



Australian Government

Defence

MORAL INJURY

BIOLOGICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL,
SOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL IMPACT



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Introduction

Moral injury is a critical issue for military personnel due to the ethical or moral challenges encountered during service, which can significantly impact operational readiness, capability and overall effectiveness. Moral injury is now widely recognised as a condition frequently experienced by military personnel, particularly during deployment or post-deployment.

What is Moral Injury?

The Australian Defence Force defines moral injury as:

Moral Injury is a trauma-related syndrome caused by physical, psychological, social, and spiritual impacts resulting from grievous moral transgressions or violations of deeply held moral beliefs or ethical standards.



Moral injury can occur when an individual perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent inhumane acts, which challenges their moral integrity. It can also result from betrayal by trusted individuals in positions of legitimate authority. The violation of deeply held beliefs, regardless of context, can lead to significant moral dissonance, resulting in both core and secondary symptoms that often occur concurrently.

Core Symptoms

Core symptoms of moral injury typically include:

- Shame
- Guilt
- Betrayal
- Anger
- Loss of trust (in self, others, or transcendental entities)
- Spiritual/existential conflict (loss of meaning or purpose in life)

These core symptoms often give rise to secondary effects, such as:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Re-experiencing the moral conflict
- Social alienation
- Relationship issues
- Self-harm (e.g., self-condemnation, substance abuse, suicidal ideation and behaviour)

Moral injury may also overlap with other workplace mental health conditions like PTSD, burnout or compassion fatigue. Symptoms such as altered belief systems, loss of purpose and struggles with meaning often accompany moral injury, making it a complex condition.

Causes of Moral Injury

Moral injury often arises when a person's deeply held values or moral code is violated.

Common activators for moral injury include:

- Killing or harming others
- Failing to prevent harm
- Witnessing cruelty
- Giving / enacting orders that lead to injury or death
- Being unable to act in line with ethical standards (e.g., providing medical aid)

Additionally, betrayal by leaders or others in power can exacerbate moral injury. Individuals may not experience moral injury immediately. It can manifest later, after leaving the military, potentially impacting relationships, performance, and organisational commitment.



Examples of Moral Injury Criteria and Symptoms

Emotional	Enduring guilt, shame, anger and disgust at self
Spiritual	Loss of faith Spiritual conflict Loss of meaning/purpose
Interpersonal	Feelings of betrayal Loss of trust in others Avoidance behaviours
Intrapersonal	Low self-esteem Self-limiting / Self-condemning beliefs

Examples



Bio-Psycho-Social-Spiritual Dimensions of Moral Injury

Understanding moral injury requires exploring the interconnectedness of biological, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. These components highlight how moral injury impacts the whole person.

Biological Impact of Moral Injury

Moral injury is known to activate the body's stress-response systems in multiple ways. Traumatic experiences leading to moral injury can activate both the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and the sympathetic nervous system, which are linked to the body's fight-or-flight response. These systems typically prepare the body to respond to immediate threats through heightened arousal and mobilisation, and if prolonged can lead to many physiological problems (including difficulty concentrating). In addition, moral injury can also engage the parasympathetic nervous system, specifically the dorsal vagal system, which is responsible for freeze, numbing, or dissociative responses. This activation can lead to states of shutdown, withdrawal, and emotional numbing as a means of coping with overwhelming stress, interfering with combat readiness.

Chronic activation of these systems, both sympathetic and parasympathetic, can contribute to a range of physiological and psychological symptoms.

Sympathetic Nervous System (Fight-or-Flight)

Responses:

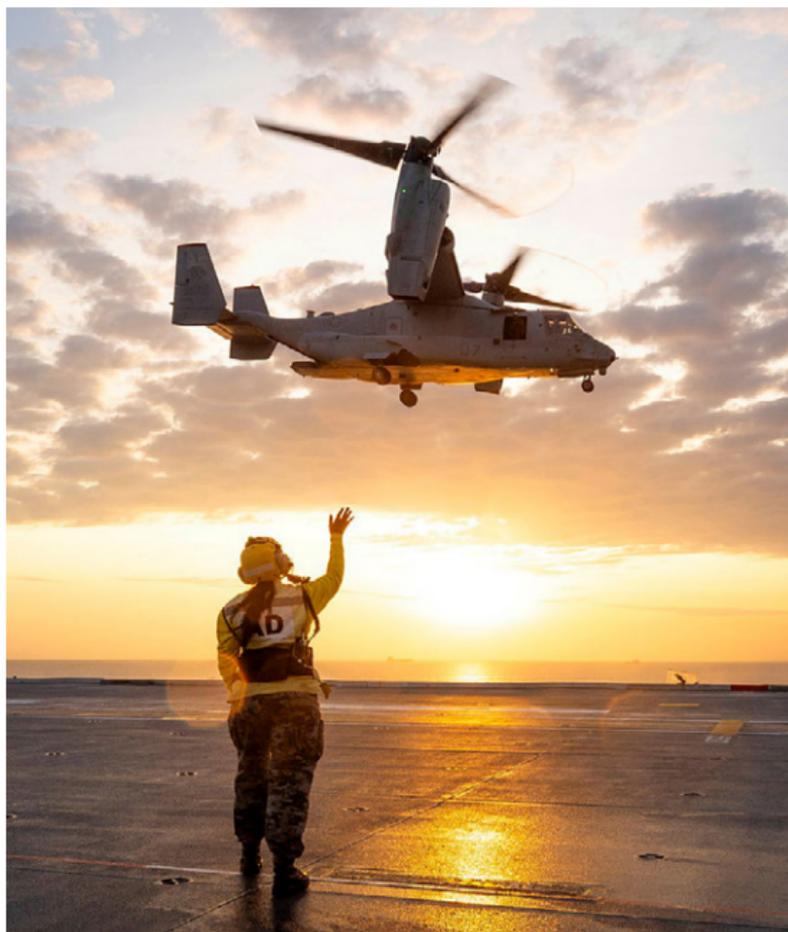
- Increased heart rate and blood pressure
- Elevated cortisol levels
- Disrupted sleep patterns, including insomnia
- Heightened emotional reactivity, such as irritability or hypervigilance
- Immune system dysregulation, leading to susceptibility to illness
- Digestive issues, such as gastrointestinal disorders
- Cardiovascular problems linked to prolonged stress
- Changes in brain structure and function: alterations in the prefrontal cortex (involved in decision-making) and the amygdala (involved in emotional processing)

Parasympathetic Nervous System (Dorsal Vagal)

Responses:

- Numbing or emotional detachment
- Avoidance behaviours, including withdrawal from social situations or responsibilities
- Dissociation, feeling disconnected from reality or oneself
- Depression and pervasive feelings of hopelessness or helplessness
- Fatigue or low energy, often related to emotional exhaustion
- Social isolation, as a result of disengaging from relationships or responsibilities
- Reduced heart rate and a sense of “shutting down”
- Freezing or immobilisation, where individuals may feel stuck and unable to act in the face of distress

These combined responses from the body's stress systems can exacerbate the emotional and physical toll of moral injury. Over time, this dysregulation may contribute to the development of long-term health problems, such as cardiovascular disease, chronic fatigue, and autoimmune disorders. Addressing both the fight-or-flight and numbing/freeze responses is critical to understanding the full impact of moral injury on an individual's health and well-being.



Psychological and Emotional Impact

Psychologically, moral injury can manifest in self-blame, guilt, and persistent negative beliefs about oneself or others. Many individuals also experience chronic shame, which can complicate healing processes, making it more challenging to engage in therapeutic work since the person sense of identity is disrupted.

Chaplain/MSWO delivered approaches like Pastoral Narrative Disclosure can help address moral injury. Encouraging individuals to process their experiences and create more adaptive moral frameworks and challenge negative beliefs and engage in spiritual contemplative and ritual practices can foster emotional healing and a renewed sense of purpose.



Social Impact

The social implications of moral injury are often profound, as individuals may withdraw from their social and familial networks. Common social consequences include:

- Isolation from family and friends
- Increased interpersonal conflict
- Difficulties maintaining relationships or engaging in social activities
- Workplace performance issues

Social isolation, in particular, can exacerbate feelings of alienation and reinforce moral injury symptoms. Support from peers and loved ones, particularly those with shared experiences, is often an important component of recovery.



Spiritual Impact of Moral Injury

Moral injury often results in significant spiritual distress and is closely linked with spiritual or existential crises. Individuals may question their core beliefs and sense of meaning or purpose. This can lead to a profound loss of faith or hope. Chaplains and Maritime Spiritual Wellbeing Officers (MSWOs) play a crucial role in addressing this aspect of moral injury, as they are trained to offer pastoral and/or spiritual care to help individuals process their experiences and find resolution. Individuals may experience a deep sense of loss, not only in terms of meaning but also in faith or connection to a higher purpose. The spiritual impact of moral injury often includes:

- Loss of faith or religious disillusionment
- Existential despair or questioning the meaning of life
- Struggles with forgiveness; both of oneself and others

Chaplains and MSWOs can offer critical support in these cases, helping individuals navigate their spiritual conflicts, reconnect with their values, and find meaning or purpose after perpetrating or witnessing moral transgressions.



Because moral injury impacts Defence members biologically, psychologically, socially and spiritually, the best treatment involves a multi-disciplinary approach with a combination of medical practitioners, nurses, psychologists, social workers and chaplaincy.

Identifying Moral Injury

A number of measures have been developed to assess for moral injury, particularly in military populations.

Common tools include:

1. **Moral Injury Events Scale (MIES):** Measures traumatic experiences and the severity of resulting symptoms. A valuable screening tool for considering the impact of morally injurious events.
2. **Moral Injury Outcomes Scale (MIOS):** Differentiates between moral distress and high impairment; considered a comprehensive measure.
3. **Moral Injury Symptom Scale - Military Version (MISS-M):** Evaluates spiritual/religious struggles along with trauma symptoms. Utilises a bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework.

Self-Assessment for Moral Injury based upon the MISS-M

Have you experienced a moral injury? The following questions, adapted from the MISS-M, can help you reflect on your emotional and spiritual health. While not a diagnosis, they provide insight into potential moral injury.

MISS-M

Circle “AGREE” or “DISAGREE” for each question:

1	I feel guilt for surviving when others didn't.	AGREE	DISAGREE
2	I feel guilt over failing to save someone's life.	AGREE	DISAGREE
3	I feel ashamed about what I did or didn't do.	AGREE	DISAGREE
4	I feel betrayed by leaders or fellow Defence members I trusted.	AGREE	DISAGREE
5	I am troubled by actions that violate my morals/values.	AGREE	DISAGREE
6	My life lacks a clear sense of purpose.	AGREE	DISAGREE
7	I hold grudges against myself for past actions.	AGREE	DISAGREE
8	I do not believe God has forgiven me for what I did.	AGREE	DISAGREE
9	I have not forgiven God for what happened to me or others.	AGREE	DISAGREE
10	I am not satisfied with myself.	AGREE	DISAGREE
11	I do not have much to be proud of.	AGREE	DISAGREE
12	I wonder if God abandoned me.	AGREE	DISAGREE

If you agree with any of these and your resulting feelings are causing difficulty with your functioning in important occupational, relational, or other important areas of your life, consider contacting a Chaplain/MSWO or mental health professional for further support. This tool is for screening, not diagnosis, but a high score or severity of any one symptom above suggests the need to seek professional help.

Early Intervention

Talking to a Chaplain/MSWO or mental health provider early on can maximise the likelihood of a positive outcome.



Treatment of Moral Injury

While research is still developing, we know:

- Chaplain/MSWO facilitated care using **Pastoral Narrative Disclosure** (based upon **Adaptive Disclosure**) has been developed for effectively addressing Moral Injury impacting upon military personnel and has been implemented across all Australian military Chaplaincy personnel.
- Some **PTSD** interventions have been adapted for moral injury, showing positive effects in reducing symptoms.
- While not tested specifically for Moral Injury, it is likely other treatment modalities such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), cognitive processing therapy (CPT), as well as other **interpersonal-psychodynamic** and **group therapy** approaches could also be efficacious.

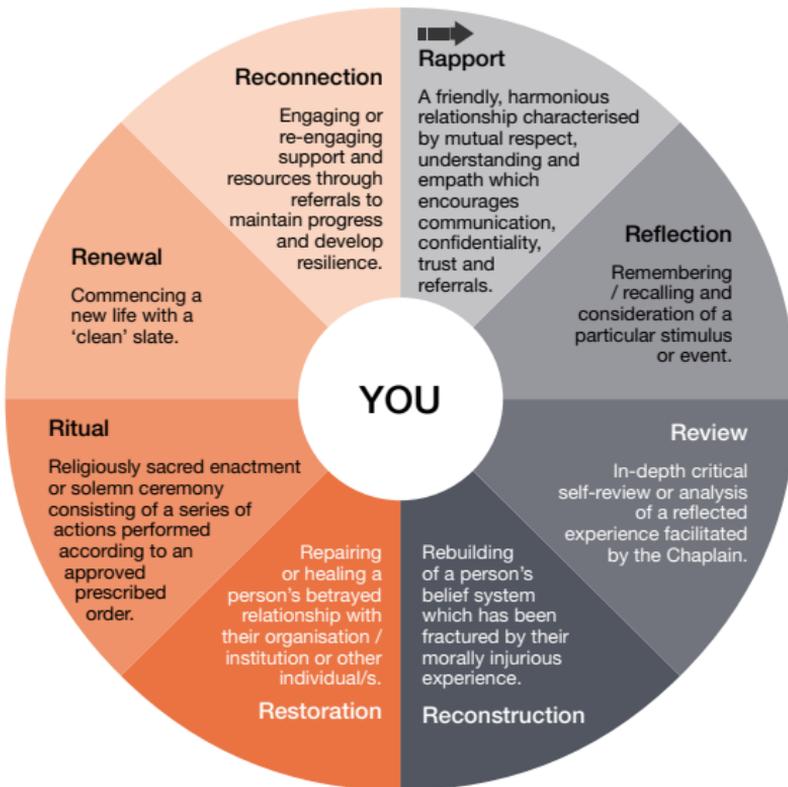
Therapeutic and Support Approaches

A holistic approach is often required when addressing moral injury, and combining psychological treatments, peer support, spiritual care, and medical intervention offers a comprehensive treatment plan. There are a number of strategies that have been utilised for addressing moral injury. One method utilised by Chaplains/MSWOs is Pastoral Narrative Disclosure.

- **Pastoral Narrative Disclosure (PND)**: This approach allows individuals to express and reflect on their experiences through the lens of personal and moral meaning. ADF Chaplains/MSWOs, trained in both spiritual care and PND, can provide a safe space for

disclosing deeply personal narratives. By integrating spiritual themes, they help individuals confront moral dilemmas, promote healing, and foster a sense of forgiveness or reconciliation. This practice enhances therapeutic outcomes, particularly for those who draw strength from spiritual or religious frameworks.

- Where appropriate, Chaplains/MSWOs can provide faith-based counselling offering spiritual guidance for individuals struggling with moral injury, provide comfort, meaning, and direction. Faith-based approaches can align personal values and beliefs with the healing process, creating a more personalised and resonant experience.



- If you are receiving other medical or mental health services, it will be a shared care and multidisciplinary practice approach. Collaboration between mental health professionals, Chaplains/MSWOs, medical staff, and peer support facilitators ensures that treatment is tailored to the individual's specific needs. This interdisciplinary approach leverages the unique strengths of each field, blending psychological, medical, spiritual, and social care into a unified support system. The coordination ensures consistency and avoids conflicting treatment strategies, offering a seamless healing process that addresses both mental and moral dimensions of trauma.



ADF Chaplaincy (Navy, Army and Air Force) engages in approximately 1500 interventions per annum involving Moral Injury (ADF CRT 2023).



Other approaches

Some approaches to get you started on the journey:

Reconnection and Healing

A key focus in the recovery process is facilitating reconnection with self, others, and the wider community. Re-establishing healthy relationships is crucial for restoring trust, belonging, and meaning in life. In moral injury, the loss of connection to one's values or moral compass often manifests as feelings of betrayal or guilt. This disconnect can lead to a sense of being "morally adrift." Reconnection begins with the individual but ultimately extends to re-engaging with communities of support.

Reconnecting with Self

Self-reflection and mindfulness practices in the person's faith tradition can support reconnection with personal values and help in re-establishing a sense of self-compassion. Strategies for reconnection might include:

- Reconnecting with core beliefs and passions in life, developing a non-judgmental awareness of the present moment can help individuals stay grounded.
- Journaling: A tool for self-reflection, journaling allows individuals to explore thoughts and emotions in a structured way, gaining insight into their inner conflicts and experiences.
- Engaging in physical activity: Reintegrating the mind and body through activities like yoga, walking, or team sports can help alleviate stress and re-establish connection with the physical self.

Reconnecting with Others

Healthy social connections are foundational to recovery. Relationships with family, friends, peers, and professionals provide emotional support, help alleviate isolation and offer opportunities for mutual growth.

- Family and peer support: Rebuilding strained relationships and maintaining a support system can be an integral part of recovery.
- Community engagement: Participating in community activities, volunteer work, or mentorship can help individuals regain a sense of purpose and belonging.



Reconnecting with Meaning

One of the central goals of addressing moral injury is helping individuals rediscover a sense of meaning or purpose in life. This may involve spiritual exploration, finding new ways to contribute to society, or developing new personal goals that align with deeply held values.

- **Chaplains and spiritual guidance:** Chaplains and MSWOs can help individuals navigate existential crises, rebuild faith, and rediscover a sense of meaning.
- **Purpose-driven projects:** Engaging in work or volunteer opportunities that align with personal values can help individuals rebuild a sense of contribution and purpose.



The Role of Leadership in Addressing Moral Injury

Commanders and leaders play a crucial role in supporting individuals affected by moral injury. Effective leadership involves understanding the nature of moral injury, recognising signs in team members, and creating an environment that fosters psychological safety and open communication. Leaders should also be aware of the available resources, such as Chaplains/MSWOs, and mental health professionals, and methods of assessment for moral injury, ensuring that individuals are referred to appropriate services when necessary.

Creating a Supportive Environment

Fostering a culture of care, trust, and accountability helps create an environment where individuals feel safe addressing their moral and emotional concerns. Leadership practices that can help include:

- **Open communication channels:** Ensure that personnel feel comfortable expressing their concerns without fear of reprisal or judgement.
- **Active listening:** Provide a space for individuals to share their experiences, validating their emotions and offering support. Wellbeing check ins and creating a culture where members watch out for each other.
- **Empathy:** Demonstrate genuine understanding and compassion, which can foster trust and contribute to healing.

Prevention, Intervention, and Support for Moral Injury

Research suggests several strategies to reduce the likelihood of moral injury, including:

- Ethical decision-making training as part of Force-Prep.
- Resilience training.
- Managing / minimising risk of exposure to traumatic events
- Promoting effective leadership.
- Building teams with high morale and cohesion.
- Clarifying roles through good job design.
- Ensuring implementation of just work cultures.
- Utilising peer and social support to share experiences.
- Providing education on moral stressors and moral injury as part of work, health and safety.
- Practicing self-care (healthy eating, exercise, social connections, and rest).
- Seeking professional support when distressed.



Getting Help

Seek help if distress lasts for more than a few days or affects your daily life and ability to function at work or in your family life. If you're experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm, seek immediate assistance.

The goal of moral injury treatment is to help individuals find forgiveness, acceptance, and reconciliation. Choosing to get assistance will be a very positive first step in recovery that allows the development of a meaningful, value-driven resilient life while contributing positively to others.

Conclusion

Moral injury is a complex and deeply personal experience that impacts individuals across multiple dimensions of life. Addressing moral injury requires a holistic approach that considers the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual components. Please feel free to contact a Chaplain/MSWO or refer to the table below for a list of supports.



**To speak to a Duty Chaplain or MSWO
CALL 1800 DEFENCE (1800 333 362)**



Support Resources

Support & Referral Services for Defence Employees

ADF All-hours Support Line (ASL)

Phone: 1800 628 036

The All-hours Support Line (ASL) is a 24/7 confidential telephone service for ADF members and their families to facilitate access to ADF or civilian mental health services. Services include psychology, medical, social work, and chaplain services.

ADF Health and Wellbeing

Phone: Refer webpage for specific contact numbers.

ADF Health and Wellbeing Portal: This portal offers resources, support links, and information for ADF personnel to access health, mental health, and wellbeing services.

<http://www.defence.gov.au/health/healthportal/>

ADF Garrison / Health Centres

Phone: Refer webpage for specific contact numbers.

Garrison health is primarily responsible for the delivery and management of quality, safe, efficient and effective health care to ADF personnel within Australia and on non-operational postings overseas. Each State/ Region has a particular health garrison/centre available to members. Please refer to the following listing to obtain the most convenient for you: <https://www.defence.gov.au/adf-members-families/local-services-events/garrison-health-centres>

ADF Chaplaincy Services

Phone: 1300 333 362: Request the “On-call Chaplain” in your area.

Chaplaincy services within Defence provide a 24/7 on call independent assessment, counselling, guidance and support service, as well as referrals to assist with accessing health and wellbeing providers.

ADF Member and Family Helpline

Phone: Refer webpage for specific contact numbers.

Defence Member and Family Helpline is a confidential helpline offering ADF members and their families advice and support 24/7. Website: <https://www.defence.gov.au/members-families/support-services/defence-member-and-family-helpline>

Beyond Blue

Phone: 1300 224636

Beyond Blue makes available mental health online counsellors providing free confidential counselling 24/7 at local call phone cost.

DVA Mental Health Support

Phone: 1800 VETERAN / 1800 838 372
(Business Hours Only)

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) provides a crises contact list referring current and former serving members and families to a variety of external mental health services. Website: <https://www.dva.gov.au/get-support/health-support/health-services/mental-health-care/crisis-contacts>

DVA Veteran Chaplaincy Program

Phone: 1800 011 046 (24/7 Support through Open Arms)

The DVA VCP provides pastoral care and spiritual health support during crisis, high intensity or acute events, in particular supporting adjustment, grief, and recovery during times of transition. The VCP is specifically available to Defence Veterans in Townsville, Brisbane and Perth.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Phone: 1300 687327

Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services are provided by [Converge International](#) and available for:

- All eligible Defence Australian Public Service (APS) employees, their immediate family members and their supervisors/managers
- Australian Defence Force (ADF) Reservists and their immediate family members
- Officers or Instructors of ADF Cadets, Cadets, and their immediate families

I AM SICK

Phone: 1800-IMSICK (1800 467 425)

ADF I AM SICK is a national 24-hour call service providing health support for all ADF personnel within Australia if they become ill or injured after hours or are not close to an on-base health facility.

Lifeline

Phone: 13 11 14

Lifeline is a national charity providing all Australians experiencing emotional distress with access to free 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention services.

Open Arms

Phone: 1800 011 046.

Open Arms provides free and confidential face-to-face, telephone and online counselling via appointments for ADF members, veterans, and their families. <https://www.openarms.gov.au/>

RESPECT

Phone: 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)

1800RESPECT provides a confidential information, counselling and support service and is available for free, 24/7 days a week to support people impacted by domestic, family or sexual violence.

Also [text 0458 737 732](https://www.1800respect.org.au/), chat online or video call via <https://www.1800respect.org.au/>

SANE Australia

Phone: Support Line 1800 187 263

SANE offers short and long-term online free digital and telehealth support services for people over 18 years of age with complex mental health needs, and their family, friends and carers. SANE also provides mental health support to people with intellectual disability, autism or acquired brain injury. <https://www.sane.org/>

**Note: All support services are listed online via the ADF DPN*



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- <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.923928>youyou: <https://www.defence.gov.au/adf-members-families/local-services-events/garrison-health-centres>

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A significant number of Defence members suffer from the effects of moral injury. This guide provides them with information about their experience and advice regarding the support they need to successfully navigate the journey towards self-forgiveness and reconnection to life, community, and meaning.

- Spiritual injury
- Moral Injury and its impact on the whole person
- Support through reconnection
- Spiritual counselling and self-forgiveness



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Disclaimer: This guide presents only general information and guidelines to assist people experiencing Moral Injury. These guidelines provide direction in estimating if a person is likely to be at risk of any mental health consequences of Moral Injury. It provides guidance in offering temporary support during an urgent situation. These guidelines are not a substitute for proper crisis intervention training nor are they a form of, or substitute for, psychotherapy. The suggestions presented in this guide are not intended to cure psychological disorders. The reader should keep in mind that people experiencing mental health crises require the services of mental health professionals. When in doubt, always refer a person to a professional for further evaluation.

The photo images used are for illustrative purposes only; the people shown are not linked to the topic.