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## THE ENEMY WE DO NOT SEE



*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.’”<sup>1</sup>

Moral injury has been called an “invisible enemy.” It 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.<sup>2</sup>

### 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.

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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.<sup>3</sup>
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)

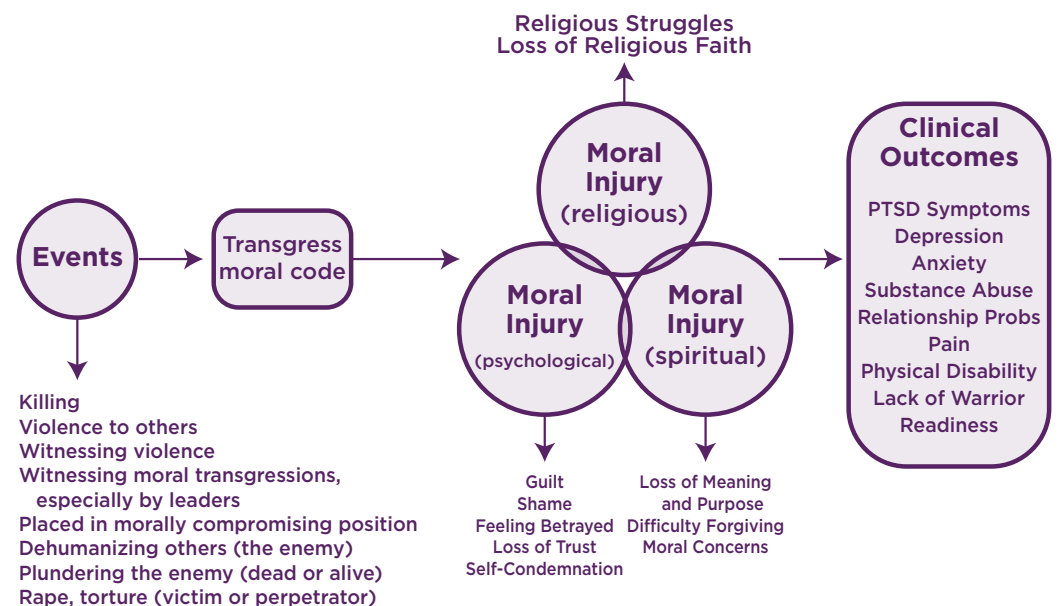
## SOF Potentially Morally Injurious Events and Causes

There are at least nine potentially morally injurious events (PMIE) recognized<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> See Figure 1.

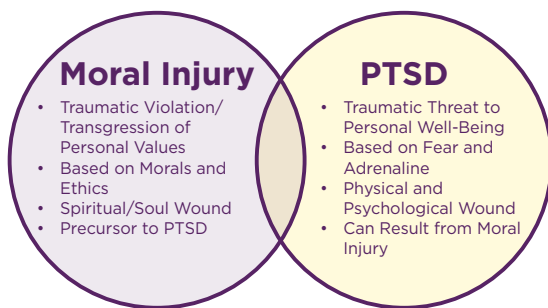


**Figure 1.** An illustration depicting the framework leveraged and utilized by JSOU researchers based on the Koenig model (2017) of the causes, symptoms, and consequences manifested in 10 major moral injury symptom domains. Source: Koenig, 2017



## 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.<sup>7</sup> See Figure 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 So What

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.<sup>8</sup>

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

### MORAL INJURY

SELF-ASSESSMENT

I feel betrayed by leaders I once trusted

A

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

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

B

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

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

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

D

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

Most people aren't trustworthy

E

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

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

F

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

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

G

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

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

H

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

I wonder what I did for God to punish me

I

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

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

J

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

**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

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, and distinctions of prototypical junior versus senior operators can factor into their susceptibility of MI.<sup>10</sup>

“

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

”

## SOF Moral Injury and Factors in Healing—The Now What

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.<sup>11</sup>

It is critical to understand both SOF culture and the SOF community, and there are two powerful tools that have been developed that can be leveraged in the healing process.

SOF culture is formed in the SOF team room, which is a sacred and sovereign space shaped by the team leader. An intervention tool that team NCOs and senior enlisted leaders can utilize is the Guide for SOF Teams, a four-step process that includes (1) engaging, (2) focusing, (3) motivating, and (4) planning.

During engaging, the team leader

connects and addresses SOF MI through questions and conversations. The determination of the degree of SOF MI takes place next, during the focusing process. Motivating helps the warrior connect and realize the possibility for change, especially in purpose, meaning, and value. During planning, the directions and preferences for change are prioritized. See Table 1.

The SOF community is also crucial in the healing process. Another tool allows stakeholders a simple process in dealing with SOF MI. This stems from a continuum analysis from eight essential stakeholders who can address MI that is beginning in the SOF wounded warrior. Special attention should be given to equip SOF loved ones, for they are often three to four steps removed. The SOF Stakeholder Analysis tool provides three clear and simple steps, "Start, Stop, Continue," to be used by both stakeholders and the SOF warriors. See Table 2.

These tools, along with unconventional, experimental 'living-narrative' methodologies, can accelerate the healing process by connecting the SOF soul-wounded warrior to their identity rooted in meaning, value, and purpose that connects them with the transcendent, others, and themselves. ♣



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

“  
*It is essential to discover what helps each individual SOF warrior to both make sense of and find meaning from the chaos of war.*  
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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> M. Vining crediting Don Western (personal communication, March 17, 2025).
- <sup>2</sup> John Edgar Caterson, "SOF MI" (class lecture, SOS5851 SOF Chaplaincy Spiritual & Moral Resiliency, Joint Special Operations University, Tampa, FL, 28 April 2023). Definition, characteristics, and facets published in Marc-Charles Ingerson, John Edgar Caterson, David Wood, and Matthew Kazumi Ikenoyama, *Moral Injury: Implications for U.S. SOF and Ethical Resiliency*, JSOU. Report 23-2 (Joint Special Operations University Press, 2023), 2, 24, 25, 27, 33. Concept on SOF Moral Injury as an "enemy" originated with research by Matthew Kazumi Ikenoyama and "Invisible Enemy" in collaboration by JSOU Report 23-2 authors.
- <sup>3</sup> Matthew Kazumi Ikenoyama and John Edgar Caterson "SOF MI Four Main Categories" (personal communication, March 29, 2025).
- <sup>4</sup> Norman and Maguen, 2014; Harold G. Koenig et al., The Moral Injury Symptom Scale-Military Version Short Form; Farnsworth et al, 2017.
- <sup>5</sup> Harold G. Koenig, Lindsay B. Carey, and Jennifer Wortham. *Moral injury: A Handbook for Military Chaplains*, 3.
- <sup>6</sup> Koenig et al., *Moral injury*, 18.
- <sup>7</sup> Caterson, "SOF MI."
- <sup>8</sup> Caterson, "SOF MI."
- <sup>9</sup> Koenig et al., *Moral Injury*, 51.
- <sup>10</sup> Ingerson et al, *Moral Injury*, 75-77.
- <sup>11</sup> Caterson, "SOF MI."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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is a faculty member, master instructor, executive subject matter expert, and director of the Special Operations Chaplaincy Advanced Courses Program at the Joint Special Operations University. He holds a master of divinity degree with a concentration in medical ethics from Princeton Theological Seminary, was a supervised graduate fellow in ethics and leadership from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and holds a doctorate in ministry degree

with concentrations in story integration, narrative theology, leadership and ethics, and psychology from The Beeson International Center at Asbury Theological Seminary. Dr. Caterson was 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 an upcoming JSOU Press edited volume on the SOF ethical decisionmaking environment and moral injury.

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Table 1. Talking about Moral Injury in SOF: A Guide for SOF Teams

Approaches	Summary	Examples: questions	Examples: reflective listening	Checkpoint
<b>1. Engaging</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Starts a conversation about MI in SOF.</li> <li>- Establishes a climate of trust.</li> <li>- Conveys an intention to help.</li> <li>- Typically, an explanation of what MI is.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I read an article about a thing called moral injury. Would you be OK if I shared what I learned?"</li> <li>• "I couldn't help but notice _____. Would you be open to a quick chat about it?"</li> <li>• "How often during the last year, if ever, have you felt dissatisfied or ashamed about your SOF role?"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "There have been some things that have been bothering you."</li> <li>• "Your experience in SOF has not been the same since that tough experience last year."</li> <li>• "I appreciate that you are open to talking about this."</li> </ul>	<p>Were we able to engage in a conversation about possible MI in SOF?</p>
<b>2. Focusing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Helps identify MI in SOF is a concern for the individual.</li> <li>- Determines which aspects of MI are of most concern.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "To what degree do you think is a concern for you?"</li> <li>• "In our conversation so far, it sounds like MI has happened to you. Would you agree?"</li> <li>• "Given everything we have talked about so far, what are your thoughts about moral injury?"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "You can see that some of your experiences fit into the definition of moral injury."</li> <li>• "For you, moral injury events have been a part of your SOF experience."</li> <li>• "Your military work has taken a toll in several ways."</li> </ul>	<p>Did we determine if MI is a concern?</p>
<b>3. Eliciting motivation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Brings out the individual's motivation for change/seeking help.</li> <li>- Connects the individual's values with change/seeking help.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "How would your career or life be different if moral injury was less of an issue?"</li> <li>• "How might it benefit you to talk to someone about moral injury?"</li> <li>• "On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being high, how important is it for you to address moral injury?"</li> <li>• "Why is it not a lower number?"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It bothers you that those difficult experiences still take a toll on you."</li> <li>• "You wish you could turn time back to when moral injury was not a problem."</li> <li>• "You have wanted to reach out to someone about this experience for a long time."</li> </ul>	<p>Did the individual voice their own motivation for change or seeking help?</p>
<b>4. Planning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reviews options for support or help for MI in SOF.</li> <li>- Summarizes the conversation.</li> <li>- Assesses motivation to act.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Can I share with you some resources that might be available to help with moral injury?"</li> <li>• "What are your main takeaways from our conversation?"</li> <li>• "If you were to make a change or seek out help from someone, what do you think you would do?"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "On the one hand, you are feeling a bit cautious about talking to someone. And on the other hand, you don't think things will get better if you keep this to yourself."</li> <li>• "Our conversation has given you some new ideas for how deal with moral injury."</li> <li>• "It has been helpful to talk about this, and you have some next steps in mind to move forward."</li> </ul>	<p>Did we discuss plans or next steps for addressing MI?</p>

Source: Table A.5 from Caterson et al., *Moral Injury: Implications for U.S. SOF and Ethical Resiliency* (JSOU Press, 2023), 81.



Table 2. SOF Stakeholder Analysis of the Soul-Wounded SOF Operator (Start, Stop, Continue Feedback).

	Wounded Warrior	Teammate	Team leader	Loved one	Senior leader	Chaplain	Clinician	Physician	Command
<b>Start</b>	Repairing one's identity through reconciliation and forgiveness <sup>152</sup>	Looking at negative changes in behavior as possible moral injury <sup>153</sup>	Looking for hidden signs of shame and/or guilt in operators <sup>154</sup>	Looking for experiences where the operator is searching for meaning <sup>155</sup>	Looking at moral injury as a significant factor for increased suicidality in operators <sup>156</sup>	Speareading efforts to link spirituality and healing moral injury in operators <sup>157</sup>	Including chaplains in helping to heal moral injury in operators <sup>158</sup>	Exploring the social, psychological, behavioral, and spiritual aspects of an operator, not just the biomedical <sup>159</sup>	Weeding out toxic leadership and malpractice within the command <sup>160</sup>
<b>Stop</b>	Blaming self for morally injurious experience(s) <sup>161</sup>	Allowing alcohol abuse to be a means of coping with moral injury <sup>162</sup>	Seeing negative performance as not a possible mental health issue <sup>163</sup>	Seeing anger and cynicism as "just a bad day" and not possibly morally injurious symptoms <sup>164</sup>	Enabling unethical culture to thrive within the ranks <sup>165</sup>	Deferring only to mental health providers on the topic of moral injury <sup>166</sup>	Deferring only to chaplains on topics of religion and spirituality <sup>167</sup>	Relying only on medication for addressing moral injury effects <sup>168</sup>	Utilizing ethical models that do not consider the ambiguity of the modern battlefield <sup>169</sup>
<b>Continue</b>	Examining moral injury and PTSD as separate conditions <sup>170</sup>	Providing peer support to operators struggling with moral injury <sup>171</sup>	Watching team members for signs of negative changes in behaviors and cognitions <sup>172</sup>	Focusing on communication, trust, sharing, and mutual forgiveness <sup>173</sup>	Emphasizing better leadership and more combat ethics training <sup>174</sup>	Providing spiritual care and guidance to operators than can help with healing moral injury in operators <sup>175</sup>	Using compassion training to help operators refine social connections for support <sup>176</sup>	Treating moral injury in operators with the same severity level as PTSD <sup>177</sup>	Advocating for operators to utilize mental health professionals and chaplains <sup>178</sup>

Source: Table A.6 from Caterson et al., *Moral Injury: Implications for U.S. SOF and Ethical Resiliency* (JSOU Press, 2023), 82.



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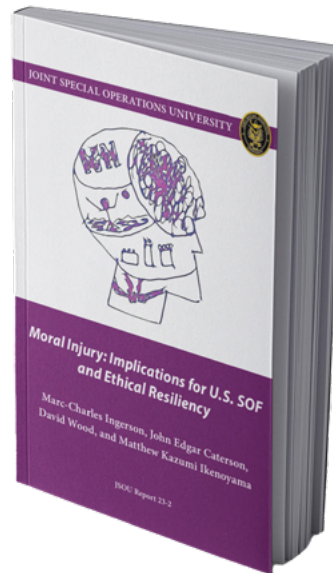
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### ***Moral Injury: Implications for U.S. SOF and Ethical Resiliency***



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