



MORAL INJURY PSYCHOEDUCATION GROUP

PROGRAM HANDBOOK

Introduction to Acceptance and Forgiveness

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

References.....	5
Acknowledgments.....	6
Introduction to Acceptance and Forgiveness.....	7
Group Telehealth Agreement.....	8
SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY.....	10
GROUP OVERVIEW.....	10
SUGGESTED GROUP RULES	11
GROUP INTRODUCTIONS.....	12
FIRST SESSION GOALS.....	12
MORAL INJURY - WHAT IT IS	12
MODEL OF MORAL INJURY	12
FORMS OF MORAL INJURY.....	12
TYPES OF MORAL INJURY	13
SOURCES OF MORAL INJURY	13
PTSD VS. MORAL INJURY.....	14
DESCRIPTION OF PTSD.....	14
DESCRIPTION OF MORAL INJURY.....	14
PTSD & MORAL INJURY: SYMPTOM OVERLAP, DIFFERENT MEANINGS.....	14
REASONS MORAL INJURY REMAINS UNRESOLVED.....	16
MULTIDIMENSIONAL MORAL REPAIR.....	17
“THE BURDEN BAG” STORY	17
“THE BURDEN BAG” WORKSHEET.....	20

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SESSION 2: THE CHANGE PROCESS.....21

INTRODUCTION TO TRANSTHEORETICAL	
STAGES OF CHANGE MODEL	21
Precontemplation.....	21
Contemplation	22
Preparation.....	22
Action Stage.....	23
“FLOATING IN QUICKSAND” STORY	23
THE QUICKSAND WORKSHEET	24

SESSION 3: RESPONSIBILITY AND GUILT25

RESPONSIBILITY	26
TYPES OF GUILT	27
“THE MONSTER WITHIN”	29
FACE AND EMBRACE QUESTIONS.....	31

SESSION 4: ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS, AND RESTORATION..... 32

ACCEPTANCE.....	32
WHAT FORGIVENESS IS	33
WHY FORGIVENESS IS IMPORTANT.....	34
RESTORATION: THE DARK WITH THE LIGHT	34
“THE SELF-WEAVING TAPESTRY” 5 STORY	34
TAPESTRY EXERCISE.....	35
WHERE YOU GO FROM HERE.....	36

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The picture on the cover was drawn by a Veteran with moral injury and used with her permission. We thank her for her willingness to share her depiction of moral injury.

The contents of this manual do not represent the views of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) or the U.S. government.



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. Confidentiality

I understand the laws that protect the confidentiality of my medical information also apply to telehealth, including group treatment conducted over video telehealth. I understand that the VA has instituted procedures and policies to protect my privacy and confidentiality. The provider will lock the virtual medical room to ensure no unauthorized person will enter the session or listen.

I understand that everything said and done in group is confidential. I agree to protect the group confidentiality, by not revealing the names of other members of the group, nor what is said and done in the group. I understand that if I violate this confidentiality, I will be removed from the group.

I understand that there is an exception to this confidentiality that applies to the group provider. The one exception to confidentiality is when the provider believes that I may be a threat to myself or others.

2. Risks and Consequences

The VA does not record telehealth sessions, including group telehealth sessions, without prior approval. I understand that I will not audio or video record any portion of the treatment session. I acknowledge that while this session will not be audio or video recorded by the VA, there is a risk that the session *could be* audio or video recorded and disseminated by a group member without knowledge or approval from VA or other group members. The consequence for any member audio or video recording any portion of the treatment session will be the removal from the group for violating confidentiality, as well as referral for prosecution to the full extent of federal and local laws. Applicable local laws may include the location of the provider and all members.

3. Privacy

Participation in this group is voluntary, and I have the right to withdraw from the group at any time without affecting my right to future care or treatment or risking the loss or withdrawal of any program benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. No group member is ever required to answer any question, to participate in any activity, or to say anything. If I am asked questions or asked to participate in an activity that makes me feel uncomfortable, I understand that I have the right to decline, and I agree not to pressure any other group member to participate if they are uncomfortable. I agree to be in a quiet, private location during my session.

GROUP TELEHEALTH AGREEMENT

4. Dignity

I agree that I will be tolerant, respectful, and supportive of other group members. I will avoid language that stereotypes or is derogatory to others and will provide only helpful feedback. I will be considerate of others who are talking, will give others a chance to talk, and will not engage in side conversations.

5. Behavior

Safety is of the utmost importance. Violence or intimidation toward other group members is not tolerated. Gossip and grudges can be very destructive in a group. I agree that if I have something to say to another group member, I will say it to the member directly and in a respectful way rather than talk about him or her with others.

I understand that if the provider believes that I am under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, I will be asked to leave the group.

I have read the agreement for group sessions and agree to follow it. The provider will note in my medical record that I have received, read and acknowledged this agreement.

*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 INJURY**
- ▶ **LEARN HOW MORAL INJURY IS DIFFERENT FROM PTSD**
- ▶ **LEARN ABOUT THE IMPACT 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.
- ▶ 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.

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"

FORMS OF MORAL INJURY

Based on the model above, moral injury occurs when an Individual...

- ▶ Engages in
- ▶ Witnesses
- ▶ Knows of OR
- ▶ Experiences something

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

That betrays/violates moral, religious or military standards (deeply held beliefs, values and expectations). This creates an unresolved dilemma.

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.

TYPES OF MORAL INJURY

► You as the “victim” OR you as the one at fault

You may blame yourself for something you witnessed or something you did that violated your core values/beliefs or what you consider to be “right.” Or you may have been “betrayed” by someone who hurt you by their actions.

► Something you did alone or with others

You may have been involved alone or with others, following or not following rules of engagement/chain of command.

► 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.

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

SOURCES OF MORAL INJURY

There are a variety of sources of moral injury. Examples include...

- ▶ Acts of *betrayal* by peers, leaders, or self
- ▶ Out of proportion violence toward others
- ▶ Death or harm to civilians
- ▶ Violence within military ranks
- ▶ Hiding what you know or failing to report
- ▶ Inability to prevent death or suffering (includes medical and first responders)
- ▶ Perceived “errors” or “mistakes”

It is not the situation alone that results in moral injury. Moral 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.

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.

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO MORAL INJURY

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.

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.

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?

☐ **“STUPID MISTAKES” / REGRETS**

☐ **REJECTIONS / HURTS**

☐ **FAMILY PROBLEMS**

☐ **IMPERFECTIONS (NOT “GOOD ENOUGH”)**

☐ **GUILT (HEALTHY OR UNHEALTHY)**

☐ **LOSS**

☐ **GRUDGES / BLAME**

☐ **“UNFORGIVEABLES”**

☐ **BETRAYALS**

☐ **OTHER:**

SESSION 2: THE CHANGE PROCESS



Change

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.
- ▶ 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.

SESSION 2: THE CHANGE PROCESS

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.

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.

SESSION 2: THE CHANGE PROCESS

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

*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



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.

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.

SESSION 3: RESPONSIBILITY AND GUILT

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.
- ▶ 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 “right-size” 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.

SESSION 3: RESPONSIBILITY AND GUILT

TYPES OF GUILT

Guilt can be **HEALTHY** or **UNHEALTHY** (misplaced or punitive)

1) Healthy Guilt

- ▶ Healthy guilt is a feeling you experience after you do something wrong and want to resolve it. Healthy 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).
- ▶ Healthy guilt might come from...
 - Deliberate harm or cruelty to others that was unsanctioned or unnecessary
 - Not reporting a violation of military standards (secrecy, coverup)
 - 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
- ▶ How to address healthy guilt
 - To address healthy guilt, it helps to confess the wrong (take responsibility for your part) and commit to actions that restore balance and repair damage.
 - Different cultures have different traditions to help their members take responsibility when they have wronged another person or the community.

Native American tradition:

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

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.

Biblical 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

SESSION 3: RESPONSIBILITY AND GUILT

human heart. In the Bible, people are transformed in the midst of guilt and expectation of punishment.

Summary of Traditions

The traditions are based on *restorative justice* and *peacemaking*.

Restorative justice is a relational process that repairs harm.

Justice focuses on responsibility & accountability.

Justice seeks to heal, not to punish.

Justice seeks to transform broken lives & relationships.

Justice is not about getting even – it seeks reconciliation.

2) Unhealthy Guilt

There are two types of unhealthy guilt. In the first, called misplaced guilt, the person did nothing wrong but **feels** responsible. In the second the person **is** responsible to some degree and carries harsh or punitive guilt that is not resolved. Punitive guilt destroys, and there is no reconciliation.

- ▶ **Misplaced Guilt:** Misplaced guilt is a feeling of guilt despite the person doing nothing wrong and not being responsible for what happened. You feel terrible because of a negative outcome and judge you must have done something wrong.
 - o Misplaced guilt may result from 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 Misplaced guilt ignores the intent and context of the act. It misses “the rest of the story.”
 - o Survivor’s Guilt: The survivor had no control over who lived and who died, so this is more about **survivor grief** (for those who were hurt or died) than **survivor guilt**.
 - o Guilt over 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.
 - o 20-20 hindsight: It is not fair to judge yourself now for what you did not know then.
 - o You can’t save everyone: You aren’t a superhero. “You can’t save the whole world.” Medical “errors” are expected and forgivable.
 - o Betrayal does not call for any “guilt” for the person who was betrayed.

SESSION 3: RESPONSIBILITY AND GUILT

- ▶ **Punitive Guilt:** Unhealthy, punitive guilt remains unresolved and keeps you stuck. It eats away at you from the inside out. It does not motivate you toward forgiveness or compassion. Unlike healthy guilt...
 - o Punitive guilt does not accept help.
 - o Punitive guilt focuses on harsh retribution or revenge.
 - o Punitive guilt lacks compassion.
 - o Punitive guilt hurts relationships.
 - o Punitive guilt can result in self-medication, substance abuse and suicidal ideation.
 - o Punitive guilt turns a person into judge and jury. You miss the opportunity for restitution and reconciliation.
 - o Punitive guilt results in bitterness, anger, blame, and even shame.

Shame is unhealthy. Shame is judgment of the self. Shame results in feeling unacceptable or unlovable.

SHAME = I AM wrong. GUILT= I DID wrong.

You do not have to carry the burden of moral injury for the rest of your life. Very few decisions and actions deserve a sentence of life in prison. Consider “time served.”

Story: “The Monster Within”

“THE MONSTER WITHIN”

There once was a young wizard who had great knowledge and wisdom for his age. His teacher was the wisest wizard of all, and he saw the young man’s potential, but he cautioned, “Know your limits, and be careful of what can happen if you feed or listen to the monsters within.”



SESSION 3: RESPONSIBILITY AND GUILT

“The monsters within?” the young wizard asked.

“Yes, we all have monsters within. They are born out of hard times that bring anger, pain and sorrow. We learn to live with them. Sometimes, when you least expect it, they will tempt you to let them out. They promise to fight your battles, wreak revenge, and fix your problems.” The older wizard added, “They lie to you and are very convincing! The truth is that they seek to destroy if we let them out. They care nothing for you and are only interested in their own power.”

“I am wiser than that,” said the young wizard. “I will not listen to the voices of the monsters within. I will study hard and one day become the best wizard in the kingdom.”

“That is good to hear,” said the wise wizard. “Even during hard times, it is better to pursue peace and reconciliation than hate and revenge.”

The young wizard worked hard at his studies and practiced his craft. Then he reached an age, as all young wizards do, when hard times came his way. He became angry and frustrated, and he heard the voice of a monster within: “You deserve better than this! Let me out, and I will help you. With my help, you will be stronger and more powerful than ever before.”

The young wizard forgot the advice of the older wizard. He raised his wand in outrage and waved his wand forcefully. Out of the tip of his wand, a monster emerged.

The huge, horrible, red-eyed, ugly, sniffling monster sneered, “Free at last and born of your anger! I will destroy your village, and it will be your fault. You foolish wizard! You will regret this as long as you shall live!”

The monster tossed aside the young wizard and laughed uproariously as he began to wreak havoc and devastation on the kingdom.

The young wizard was dismayed at the monster’s unleashed power. “What have I done?! The kingdom is suffering and it is my fault.” He cried out in anguish, “Master Wizard, please come and fix this. I have unleashed a terrible monster.”

He heard the voice of his wise teacher. “This is a monster of your own making, and only you can fix it. You will know what you must do when you find the answer.”

The young wizard thought, “I must run from this monster. Surely, it will follow me and leave the village behind.”

So the wizard ran, over hill and dale, and the monster pursued. The wizard hid inside deep, dark caves, and each time he ran, the monster found him.

SESSION 3: RESPONSIBILITY AND GUILT

“You can’t run or hide from me!” sneered the monster. “I am part of you, a monster of your own making, and I will sniff you out and destroy you!”

And so the wizard stopped running.

“I know what I must do,” he thought. “I will destroy him. Surely that is the answer. I will call him out and kill him, if it is the last thing I do!”

So with great courage, the young wizard called the monster out. “Here I am!” he cried. “Come get me!” he challenged.

He pulled his sword and faced the monster, who stared him down and prepared to charge.

Once again, the young wizard heard the voice of his teacher. “Killing the monster is not the answer. You can’t destroy a monster of your own making. He is part of you. If you try to kill him, it will destroy *you*..”

The young wizard shouted in a defiant voice, “I will kill this monster, or I will die trying!” The wizard stood tall and proud as the monster charged. He held his sword high, ready for the fight. Then just before the monster reached him, the wizard knew what he must do.

He dropped his sword and opened his arms. The monster ran into his embrace with a great roar of anguish and pain. The monster met the embrace with shocked surprise, and then was gone.

The young wizard was dazed and amazed at what had just happened. “Well done,” came the voice of the old wizard. “When you unleash a monster of your own making, you can’t run from it or hide, and you can’t destroy it. When you face and embrace it, you can finally be whole.”

I wish I could say that the young wizard never again failed or made the wrong choice, but when he did, he did so honestly, with less arrogance, because he knew he was not perfect. He lived with good intentions, forgave himself for what he had done and did his part to keep peace. I hope you, too, will find the courage to face and embrace the monsters within. so that they lose their power to wreak havoc in your kingdoms.

FACE AND EMBRACE QUESTIONS

We all have “monsters within” that are hard to face and embrace. These might be some of the burdens you carry or the ways you are stuck.

SESSION 3: RESPONSIBILITY AND GUILT

1. What “monsters” do you need to face?
2. What monsters” do you need to embrace (accept)?
3. Who might help you do that?
4. “Monsters” can cause strong emotions, such as fear, anger, grief, guilt, shame, regret, or blame. What emotions do your monsters stir up?

SESSION 4: ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS, AND RESTORATION



ACCEPTANCE

“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.

SESSION 4: ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS, AND RESTORATION

WHAT FORGIVENESS IS

- ▶ 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.”
- ▶ Carrying the burden of guilt or anger hurts you. An attitude of “punishment deserved” keeps you stuck. Forgiveness is acknowledging that no one deserves life in prison. “Time served.”
- ▶ Forgiveness is release of your burden(s), even the “unforgivable” or “unmentionable” ones.
- ▶ Forgiveness is a choice. When you choose forgiveness, even when it is “undeserved,” you choose to move beyond pain.
- ▶ Forgiveness comes from a place of compassion (for yourself or others). It heals brokenness and restores wholeness.

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
A canceled debt	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)
Considering the whole pie	Blaming
Acceptance of humanity & vulnerability	Bitterness, revenge, self-righteousness, denial

SESSION 4: ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS, AND RESTORATION

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
- ▶ Better spiritual health for the forgiver

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.

SESSION 4: ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS, AND RESTORATION

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.

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

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

