman and Maguen, 2014; Harold G. Koenig et al., The Moral Injury Symptom Scale-Military Version Short Form; Farnsworth et al, 2017; Caterson et al, 2020.
 - ⁵ Harold G. Koenig, Lindsay B. Carey, and Jennifer Wortham. *Moral injury: A Handbook for Military Chaplains*, 3.
 - ⁶ Koenig et al., *Moral injury*, 18.
 - ⁷ Caterson, "SOF MI."
 - ⁸ Caterson, "SOF MI."
 - ⁹ Koenig et al., *Moral Injury*, 51.
 - ¹⁰ Ingerson et al, *Moral Injury*, 75-77.
 - ¹¹ Caterson, "SOF MI."
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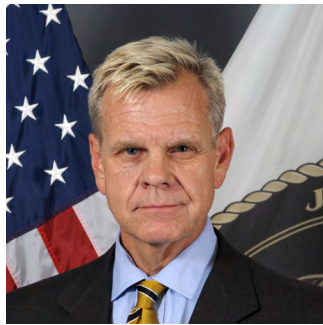
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Leadership from The University of Edinburgh in Scotland (1994), DMin. with concentrations in Story Integration, Narrative Theology, Leadership & Ethics, and Psychology from The Beeson International Center at Asbury Theological Seminary (2002). Dr. Catterson has authored 12 books, five graduate school smartbooks and textbooks, and 25 military and faith training programs and workbooks. He served as the faculty advisor and coauthor for *Moral Injury: Implications for U.S. SOF and Ethical Resiliency* (JSOU Press, 2023) and is the co-editor for two upcoming JSOU Press Edited Volumes on SOF MI typology and the SOF ethical decision-making environment.

In the not-too-distant future, JSOU Press will publish an edited volume, *THE INVISIBLE ENEMY: SOF Moral Injury and Shaping Stories—Crucial Conversations for the Future of the Joint Special Operations Community*. It will feature accounts by current and living legends that unpack SOF MI through the lenses of SOF context, culture, community, and future.



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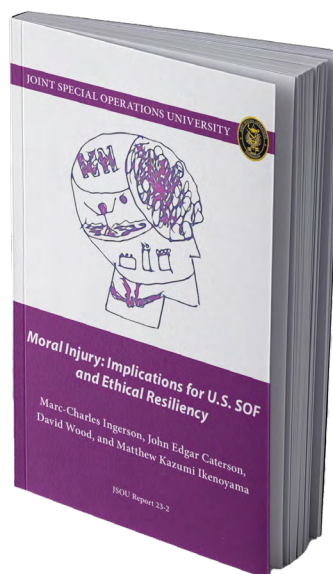
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TO LEARN MORE

about Moral Injury and ethics in SOF, please see

Moral Injury: Implications for U.S. SOF and Ethical Resiliency



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