



MORAL INJURY PSYCHOEDUCATION GROUP

PROGRAM HANDBOOK

Introduction to Acceptance and Forgiveness

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2024 Edition



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This manual can be downloaded at <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn16/moral-injury-psychoeducation-group.asp>. For a hardcopy of the manual, please contact VISN16SCMIRECCEducation@va.gov.

We thank Chaplain Wissusik-Getka for her contributions to the revisions of this Handbook.

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INTRODUCTION TO ACCEPTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Moral Injury Psychoeducation Group! The material was developed at the South Texas Veterans Health Care Service and may be conducted online or face-to-face with a facilitator. In both cases, the facilitator teaches the material and offers Veterans opportunity for comments or questions. If you have decided to attend this group, you likely wonder if you have moral injury and how that has affected you.

The picture on the cover was drawn by a Veteran with moral injury. It reflects her view of herself after a difficult deployment. This picture poignantly portrays how those with moral injury carry damaged self-perceptions and are surrounded with darkness of mind and spirit.

Many Veterans and clinicians are less familiar with the concepts integral to moral injury. They may mistake symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for those of moral injury and question why symptoms are not resolving with therapies for PTSD.

This four-week educational course was developed 1) to introduce concepts related to moral injury and to 2) prepare Veterans for more intensive therapy for moral injury if they later choose that option.

You can attend the four-week group with no further commitment. The facilitator will lead the group and explain the concepts. Members are asked to not share personal stories in this group; however, there are worksheets and materials you may complete between groups if you choose to do so. Completing the worksheets will help you apply the concepts to your own situation, but they will not be collected or reviewed in group. They are to help you think about your own “story” and better understand moral injury.

This program may stir up memories of your time in the military, and we encourage you to engage in self-care through exercise, sleep, stress reduction, and positive spiritual or interpersonal connections. Please seek professional support should you need it. See <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/vsn16/veteran-wellness-guide.asp> for *The Veteran’s Wellness Guide*, an excellent resource. As always, the Veteran’s Crisis Line is available 24-7.



Thank you for taking the first step, and welcome to the group!

*If the group is being conducted online, members may use the chat box for questions or comments.

Pat Pernicano & Kerry Haynes

GROUP TELEHEALTH AGREEMENT

Veterans will be asked to review prior to first telehealth group and consent to:

1. Privacy and Confidentiality

During the visit, I will be in a quiet, private location where the confidential information of group participants cannot be seen or heard by others. I agree to not share the visit link with anyone. The laws protecting the confidentiality of my medical information also apply to telehealth, including group treatment conducted over video telehealth. The VA has instituted procedures and policies to protect my privacy and confidentiality. The group facilitator will lock the virtual medical room to prevent unauthorized persons from entering the visit. Everything said and done in group is confidential. I will protect the confidentiality of all group members by not sharing their names or what is said and done in the group. If I violate this confidentiality, I will be removed from the group. The group facilitator may disclose confidential information without my consent where mandated or permitted by law (e.g., to protect me or others from harm). If a group member has a medical or mental health emergency, the group facilitator may disconnect others from the visit to ensure privacy and to address the emergency.

2. Participation

Participation in this group is voluntary, and I have the right to withdraw from the group at any time. Withdrawing from group would not affect my right to future care or risk the loss or withdrawal of any VA benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I will participate in the group according to the expectations outlined by the group facilitator. For video telehealth therapy groups, cameras will remain on during the entire group unless the group facilitator states otherwise. If I am asked questions or asked to participate in an activity that makes me feel uncomfortable, I can decline, and I will not pressure other group members to participate. If I or the group facilitator have concerns about my meeting group expectations or participating in any aspect of the group, a discussion will occur to determine next steps, including other treatment options.

3. Risks and Consequences

The VA does not record telehealth visits, including group telehealth visits, without prior approval. I will not audio- or video-record or photograph any portion of the group visit. While this visit will not be audio- or video-recorded or photographed by the VA, there is a risk that another group member could audio- or video-record or photograph the visit and share it without knowledge or approval from VA or other group members. If it is known that any group member has audio- or video-recorded or photographed any portion of the visit, then he/she will be removed from group for violating confidentiality; relevant information will be shared with group members. He/she will then be referred for prosecution to the full extent of federal and local laws including applicable laws in the locations of the group facilitator and all group members.

GROUP TELEHEALTH AGREEMENT

4. Behavior

I will do my part to make the group a safe place by being respectful, supportive, and providing helpful feedback. I will avoid language that stereotypes or is insulting. I will be considerate when others are talking, give others an equal chance to speak, and will not engage inside conversations. Violence, threats, and intimidation will not be tolerated. Gossip and grudges can be very destructive. I agree that if I have something to say to another group member, I will say it to the member directly and respectfully rather than talk about him or her with others. I agree that I will not engage in a group video session from a moving vehicle and understand that doing so may result in the group facilitator disconnecting me from the session. If the group facilitator believes that I am impaired by alcohol or substances, using substances (including tobacco, etc.), or engaging in behavior that disrupts the group, I may be asked to leave and/or be disconnected from the group. The group facilitator will have a follow-up discussion with me to determine any necessary changes to my treatment plan.

I have read the agreement for group sessions and agree to follow it. The group facilitator will note in my medical record that I have received, read and agreed to these expectations.

*In developing this consent form, it was necessary to use several technical words; please ask for an explanation of any that you do not understand.



SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY



GROUP OVERVIEW

1. This group is educational and provides information about moral injury.
2. Stories will be used to illustrate group topics.
3. This group does not involve personal sharing.
4. The pre- and posttests help us see what you learned during the group. The final evaluation is for you to give us feedback about the group. Thank you for returning these to the group leader upon request.

Learning Objectives

After this four-week educational group you will:

1. Understand the types of moral injury, how it differs from PTSD, and how it affects people
2. Understand the process of change and figure out where you are in the change process
3. Understand if you have moral injury and what you want to do next

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

SUGGESTED GROUP RULES

In Person Group

1. Silence cell phones at beginning of each group.
2. Protect each other's privacy and confidentiality during and after group.
3. Do not offer advice to other group members.
4. If you need to leave the room, please return as soon as possible.
5. Commit to the 4 weeks. If you will miss a group, please **patient-cancel with scheduling**.
6. Do not share your moral injury story during group. Feel free to contact a group leader, chaplain or your therapist as needed between sessions if you have questions or concerns.
7. Time will be allowed at the end of each group for questions or comments.

Telehealth Group

1. The VA Group Telehealth Agreement spells out guidelines and expectations for a virtual group, including confidentiality, safety and privacy. Group members must read and agree to these guidelines prior to starting the group.
2. Silence cell phones at beginning of each group.
3. Commit to the four weeks. If you will miss a group, please **patient-cancel with scheduling**.
4. Protect each other's privacy and confidentiality during group, i.e., ensure no one else is in the room who could hear the conversation or see who is in attendance.
5. Do not share your moral injury story during group. Feel free to contact a group leader, chaplain or your therapist as needed between sessions if you have questions or concerns.
6. Do not offer advice to other group members.
7. If you need to leave, please post something in the chat box (for example, BRB be right back) so we won't worry about you.
8. Comments or questions may be written in the chat box, and these will be addressed at the end of each group.

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

Group Introductions: Give name, where you were raised, branch of service, and how long/where you served. Say a few words about why you decided to attend this group.

FIRST SESSION GOALS:

- ▶ **DEFINE MORAL PAIN** (normal emotional response) **AND MORAL INJURY** (unresolved dilemma with blame or punitive response).
- ▶ **LEARN HOW MORAL INJURY IS DIFFERENT FROM PTSD**
- ▶ **LEARN ABOUT THE IMPACT OF MORAL INJURY**

WHAT MORAL PAIN IS

- ▶ Moral pain is deep, painful emotions that are triggered by witnessing, being hurt by, or engaging in actions that violate core spiritual, personal, and/or military values. The emotions are in the moment and a normal response to what happened. We all have painful emotions in response to moral violations.
- ▶ Moral pain may stir regret, guilt, grief, and/or empathy.
- ▶ Sometimes moral pain is resolved over time without blame. When it is not resolved, the person becomes stuck in guilt, blame, or judgment of moral injury.

WHAT MORAL INJURY IS

- ▶ Moral injury is not a diagnosis; rather, it is a response to something that happened that violated your core values or beliefs and resulted in a dilemma.
- ▶ Actions, in hindsight, seem wrong, inhumane, immoral, dishonest, or cruel.
- ▶ Moral injury results when there is an unresolved dilemma or moral conflict.
- ▶ Moral injury can occur after a traumatic event but is different from PTSD. In the material that follows, you will learn about the similarities and differences as well as the types of situations that may result in moral injury.

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

MODEL OF MORAL INJURY



Sheila Frankfurt, Ph.D., VISN 17 Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans, "Impact of Moral Injury on Post-deployment Mental Health" (adapted by Dr. Pat Pernicano)

PATHWAYS TO MORAL INJURY

Based on the model above, moral injury occurs when an Individual is confronted by a situation that violates deeply held beliefs, values, and expectations (personal, spiritual, or military). This stirs moral pain and creates an unresolved dilemma. The person...

- ▶ Engages in something that violates core values (participates).
- ▶ Witnesses something and could not do more or prevent the event.
- ▶ Learned of immoral action and looked the other way or did not report it.
- ▶ Uses "if only" thinking for circumstances over which the person has no control.
- ▶ Was hurt or betrayed by someone else, the military, or other entities and now carries bitterness, grief, guilt, or shame.

When something bad happens, we try to explain why. Veterans may blame themselves for what happened, whether they were actually responsible for the event or the outcome. They don't know how to resolve the dilemma and carry guilt, shame, blame, grief, and/or anger.

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

TYPES OF MORAL INJURY

► **Participation**

You may have been involved alone or with others; you may have been following, or not following, rules of engagement/chain of command. Sometimes you do things with others that you would never do alone, due to group pressure. Other times, when you are exhausted or in dangerous situations, you may do things alone you wouldn't do with others.

► **Something you failed to do**

You ignored something, did not report, or failed to do "enough." You may judge yourself for something you did not do and in hindsight, you question your judgment or decision. You might come to believe that had you acted differently, you could have changed the outcome of a negative event. You also might have stood by in the face of injustice and done nothing, later regretting that you did not act or speak up.

► **Carrying dehumanizing memories**

Some missions, humanitarian or combat, expose persons to situations that are beyond the realm of normal human experience. These dehumanizing memories can trigger overwhelming feelings of numbness, helplessness, futility, vulnerability and grief later in time. Such exposure to loss and destruction, during or in the aftermath, can result in moral injury.

► **Unintended outcomes**

Circumstances outside your control often bring grief, regret, or even perceived blame. You could not have known what was going to happen. All the same, you feel responsible. You might have been unable to prevent death or suffering (includes medical and first responders). Accidents or perceived errors and mistakes weigh heavily.

► **Acts of betrayal by peers, leaders, or self**

Betrayal can involve lies, threats, power-control, blaming the recipient, or cover up.

Injury arises when the situation triggers an ethical dilemma or moral conflict.

PTSD VS. MORAL INJURY

Some Veterans have PTSD, some have moral injury and others have both. Below are some of the characteristics of PTSD and moral injury. To have both, a person would experience a traumatic event that also resulted in a moral dilemma.

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

DESCRIPTION OF POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

- ▶ The person who has PTSD experienced an event that involved risk and danger (often life threatening).
- ▶ The trauma exposure resulted in a neurobiological response (arousal ➡ freeze ➡ flight ➡ fight) that persists after the event is over.
- ▶ PTSD results in significant changes in the person's functioning.
- ▶ After the traumatic event, the person does not "calm down" and continues to have symptoms of anxiety and fear.
- ▶ Someone with PTSD is likely to have physical reactions such as sweaty palms, startle, rapid heart rate, or shortness of breath in the presence of smells, sounds, sights, touches or other reminders of the trauma.
- ▶ The person is also likely to have behavioral symptoms such as avoidance (of triggers or situations that resemble the trauma); poor sleep, often with nightmares; and strong emotions when triggered by reminders of the traumatic event.
- ▶ Nightmares may revisit the traumatic event or take place in a similar setting; and they are likely to include danger, fear of harm, helplessness, or being attacked (with or without necessary gear).
- ▶ Events that result in PTSD do not always result in a moral dilemma.

DESCRIPTION OF MORAL INJURY

- ▶ Moral injury is not a diagnosis, and persons who have moral injury may be diagnosed with other conditions, such as depression, adjustment disorder, anxiety, or PTSD.
- ▶ A person with moral injury may experience deep regret, guilt, anger (at "wrongness" or "failure"), sadness or grief, overwhelming loss, poor sleep, rumination (going over and over the past), helplessness, or hopelessness.
- ▶ Veterans with moral injury may feel "unforgiveable" or believe they deserve to be "punished."
- ▶ Something happened that violated deeply held rules, beliefs or values.
- ▶ Moral injury has sometimes been described as a wounding of the soul.

PTSD & MORAL INJURY: SYMPTOM OVERLAP, DIFFERENT MEANINGS

Some symptoms of PTSD resemble those seen in moral injury, yet the root cause of the symptoms is different. See material on the following pages.

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

AVOIDANCE & ISOLATION

PTSD	MORAL INJURY
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Veterans with PTSD may avoid persons, places or situations that remind them of the traumatic event. It is out of fear.▶ They remain concerned for their safety and are uncomfortable when they have less control over what “could” happen.▶ Veterans with PTSD believe that the world is dangerous.▶ After the military, Veterans with PTSD avoid situations that “could” present danger, including crowds. They scope out “escape” routes. They have well developed plans for family and personal safety (home alarms, weapons, etc.).▶ Someone with PTSD may avoid talking about the military or specific missions because it raises anxiety. The person may avoid movies or TV shows about the military because they trigger memories of the trauma and raise anxiety or result in distress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Veterans with moral injury may also avoid others, however, it is not out of fear. This kind of avoidance is out of lost hope, disillusionment, and self-judgment.▶ Individuals with moral injury judge that no one else would understand or accept what they have done. A life of secrecy develops, and they do not want to talk about the military or specific missions. Many persons with moral injury describe it as hiding the “real me” from others while seeing, in the mirror, a shattered or monstrous self.▶ The drawing on the cover of this handbook was done by a Veteran with moral injury. Veterans with moral injury isolate themselves because they feel “unworthy,” and they may stop previous religious/spiritual practices.



SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

NEGATIVE THINKING

PTSD	MORAL INJURY
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Veterans with PTSD believe that the world is not safe. They remain ready to protect and defend themselves and their families from harm. They believe they have to take extra safety measures.▶ Veterans generalize what happened in the combat zone or deployment location to their current life.▶ Veterans do not trust others, who remind them of insurgents.▶ Veterans with PTSD engage in negative thinking that is unrealistic and black-and-white.▶ Their nightmares reinforce their beliefs about safety, and they “replay” situations that involve inescapable danger.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Veterans with moral injury develop hopeless, negative thinking over what happened.▶ They think that the world should be safe and that some things should never have happened. They become bitter over negative outcomes that, using hindsight, they think might have been avoided.▶ Their thinking is more depressive than fearful.▶ They may judge that they have “failed” or that what they have done is “unforgivable.”▶ They lose faith in themselves and others and no longer trust their judgment.▶ They may have dreams about being hunted, haunted or chased by those they think they “failed.” They may dream about being helpless in the face of death.



SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

IRRITABILITY OR QUICK ANGER

PTSD	MORAL INJURY
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Many Veterans with PTSD are very irritable, and anger is easily triggered, usually when they feel vulnerable, pressured, out of control or afraid.▶ Due to the high nervous system arousal associated with PTSD, Veterans can become quickly angry at perceived threats in their environment.▶ Poor sleep, with interruptions such as nightmares, can result in fatigue and irritability with poor mood regulation.▶ Use of alcohol or drugs to sleep, to block memories, or to numb emotions can contribute to mood changes.▶ Anger in those with PTSD is usually part of the fear-freeze-flight-fight response.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Veterans with moral injury may report depressive symptoms (low energy, tearfulness, depressed mood, negative thinking, self-blame, poor motivation, short fuse, irritability and/or over-sensitivity).▶ Veterans with moral injury may have unresolved grief or loss displayed as a negative mood.▶ Poor sleep due to nightmares or rumination (going over and over things in one's mind) results in fatigue, which affects focus, concentration and mood.▶ Use of alcohol or drugs to sleep or suppress feelings contributes to mood changes.▶ Veterans with moral injury can become very angry or bitter over things that should not (in their opinion) have happened.▶ Veterans may have moral outrage, righteous indignation and desire for justice or retaliation.



SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

REASONS MORAL INJURY REMAIN UNRESOLVED

- ▶ Moral injury remains unresolved when Veterans don't let go of self-blame. Guilt keeps people stuck.
- ▶ Service members are told to push through and contain their feelings. The feelings come back later.
- ▶ Service members are not taught how to cope with moral injury.
- ▶ Veterans engage in "what if?" thinking and remain in the "land of should have, would have, could have."
- ▶ Veterans wish for revenge, and the bitterness inside is like a poison.

The following information is taken in part from Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, "Shattered Assumptions: Toward an Understanding of Trauma," Presentation to VA Chaplains, April 9, 2013.

After the Veteran comes home, he or she is...

- ▶ Removed from war context
- ▶ Not with buddies/unit
- ▶ With family/friends who don't understand

The Veteran analyzes and no longer understands or approves of own actions

MULTIDIMENSIONAL "MORAL REPAIR"

Moral Injury can result in problems with body, mind, community and spirituality. Resolving moral injury requires what Nash refers to as moral repair, a healing of the whole person. This kind of restoration is multidimensional. At the VA, we endorse multidimensional Veteran care.

- ▶ BODY: Sleep, Stress Load, Physical Health (diet, exercise, play), Restoration of Focus and Concentration
- ▶ MIND: Emotions, Guilt, Distorted Thinking
- ▶ COMMUNITY: Connecting with Others
- ▶ SPIRITUALITY: Meditation, Forgiveness, Beauty/Nature, Prayer, Higher Power/God

From William P. Nash, "Common Goals for Preventing and Repairing Moral Injury," DCoE Chaplains Working Group Teleconference, 4 March 2015.

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

Story: “The Burden Bag” (Pernicano, 2014)

“THE BURDEN BAG”

Modified Veteran Version (2018). In Pernicano, P. (2014). *Using Trauma Focused Therapy Stories: Interventions for Therapists, Children and their Caregivers*. NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.

There once was a rabbit named Jack that moved as slow as a turtle. He could not hop or run like the other rabbits, and he was carrying a huge backpack that weighed him down. It hung nearly to the ground and looked like it was full of rocks.

One day, a friend approached him. “You know, a rabbit is not meant to move as slow as a turtle. Why are you carrying that heavy backpack? Why don’t you take it off?”

Jack replied, “It’s my burden bag. I never take it off.”

The friend asked, “Not to sleep? Not to eat? Not to play?”

Jack replied in a grouchy voice, “I told you, I NEVER take it off.”

His friend was curious. “I’ve never seen a burden bag. What types of burdens do you carry around?”

Jack said, “I don’t really remember everything that’s in it, because I have been collecting burdens for a very long time.” At his friend’s request, he opened the backpack and revealed some of what was within.

The burdens were stuffed into Ziploc bags and labeled such things as, “Stupid mistakes,” “Total failures,” “Family problems,” “Imperfections,” “Betrayals,” and “Rejections.” The two largest, heaviest burdens were labeled “Unforgiveable” and “Unspeakable.”

His friend remarked that it was no wonder Jack moved as slow as a turtle. They walked together until they found themselves at the shore of a beautiful lake. A sign by the lake said, “No fishing.”

“What is this place?” asked Jack.

His friend replied, “This is a bottomless lake. You can throw burdens in the lake if you want to lighten your load. You watch them sink, and you can’t fish them back out.” His friend added, “Some people call it God’s Pond, and others call it Forgiveness Lake. It doesn’t matter what you call it. It is open to everyone.”

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

Jack was not easily convinced. He did not know what he would do if he emptied his backpack or lightened his load. Jack said, “These memories are important. I can’t throw them away like they don’t matter.”

“Of course, they matter!” said his friend. “And you aren’t throwing away the memories - just the weight and pain of them, so that you can lighten your load and move forward.”

Jack wasn’t sure he even wanted to *touch* the unforgiveable, unspeakable ones. He didn’t know if he *deserved* to be free of them. His friend said, “You don’t have to deserve it. The lake is here, and it is your choice.”

In that moment, Jack realized he had a choice – to remain weighed down by his burdens or to release them. With some fear and trepidation, as his friend encouraged him, Jack flung the first burden in a high arc out over the lake. As it hit the lake’s clear surface, small circles spread out around it, and the burden sank below the surface. Jack felt an unexpected surge of relief. One by one, he threw the burdens into the lake.

When Jack was done, at least for the time being, he was exhausted, because as you know, it is hard work to let go of burdens. He asked, “But what do I do when I’m tempted to collect new burdens?”

His friend answered, “That is bound to happen, because, after all, you are ‘only rabbit.’ You might want to try collecting blessings. Blessings are things like carrots, lettuce, good memories, laughter and playing with other rabbits. Fill the backpack with blessings, and every day, count your blessings. That will leave less room for burdens. And you can always come back to the lake.”

Jack came to realize that he was not meant to move as slow as a turtle. Perhaps you, too, will realize who you are meant to be and find a way to lighten your load.

BURDEN BAG WORKSHEET

We all carry burdens from the past, some of which weigh us down and prevent us from living our lives more fully in the present. Carrying heavy burdens makes life more difficult. It is helpful to engage in practices to release or turn over burdens from the past.

Think about burdens you are carrying that might relate to moral injury.

Veterans are encouraged to complete the worksheet at home. Identify which burdens you would like to address to lighten your load and pursue a “new normal.”

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

“The Burden Bag” Worksheet (Pernicano, 2018)

WHAT BURDENS DO YOU CARRY DUE TO MORAL INJURY?

MENTAL

- ☐ “Stupid Mistakes”/Regrets
- ☐ Imperfections (not “good enough”)
- ☐ Guilt (Healthy or Unhealthy)
- ☐ Failure

EMOTIONAL

- ☐ Rejections/Hurt
- ☐ Grief and Loss
- ☐ Bitterness/Grudges/Blame

SPIRITUAL

- ☐ Unworthy
- ☐ Lost Purpose or Meaning
- ☐ Lost of Changed Faith
- ☐ “Unforgiveables”

RELATIONAL

- ☐ Family Problems
- ☐ Grudges/Blame
- ☐ Betrayals
- ☐ Abandonment
- ☐ Lost of Trust
- ☐ Injustice

PHYSICAL

- ☐ Chronic Fatigue and/or Pain

☐ OTHER:

SESSION 2: THE CHANGE PROCESS



Change

REVISIT *THE BURDEN BAG*: BRIEF GROUP REACTIONS

INTRODUCTION TO TRANSTHEORETICAL STAGES OF CHANGE MODEL:

This model was developed by Prochaska and DiClemente in the late 1970s and has evolved through numerous studies on behaviors such as smoking, weight loss, using drugs/alcohol, or exercising. It is about individual decision making and intentional change. Change takes place as a process, one step at a time, not all at once. Change involves thoughts/beliefs, feelings, attitudes and actions.

Precontemplation - The first stage of change is called **Precontemplation**.

- ▶ At this stage, the person can't see the problem. Other people may see or point out the problem. At this stage of change, people likely resist change. They may think the situation is hopeless and outside their control. They may minimize negative consequences.

SESSION 2: THE CHANGE PROCESS

- ▶ For moral injury, the person is usually “stuck” in an attitude of blame or hopelessness and avoids thinking and talking about what happened, wishing it would go away.

Joe wishes his wife would “stop picking on” him. He spends much of his time alone, and he snaps at her when she asks him to do something. He has been drinking more since military retirement, but it helps him fall asleep. He dreams about things from the military that bother him, and he wonders if what he did is forgivable. “There’s nothing wrong with me. It is better to not think or talk about the past.” He doubts he will go to the next reunion because they will all be talking about the military. He just wants to get over it and stop feeling angry and guilty.

Joe is in Precontemplation.

Contemplation - This is the second stage of change. The person is aware there is a problem and is tired of feeling so stuck.

- ▶ *Thinking about change is part of the change process.*
- ▶ The person realizes that there is a problem with choices or behavior. A partner or spouse may encourage a change.
- ▶ The person wants to understand why the problem is happening and thinks about possible solutions.
- ▶ The person weighs the pros and cons of making a change.
- ▶ Someone at this stage may underestimate the benefits of making a change and may dwell on the barriers.
- ▶ During contemplation, a person is more open minded and considers doing something to change in the next few months.
- ▶ The person would like to get back to “normal” but lacks the skills or knowledge to do so.
- ▶ The person considers seeking help for moral injury. Someone with moral injury may put off getting help because it is emotionally painful to open that can of worms. But carrying around moral injury is a heavy load.
- ▶ The person keeps thinking about whether to change or seek help.
- ▶ The end of this stage is a time of anxiety, eagerness, excitement, anticipation and planning activity.

Joe went to his reunion, because some of the guys wanted to see him. While they were hanging out, they talked about some of their experiences. It turns out that a couple of the other Veterans also have bad dreams, and they can’t stop thinking about what happened. They feel guilty and sad; many are struggling with family or marital problems. Some of

SESSION 2: THE CHANGE PROCESS

them are going to the VA for mental health issues, and they say it is helping. Others are trying to stay busy with work or family. Joe starts thinking about his emotions, his mood, his drinking, his marriage and his sleep issues. He wonders if he might go to the VA and ask for help. He is starting to realize that he has a problem related to his military service.

Joe is in the Contemplation Stage.

Preparation – This is the third stage of change.

- ▶ At this stage, the person thinks more about the future than about the past and plans to take action. There is still some ambivalence about change.
- ▶ This shift occurs when the benefits of changing are clear and outweigh the drawbacks. The person realizes that making a change will improve the quality of life.
- ▶ During this stage, the person may make a few small changes and see the benefit of those changes.
- ▶ For those with moral injury, this phase may include reading about moral injury or connecting with other Veterans who shared the Veteran's experiences.
- ▶ Veterans may participate in peer support or Wounded Warrior activities.
- ▶ Veterans may ask about available treatments and make arrangements at work to be able to attend.
- ▶ At this stage, a Veteran might sign up for a class on moral injury.

Joe talks to his wife, who encourages him to get help. He calls the VA and makes an appointment. He attends that first appointment and mentions what is going on with him. He asks if he might have PTSD. The staff person said he would have to go through a mental health interview to figure that out. The staff person said that Joe mentioned some things that might point to moral injury. He gave Joe a brief introduction to moral injury and a pamphlet. He invited Joe to attend an educational class that would be a first step. It would introduce Joe to PTSD and moral injury and give him some ideas about what to do next.

Joe is in the Preparation Stage.

Action Stage – This is the fourth stage of change.

- ▶ This is the stage when the person takes action over a longer time period.
- ▶ The person has a plan and commits time and energy to the change process.
- ▶ Change is more visible to others.

SESSION 2: THE CHANGE PROCESS

- For those with moral injury, this phase includes active participation in a class or therapy (individual or group) focused on moral injury.

Joe decides to attend the educational group. He clears his schedule and attends four appointments. After each class he reviews the material and does the worksheets. He participates in the group by raising his hand, answering questions, and listening carefully. Joe comes to the conclusion that he is experiencing moral injury, and he wants to get help for it. He is not quite sure yet what he wants to do, but he commits to action.

Joe is in the Action Stage.

*You might get to the **Preparation Stage** during this group, and in the last session, you can choose what to do next. *Staying in precontemplation or contemplation is a little like floating in quicksand.*

Story: “Floating in Quicksand” (Pernicano, P. 2020, Unpublished Story)

“FLOATING IN QUICKSAND”

There once was a man who was floating in quicksand, out in the middle of nowhere, keeping his head above water and trying to survive. He had not seen the quicksand in time to stop his fall. He regretted falling in and wished that he could retrace his steps and avoid this dilemma. He said to himself, “It’s my own fault. I wasn’t paying close enough attention.” But what was done was done, and now, he was resigned to stay afloat as best he could. He knew not to struggle or panic, because that might pull him under. Perhaps help would come.

No one had passed by since he fell in, and he was starting to lose hope. He feared he would get sucked under when his strength gave out.

Then came a voice, “Hey, there, what’s going on down there?” Someone had finally come upon him!

The man replied in an irritated voice, “Isn’t it obvious?! I’m floating in quicksand - treading water, keeping myself alive! Might you give me a hand?”

The stranger pondered as he viewed the situation. “Yes, I can give you a hand. Or you can carefully turn yourself around and use the rope ladder that is right behind you.”

Hmmm. He had missed that solution. Right behind him was a rope ladder, so he was probably not the first person who had faced the quicksand dilemma.

Life is a little like that - something unexpected happens and you find yourself stuck. You can survive by floating in quicksand, but if you are ready to move in a new direction, you might find a whole new point of view.

SESSION 2: THE CHANGE PROCESS

THE QUICKSAND WORKSHEET

Being “stuck” in moral-injury related behaviors (circle areas where you are stuck)

1) **AVOIDANCE**

I avoid thinking and talking about things that happened in the military. I avoid reminders of the military.

2) **DISCONNECTING FROM OTHERS**

I distance from others. I have trouble letting others get close to me. I try to be in control.

3) **EXPRESSING FEELINGS**

My feelings became more negative. I over-control or under-control my emotions.

4) **ISOLATION**

I stopped doing things I used to enjoy. I am more of a loner.

5) **SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

I use or used drugs or alcohol to forget, cope or sleep.

6) **SPIRITUAL / FAITH**

I lost my faith or stopped worship practices.

7) **SELF-ESTEEM**

I lost respect for myself or think less of myself.

8) **TRUST**

I lost faith in others and no longer trust people to do “good” or “right.”

Thinking about the Stages of Change:

- 1) Which of these “stuck” areas are a problem for you?
- 2) If you ranked them, which ones are causing the most problems for you?
- 3) When you weigh the pros and cons of making a change, what might you focus on first?
- 4) Are you ready to make a change?

SESSION 3: RESPONSIBILITY AND GUILT



REVISIT *BEING STUCK IN QUICKSAND*: BRIEF GROUP REACTIONS

WHAT IS GUILT?

Many Veterans with moral injury report having “guilt.” **The word *guilt* is appropriate for the feeling experienced when you do something wrong.** Starting in childhood, we learn to take responsibility for our actions and “pay the price” with apology or restitution. As an adult, it is appropriate to feel guilty and face the consequences or take responsibility when you do something wrong.

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Guilt might come from...

- ▶ Deliberate harm or cruelty to others that was unsanctioned or unnecessary
- ▶ Not reporting a violation of military standards (secrecy, cover-up)
- ▶ Not doing what's "right" (for example, not speaking up when it is called for)
- ▶ Blaming someone else for something you did (not taking responsibility)
- ▶ Not following chain of command or rules of engagement
- ▶ Being complacent and neglecting duty

What about when you didn't do anything wrong? Sometimes there is a negative outcome in spite of good intentions. You think you must have done something wrong because you feel terrible about what happened. It is human nature to look for someone to blame, especially when "bad things" happen to good people. Sometimes no one is to blame.

RESPONSIBILITY

Responsibility is complicated. It is good to take responsibility for your part of things. It is also good to consider other factors that affected the outcome. Responsibility for "wrongs" varies by participation, intention, predictability and sanction. **A "bad outcome" does not mean someone did anything "wrong."**

1) Participation:

- ▶ If **someone else** hurt or assaulted you, ordered a cover up, was dishonest or used poor judgment, you are not responsible. We call this type of moral injury a "betrayal."
- ▶ If you were a bystander, you are not responsible; but you might wish you could have done something to change the outcome.
- ▶ If you were an active participant, and something went wrong, responsibility varies by intention, predictability and sanction.

2) Intention:

- ▶ When you had good intentions, but something went wrong, it is appropriate to have grief, remorse, sadness or regret. This is the case with training accidents or civilian casualties.
- ▶ If you inflict purposeful harm on someone, responsibility varies by sanction.
- ▶ Other factors (emotional overload, lack of sleep, heavy combat, loss of troops, peer pressure) can contribute to decisions and negative outcomes.

3) Predictability:

- ▶ You are less responsible when the event is sudden, unexpected, and unpredictable. You might blame yourself for not seeing it coming; yet at the time, you could not see it coming.

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- ▶ You bear more responsibility if the event was predictable and intentional, unless it was sanctioned.

4) Sanction:

- ▶ If an event was ordered or sanctioned, you may still have moral injury if what happened was at odds with your deeply held beliefs or values.
- ▶ You might carry the burden of secrecy and guilt if there was a cover up or you witnessed something wrong and did not speak up.
- ▶ If you engaged in unsanctioned behavior that caused harm, you are more responsible for the outcome.

It is important to figure out your own responsibility and be accountable for your part. Once you determine what piece is yours (of what happened), you can work on forgiveness and pursue actions to restore or repair. Forgiveness will be the focus of the next session.

RESPONDING TO GUILT

Responses to guilt can be HEALTHY or UNHEALTHY

1) Healthy Responses to Guilt

- ▶ Guilt is a feeling you experience after you do something wrong and want to resolve it. Healthy response to guilt motivates actions that restore trust, repair brokenness and right a wrong.
- ▶ When you violate deeply held beliefs, values, standards (military, personal or religious), or morals, it is appropriate to feel guilt (and regret or remorse).
- ▶ How to address guilt in healthy ways
 - o It helps to confess the wrong (take responsibility for your part) and commit to actions that restore balance and repair damage.
 - o Different cultures have different traditions to help their members take responsibility when they have wronged another person or the community.

African tradition

The person responsible for the harm offers apology and restitution. The focus is on responsibility and making wrongs right by repairing and rebuilding relationships.

Buddhist tradition

There is a teaching of Khanti or Ksanti, which is the Buddhist concept of patience, forbearance, and tolerance: the capacity to let go of interpersonal resentment and to cultivate a quality of acceptance and forgiveness. Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past. Forgiveness is a

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way to move on. In Buddhist psychology, forgiveness is understood as a way to end suffering, to bring dignity and harmony to our lives. Forgiveness is fundamentally for our own sake, for our mental health.

Christian tradition

In the Christian tradition, God does not change hearts through punishment or retribution. God, like a human parent, teaches, directs and offers restoration through love. Love restores wholeness and transforms the human heart. In the Bible, people are transformed in the midst of guilt and expectation of punishment.

Jewish tradition

In Jewish theology, forgiveness is offered to and accepted by the one who is wronged. Judaism places great emphasis on Teshuva, or repentance, in response to God's love and for reconciliation. Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement when those of Jewish faith confess, repent, and ask for forgiveness from God and from others.

Muslim tradition

Forgiveness is done as an imitation of Allah's love, mercy and justice. Allah is described as loving and forgiving toward those who repent. Before embarking on a Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, Muslims ask for forgiveness of whomever they may have wronged.

Native American tradition

People tell their stories. There is a process of 1) praying, 2) expressing feelings about what happened, 3) discussing with elders and 5) reconciling through a ceremony of justice.

Summary of Traditions

- The traditions are based on restorative justice and peacemaking.
- Most of the traditions involve confession in the presence of a tribe, elders, or a fair/compassionate other.
- Most of the traditions involve action to make amends or restitution.
- Most of the traditions imply a commitment to living differently and not repeating the wrongdoing.
- Restorative justice is a relational process that repairs harm.
- Justice focuses on responsibility and accountability.
- Justice seeks to heal, not to punish.
- Justice seeks to transform broken lives and relationships.

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If you do not have formal religious beliefs, your spirituality might relate to your core values, to compassion, to nature, to giving back, to engaging in restitution or amends for wrongs. If you do not have religious or spiritual practices, you can engage in restorative practices with acceptance of time served.

2) Unhealthy response to guilt = punitive

- o Even though the person is responsible to some degree, it is unhealthy if that person carries harsh or punitive guilt that stays unresolved.
- o Unhealthy, punitive guilt is a burden you carry that keeps you stuck. It eats away at you from the inside out, like a poison.
- o It does not motivate you toward forgiveness or compassion.
- o It does not seek or accept help.
- o It focuses on harsh retribution or revenge.
- o Punitive guilt is judgmental.
- o Punitive guilt hurts relationships.
- o Punitive guilt can result in self-medication, substance abuse and suicidal ideation.
- o It turns you into judge and jury. You miss the opportunity for restitution and reconciliation.
- o Punitive guilt results in bitterness, anger, blame, and even shame.
- o Shame is unhealthy. Shame is judgment of the self. Shame results in feeling unacceptable or unlovable. **SHAME = I AM wrong. GUILT= I DID wrong.**

► **Misplaced Guilt:** Sometimes there is no real guilt, because there was no wrongdoing. The person did nothing wrong but feels responsible for what happened. The person might be experiencing grief, deep regret or painful loss. You feel terrible because of a negative outcome and judge you must feel deep regret, or painful loss. You feel terrible because of a negative outcome and judge you must have done something wrong. **Feeling guilty when you are not responsible might mean...**

- o You have unrealistic expectations (aiming for perfection, thinking errors are unacceptable, wanting to have total control). You judge imperfection as unacceptable and vulnerability as “weak.” Military training reinforces this.
- o You ignored the intent and context of the act.
- o You don’t know why you survived and someone else did not. The survivor has no control over who lives and who dies, so this might be more about **survivor grief** (for those who were hurt or died) than **survivor guilt**.
- o You blame yourself for freeze/flight/fight: This neurobiological stress response is an uncontrollable, involuntary, nervous system response; so is the adrenaline rush and euphoria when you survive a high-risk situation. You don’t have to beat yourself up for a brain reaction.

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- o You are using 20-20 hindsight: It is not fair to judge yourself now for what you did not know then.
- o You find it hard to accept that you can't save everyone: You aren't a superhero. "You can't save the whole world." Medical "errors" are expected and forgivable.
- o You blame yourself for a betrayal. Betrayal does not call for any "guilt" for the person who was betrayed.

Willingness to Lighten Your Load

You do not have to carry the burden of moral injury for the rest of your life. There might be some things in your rucksack to consider releasing. As in the Burden Bag, you will always have the memories, but the suffering can be lightened. The first step to acceptance and forgiveness is willingness to give up what you are carrying. With willingness, you step out of contemplation and journey toward action, even when you don't know where the journey will end.

TIME SERVED

Pat Pernicano (2023)

There once was a man who appeared before a benevolent judge in the court of *Acceptance* and *Forgiveness*. He had struggled to accept and forgive things from his past, and he carried a heavy burden of bitter pain. He was serving a self-imposed life sentence without parole.

The judge asked him to stand up and said, "You have been in this prison a long time. I would like to hear your story." The man stood up. He was reluctant to tell his story because he knew it would stir up his painful memories. But not talking about it had not helped, so he hesitantly did what the judge asked.

After he finished, the judge said, "You are free to go – with time served- it is time for you to be released. No one deserves life in prison for what you have told me. You have served many years in this dark and painful place. Go collect your things and reclaim your life."

The man **went back to his cell and locked himself in.**

Later that day, the guard came by the cell. He asked the man, "Why are you still here? It's time for you to go. The judge released you with time served." The guard laid the key by the cell door.

Two days later, **the man was still in his cell.**

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He had not used the key. The guard came and said, “I gave you the key to the cell door and it is still there on the floor.” The guard picked up the key, unlocked the cell, opened the door, and said, “You are free to go. What are you waiting for?”

The man had many reasons he had remained in the cell. He was still carrying bitter pain, and he was not sure what to do next.

The man in the cell said, “It’s not that easy. Being free to go is about two things - one part is your mind, knowing it is time, and the other part is spiritual, wondering if you want it and if you deserve it. I’m working on freeing myself. Until I accept what you offer me and free myself, I’m not really free to go.”

The guard was baffled and said, “Well in the court’s eyes, you are free to go. So go, continue your journey of mind and spirit somewhere else.”

For some, it is not enough to be freed by a benevolent judge, with time served. Someone else may free you, but you remain bound by your inner pain and struggles. Freeing yourself and releasing your pain is not as easy as it seems. And yet, it is your decision to make.

The man collected his things and left the jail cell. He would find the key to free himself in mind and spirit. He would reclaim his life. But for now, he would continue his journey as he searched for acceptance and forgiveness.

QUESTIONS ABOUT “TIME SERVED”

1. Life in emotional prison is tiring and non-productive. What would it mean to free yourself?
2. How will you know when enough is enough?
3. Stages of change involve making a decision after considering the risks and benefits. When trying to jump off a high dive, your heart pounds and your palms sweat. You’re tempted to leave the board and quit trying. Consider getting to the end of the board: have your fear, and jump.
4. Are you willing to get up on the high dive?
5. Are you ready to have your fear, and jump?

SESSION 4: ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS, AND RESTORATION



REVISIT *TIME SERVED*: BRIEF GROUP REACTIONS

READ TOGETHER: *THE MONSTER WITHIN*

THE MONSTER WITHIN

(Pernicano, revised 2024)

There once was a kingdom where people lived in peace. They were neighborly and kind to one another, and they shared what they had. A cocky young wizard in training hoped that one day he might be the best wizard in the kingdom. He practiced with his wand and learned all he could from the Great Wizard. The Great Wizard taught him many things and also cautioned him to be patient because his full talents and skills would emerge in time, when he was ready.

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The young wizard was impatient, and one day he went beyond what he had been taught. “I’ll do it my way,” he thought. “I’ll show them what I can do. I’ll prove my worth.”

As he waved his wand, he realized it was beyond his control, and out of the tip came a horrible monster. His red eyes glared, and his face contorted in rage. The huge monster towered over the young wizard, sneered at him in scorn, and said, “Ha-ha, look what you have done! You have released me far before your time, and I will wreak havoc on the kingdom. You have freed me, and I will destroy you and your kingdom! I do as I please - you can’t stop me!

The monster ran to the village and began destroying everything in his path. He tossed people aside, tromped on gardens, and bashed in the beautiful homes. People screamed in fear and ran in all directions.

The young wizard cringed in shame, “What have I done?!” and called out to the Great Wizard, “I have done a terrible thing; please help, please fix this!” He regretted what he had done to the depths of his soul.

He heard the voice of the Great Wizard. “Only you can fix this. When you figure it out, you will know what to do.”

“Let me get him out of the village,” the young wizard thought. “At least then I can minimize the damage. He lured the monster to follow him and ran to the hills where he could hide in a cave.

The monster pursued him, bellowing, “I am a monster of your making. You can’t run or hide from me. I will sniff you out wherever you go, and I will destroy you and your people.”

The young wizard hid in a cave, and the monster lurked outside, saying, “I’m waiting for you. You can’t hide forever.”

The young wizard decided he had to leave the cave, and he would come out fighting. “I will draw my sword and kill the monster. I need to kill him so that once again the village can live in peace.” He heard the voice of the Great Wizard. “You can’t kill a monster of your own making. He is part of you, and you will die trying.”

He asked the Great Wizard, “What am I to do?” and the answer was, “When you figure it out you will know what to do.”

The young wizard replied, “I may die trying, but even if it is the last thing I do, I will destroy him.”

He leapt out of the cave, his sword drawn. The monster charged him. His red eyes glared, and his face was contorted in rage. Just before the monster reached him, the young wizard knew what he had to do.

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He dropped his sword, opened his arms wide, and watched the astonished monster charge into his embrace.

The voice of the Great Wizard came to him: “Good job. You can’t hide from or destroy a monster of your own making. When you face and embrace him, you are made whole.”

The young wizard returned to the village. The people forgave his youthful indiscretion, and he vowed to help them restore their gardens and homes. In time he would become a great wizard, but for now he would try to forgive himself, accept his limitations and grow into potential as he forgave himself. After all, each of us will have monsters to face and embrace – it is part of accepting and forgiving and growing into who we might one day be.

SHARING QUESTION: HOW IS THIS A STORY OF ACCEPTING AND FORGIVING?

It has been said that without forgiveness, there is no peace.

1. Healing from moral injury includes empathy for yourself and others. Empathy is responding to the feelings of others.
2. Healing from moral injury includes compassion for yourself and others. *Compassion*, which means “suffering with,” is an awareness of suffering that triggers a strong desire to help.
3. When you experience compassion and empathy, you can accept and forgive human imperfection and fallibility.

SESSION 4: ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS, AND RESTORATION

ACCEPTANCE = MOVING ON, GETTING UNSTUCK

“You can’t start the next chapter of your life if you keep rereading the last one.” If you were reading a book series, you might get “stuck” in chapter 3, book 3. You can’t believe what happened in that chapter. Some of your favorite characters died unexpectedly, others really “messed up,” and the end of the chapter leaves you hanging, without resolution. There is a sense of hopelessness, and you aren’t sure you want to finish the book or the series.

- ▶ It is important to keep reading, to move on to the next chapters and to the next books in the series. You can’t know what is coming, and you won’t find out unless you keep going.
- ▶ Your time in the military was a chapter in your life. You remember the comradery, promises made, and the leaders, both the good role models and the ones that let you down. You remember the worst moments when you were not your “best self” or when others betrayed you.
- ▶ You can’t start the next chapter of your life if you keep re-reading those earlier chapters. You can’t erase or change the past, but you can accept it as part of your whole life story.

Acceptance means you stop trying to re-write the past. You don’t let the past totally define who you are today. You move through the pain, accept it, grieve it, and head in a new direction.

FORGIVENESS= THE CHOICE TO MOVE BEYOND PAIN

- ▶ Forgiveness is a process of the head and the heart, a form of “radical acceptance.” Radical acceptance is accepting yourself and your circumstances (reality) to better move through and past what has happened. It is accepting things the way they are, without resistance. “It is what it is.”
 1. Carrying the burden of guilt or anger hurts you.
 2. An attitude of “punishment deserved” keeps you stuck.
 3. Forgiveness is acknowledging that no one deserves life in prison. “Time served.”
 4. Forgiveness is release of your burden(s), even the “unforgiveable” or “unmentionable” ones.
 5. When you choose forgiveness, even when it is “undeserved,” you choose to move beyond pain.
 6. Forgiveness comes from a place of compassion (for yourself or others). It heals brokenness and restores wholeness
 7. The act of forgiveness (to forgive and be forgiven) is for the person carrying the burden, to relinquish the load.

SESSION 4: ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS, AND RESTORATION

In the movie, “The Mission” (1986), a true story starring Robert DeNiro and Jeremy Irons, a slave trader hits bottom. With the support of a Jesuit priest, he faces the natives he has enslaved for many years and is at their mercy. He expects death, but they offer mercy. In response to this “gift,” he serves the tribe the remainder of his life.

Forgiveness is the choice to move beyond pain. The act of forgiveness (to forgive and to be forgiven) is for the person carrying the burden, to relinquish the load.

What Forgiveness IS	What Forgiveness is NOT
Accepting imperfection	Forgetting
Choosing to not get even	Pardoning
Willingness to let go	Excusing
Decision to move forward	Condoning
Making peace with it or with self	Reconciling with others (may not be advised or possible)
Non-punitive	Blaming
Restoring your values	Living with bitterness, revenge, or self-righteousness
Taking a hook out of yourself	Letting someone else off the hook

WHY IS FORGIVENESS IMPORTANT?

Forgiveness has been related to...

- ▶ Better physical health with improved immune system & reduced risk for cardiovascular problems.
- ▶ Better mental health and reduced rumination.
- ▶ Reduced stress (it can lower basal cortisol, a stress hormone that affects overall health and sexual performance).
- ▶ Better relationships and better spiritual health for the forgiver.

SESSION 4: ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS, AND RESTORATION

WHERE YOU GO FROM HERE

1. You may participate in moral injury therapy focused on trauma, forgiveness, responsibility, guilt, and finding a “new normal.”
2. You may request to talk with a chaplain about moral injury if you are not sure what to do, or if you have questions about your own moral injury.
3. If you have PTSD, you might consider specialized treatment for PTSD, such as Prolonged Exposure or Cognitive Processing Therapy.
4. Sometimes doing things helps you deal with guilt or find meaning and purpose. You might try one or more of the following before you start therapy: participating in spiritual practices, reducing substance use, connecting with other Veterans, or participating in community Veteran activities or meaningful volunteer work.
5. You might choose to learn more about moral injury to better understand what you have been going through:

Currier, J., Drescher, K. & Nieuwsma, J. (Eds.) (2021). *Addressing moral injury in clinical practice*. American Psychological Association: Washington, D.C.

Shay, J. (1994). *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character*. New York: Scribner.

Tick, E. (2014). *Warrior's return: Restoring the soul after war*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.

Wood, D. (2016). *What have we done? The moral injury of our longest wars*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION!

STAFF CONTACT INFORMATION: _____

SESSION 4: ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS, AND RESTORATION

RESTORATION: THE DARK WITH THE LIGHT

Modified version of “The Self Weaving Tapestry” (Pernicano, P., 2014)

“THE SELF-WEAVING TAPESTRY”

From Pernicano, P. (2014). *Using Trauma Focused Therapy Stories: Interventions for Therapists, Children and their Caregivers*. NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.

There once was a Harry Potter-ish type kingdom where each person received a self-weaving tapestry at birth. Whenever a good thing happened, a bright colored thread would weave itself in. When something bad happened, a dark thread would be woven in. Over time, the tapestry became a beautiful reflection of the person's life.

One person who lived in the kingdom hated the dark threads, because they were a reminder of the bad things that had happened. The memories of those events occupied the person's thoughts, day and night.

The person said, “I hate the dark threads. I don't want to look at them or think about them. I don't want to remember those things. I'll just get rid of them and put them aside.” The person removed all the dark threads from the tapestry and locked them in a box in the closet.

A friend came by to visit not long after that, stared in dismay at what was left of the tapestry on the wall, and asked, “What have you done to your beautiful tapestry?”

The person said, “What do you mean? I fixed it. I took out the dark, ugly threads. Now I won't have to look at them or think about them. It's better this way.”

The friend replied, “The tapestry was beautiful before because it was the whole you. The dark with the light, the good with the bad. It's not whole without the dark threads. Look at it- there is so much missing.”

It was true. What remained on the wall was not whole – bright threads sagged around huge holes. So many threads were missing. The tapestry was a sorry remnant of what had been there before.

The friend added, **“The dark threads are an important part of you.** You could get them out of the closet and weave them back into the tapestry - put them where you want them! You can't change the things that happened to you. You **can** change how you look at them and consider the whole.”

The person considered what the friend had said. It made no sense to hide the dark threads or pretend they did not exist. So the person wove the dark threads back into the tapestry, putting them where they seemed to fit. The person began to see and accept the beauty of the whole, the dark with the light .

I hope you, too, will discover ways to accept the beauty of your “whole,” the dark with the light in your new normal.

SESSION 4: ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS, AND RESTORATION

TAPESTRY EXERCISE

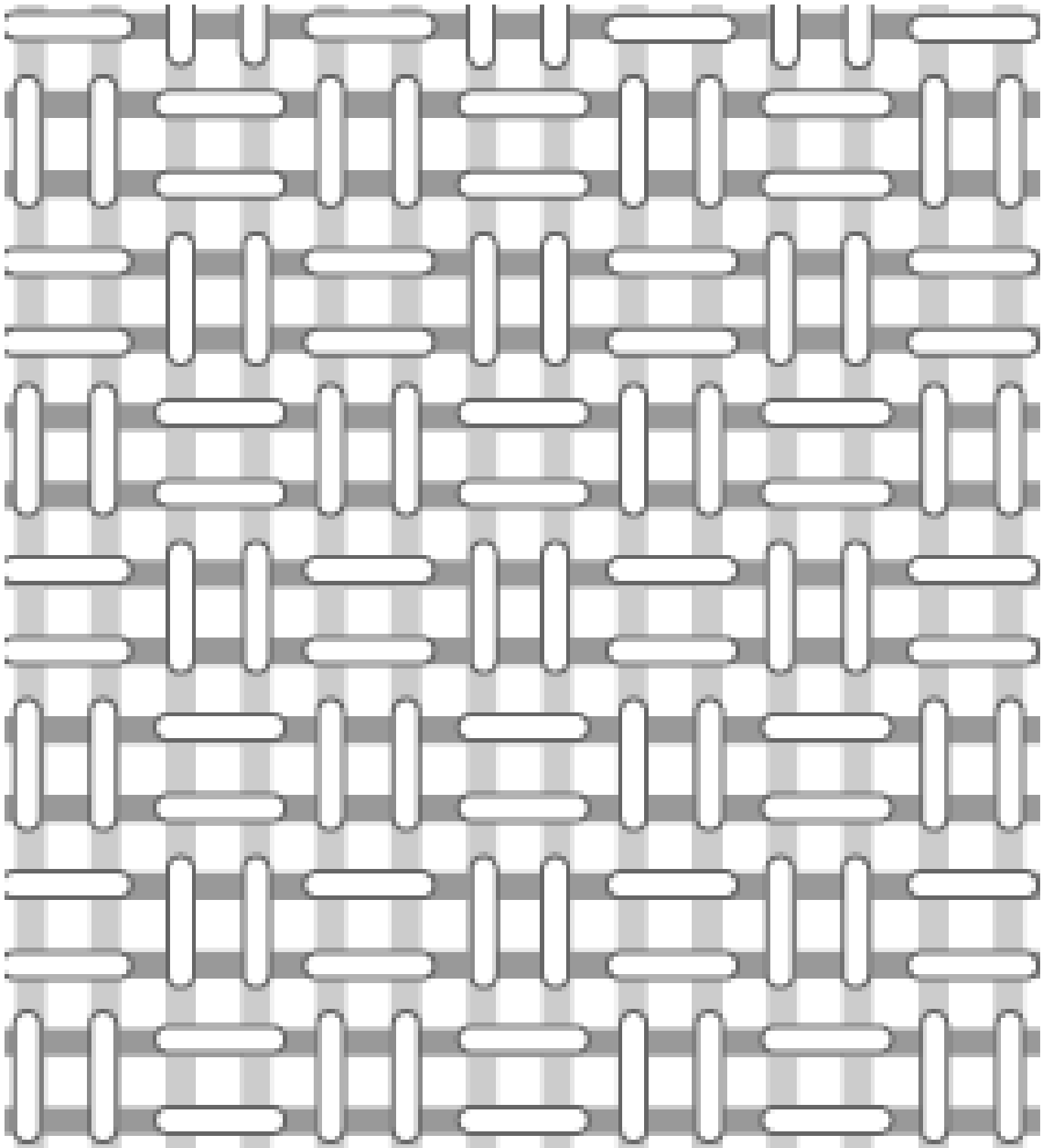
If you had a self-weaving tapestry, it would include the dark and the bright threads woven together, the “good” with the “bad.”

- ▶ As you think back on your whole life, what are some of the brightest threads? **Bright threads** include good memories, your strengths, supports, values, good intentions, positive relationships, life accomplishments, and opportunities you were given.

- ▶ As you think back on your whole life, what are some of the darkest threads? **The dark threads are** burdens such as negative life events, painful memories, judgments, strong feelings for which you seek relief.

- ▶ Picture your threads woven together in a tapestry. The bright threads balance out the “darkness” in your life. As you think about the finished tapestry, see the beauty in the whole of “you.” For those who wish to draw, a blank tapestry is provided on page 37.

SESSION 4: ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS, AND RESTORATION



This is your tapestry. Color and label the dark and bright threads. See the beauty in the whole!

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