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**MORAL INJURY IN
THE MILITARY:
BEYOND THE
BATTLEFIELD**





An active-duty United States Navy Commander authored this article. The author wishes to remain anonymous due to concerns of additional reprisal and retaliation. The Commander has served 14+ years in the U.S. Navy and has served across multiple Navy domains. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Walk the Talk Foundation and its members. (Published February 22nd, 2025)

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Defining Moral Injury

Moral injury is a psychological, emotional, and spiritual distress that occurs when individuals perpetrate, fail to prevent, witness, are subjected to, or experience acts that transgress their deeply held moral beliefs and values. It is often associated with feelings of guilt, shame, betrayal, and a profound internal conflict. Unlike Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is typically rooted in fear-based and/or life-threatening trauma, moral injury stems from a perceived violation of what is right, creating a rupture in one's ethical framework.

Defining Burnout

Burnout is a state of chronic physical and emotional exhaustion caused by prolonged exposure to high levels of stress, often in work-related environments. It is characterized by three key components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (a sense of detachment or cynicism toward work), and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Burnout is typically the result of overwhelming workloads, lack of control, and insufficient support in professional settings.



Moral Injury vs. Burnout: A Brief Comparison



While both moral injury and burnout can lead to significant distress and a decline in mental well-being, they stem from different sources and manifest differently:

Aspect	Burnout	Moral Injury
Cause	Excessive work demands and systemic inefficiencies	Perceived violations of moral or ethical codes
Symptoms	Exhaustion, cynicism, reduced efficacy	Guilt, shame, anger, loss of meaning
Resolution	Rest, workload adjustments, organizational changes	Ethical reconciliation, institutional reform

Traditional Understanding of Moral Injury in the Military

Moral injury in the military is often discussed in the context of combat, where service members may experience ethical dilemmas such as the killing of civilians, witnessing war crimes, or being ordered to act against their moral beliefs. These experiences can lead to profound guilt, self-condemnation, and a loss of faith in leadership, institutions, or even one's own moral compass. The traditional understanding frames moral injury as a potential consequence of warfare, where split-second decisions can have lasting psychological repercussions.

System and Bureaucracy Based Moral Injury in the Military

While combat-related moral injury is well-documented, anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that moral injury also occurs due to the systemic and bureaucratic structures within the military itself. Service members can find themselves in ethical dilemmas not due to combat, but due to the institutional culture, leadership failures, and administrative injustices that undermine their core values, trust in their service, and faith in the institution(s) they swore to protect.



Betrayal by Leadership and Institution



One of the most profound sources of moral injury in the military comes from perceived betrayals by leadership, the system, and institutions they reside within. Service members are instilled with values such as honor, integrity, and loyalty, yet many find that these principles are not upheld when they need support the most.

- » When unethical behavior by senior leaders is tolerated or even rewarded, while those who report misconduct face retaliation, service members experience a deep sense of betrayal.
- » When individuals suffering from mental health crises are met with administrative punishment rather than care, it sends the message that their well-being is secondary to institutional convenience.
- » When issues like sexual harassment, workplace bullying, and toxic command climates are ignored or downplayed, the fundamental trust between the individual and the system erodes.
- » When attempts to report, investigate, and rectify wrongs are met with overly administrative and bureaucratic processes and responses it reinforces beliefs that the system is designed to protect itself.
- » When review of whistleblower reprisal complaints demonstrates a substantiation rate of 2.41%, implying that 97.59% of whistleblower reprisal filers are confused, misinformed, or dishonest. It raises critical concerns about the effectiveness of investigative processes, the potential chilling effect on legitimate whistleblowing, and whether systemic barriers prevent valid claims from being properly substantiated.
- » When comparisons are made between the military justice system's punitive administrative processes and the civilian judicial system that service members are sworn to protect, it becomes evident that fundamental 6th Amendment and Brady rights—such as the right to a speedy trial, impartial adjudication, legal counsel, access to evidence, and the ability to confront accusers—are systematically denied, leaving service members vulnerable to unchecked command influence, secrecy, and procedural inequities.

These experiences create a moral dissonance: service members are told to embody certain values, yet the organization often operates counter to those very ideals. This leads to feelings of powerlessness, disillusionment, internal conflict all tantamount to moral injury.



The Emotional Toll of Institutional Neglect



The rigidity of military bureaucracy can exacerbate moral injury by prioritizing institutional needs over individual well-being. For example:

- » **Disciplinary Actions Lacking Due Process:** Service members can be punished without clear justification or fair investigation, leading to feelings of injustice and helplessness. Subsequently, those who feel unjustly punished lack clear, equitable, transparent opportunities for recourse and are often buried in administrative bureaucracies.
- » **Lack of Support During Personal Crises:** The military demands resilience yet can fail to provide adequate and genuine support for those struggling with mental health, family issues, or moral conflicts. Additionally, the weaponization of mental health as a way of discrediting the service member directly subverts the relationship between mental health providers and patients.
- » **Transactional Treatment of Personnel:** Service members come to realize that they are treated as expendable assets rather than valued individuals, reinforcing feelings of betrayal and disillusionment while exacerbating the cognitive dissonance between the reality of their treatment and messages of their touted value, importance, and appreciation.

Why It's Not Burnout—It's Moral Injury

Many of the frustrations increasingly voiced by service members may be misclassified as burnout. While burnout does occur in military settings due to high workloads, long deployments, and institutional inefficiencies, the deeper distress felt by many service members aligns more closely with moral injury. Here's why:

- » Service members don't just feel overworked; they feel violated. The primary complaint is not just exhaustion, but a profound sense that the institution has betrayed its own stated values.

- » Burnout is relieved by rest; moral injury is not. Many service members take leave or change assignments, only to find that their distress persists because the underlying ethical breach remains unaddressed.
- » Burnout breeds frustration; moral injury breeds existential crisis. Those experiencing moral injury often struggle with their sense of identity, purpose, as well as trust in leadership, which all lead to long-term emotional and psychological wounds.



The Critical Importance of Accurate Diagnosis

Failure to accurately capture moral injury may contribute to the broader weaponization of mental health in the military. When service members are labeled with diagnoses that can be used to justify administrative separation or failure to accurately capture, moral injury may contribute to the broader weaponization of mental health in the military.

Properly identifying moral injury is not only essential for ensuring that service members receive appropriate care and support, but also for documenting systemic failures within the military and empowering service members with the vocabulary and language to report, discuss, and catalogue their experiences. Accurate diagnosis may help counter narratives that shift blame onto individuals rather than acknowledging institutional shortcomings. By recognizing moral injury as a legitimate source of distress, the military can move toward a more just and supportive approach to mental health care—one that prioritizes service members' well-being over administrative convenience and one that works to address the underlying cause of the service members' illness, the system, institutional, and leadership failures service members are bearing witness to and experience.

Moral injury and burnout are not recognized DSM diagnoses, but they represent critical dimensions of service members' psychological distress. Mental health providers play a crucial role in exploring the underlying causes of symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and emotional distress. Through careful assessment, providers can help service members articulate their experiences—including moral injury—while ensuring accurate diagnoses that guide appropriate treatment.

Service members experiencing moral distress are sometimes diagnosed with adjustment disorder, depression, generalized anxiety disorder, or even personality disorders. While these diagnoses may capture certain aspects of their symptoms, they may not fully reflect the moral and ethical conflicts at the root of their suffering. It is also important to recognize that service members may have more than one diagnosis; for example, a service member could experience anxiety or depression as a result of both burnout and moral injury. These are not mutually exclusive conditions, and an oversimplified or superficial diagnosis risks obscuring the true nature of their distress.



Addressing Moral Injury: A Call for Institutional Reform

If the military is to truly support its members, it must recognize and address the moral injuries it inflicts through systemic failures. This requires more than just resilience training; it demands fundamental changes in leadership accountability, institutional transparency, and a commitment to ethical integrity. The same principles it demands of its members. Key steps to improvement require global and wholistic reform which include:

- » **Fostering a Culture of Accountability:** Systems, institutions, and leaders must be held to the same ethical standards expected of their subordinates. Retaliation against whistleblowers must be eradicated.
- » **Improving Support Structures:** Mental health resources must be more accessible, and actions must prioritize rehabilitation over punishment. Awareness among mental health providers and the opportunity to document and capture such diagnoses must exist.
- » **Empowering Service Members:** There must be mechanisms for service members to voice concerns without fear of retribution.

Conclusion

The definition of moral injury must extend beyond the battlefield to encompass the systemic, institutional, and leadership betrayals that service members experience. Without acknowledging this, the morally injurious failures affecting military personnel can never truly be addressed. Moral injury arises when deeply held values—honor, integrity, and loyalty—are violated, leading to profound psychological, emotional, and spiritual distress. Yet, for many service members, this injury is not inflicted during combat but by the very institution they swore to serve. When they seek justice, accountability, or support, they often find these core values disregarded. Institutional culture, leadership failures, and administrative injustices erode trust, creating a stark moral dissonance—service members are called to embody ethical ideals, yet they witness or experience actions that directly contradict them. The result is not just exhaustion, but a deep sense of betrayal and disillusionment. If the military truly seeks to recruit and retain the nation’s best and brightest, it must do more than demand honor, courage, and commitment—it must embody these values in action, not just in words. The services must Walk the Talk. [“Previously Published Related Article”](#).



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