

## INVISIBLE WOUNDS

### The Crucial Role of Moral Injuries in Enhancing Safety Culture

By Shawn M. Galloway

**Safety culture within organizations has long been a focal point for ensuring the well-being of employees and maintaining operational integrity. However, an often-overlooked aspect of safety culture improvement is the consideration of moral injuries.**

**Understanding** and addressing moral injuries is crucial for creating a workplace environment that prioritizes physical safety and attends to psychological and ethical dimensions of employee well-being.

#### Beyond PTSD

The concept of moral injury originated in the field of psychology and was initially associated with the experiences of military personnel. It gained prominence as researchers sought to understand the psychological impact of war beyond the traditional framework of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The term “moral injury” was first introduced by clinical psychiatrist Jonathan Shay (2014) in the 1990s. Shay observed and studied the psychological effects on veterans, particularly those who had served in the Vietnam War and the Gulf War. He noticed that some individuals struggled not only with the typical symptoms of PTSD but also with profound guilt, shame, and inner conflict resulting from morally ambiguous or ethically challenging situations experienced during their service such as carrying out orders to kill civilians to complete an assigned mission.

Shay defines moral injury as the emotional, psychological and spiritual distress that arises from actions or witnessing actions that transgress one’s deeply held moral or ethical beliefs. This concept expanded the understanding of trauma beyond immediate physical threats to include the complex interplay of moral and ethical considerations.

Since its introduction in the context of military experiences, the concept of moral injury has been adapted to other domains including healthcare, law enforcement and the workplace. It has proven valuable in exploring the psychological impact of situations where individuals face moral challenges, witness ethical transgressions, or perceive a misalignment between their own values and the actions of their organizations.

Moral injuries occur when individuals witness or participate in actions that conflict with their deeply held moral

values and beliefs. As observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, doctors had to turn many patients away due to facilities being at capacity or reprioritization of urgent patient needs. According to the Moral Injury Project (n.d.):

Moral injury can lead to serious distress, depression, and suicidality. Moral injury can take the life of those suffering from it, both metaphorically and literally. Moral injury debilitates people, preventing them from living full and healthy lives. The effects of moral injury go beyond the individual and can destroy one’s capacity to trust others, impinging on the family system and the larger community.

#### Moral Injury Within Occupational Culture

In the context of workplace safety, these injuries may result from situations where employees perceive a misalignment between the organization’s stated values and its actual practices. This misalignment can erode trust, diminish morale and contribute to a compromised safety culture.

According to Open Arms—Veterans and Family Counselling (n.d.), a mental health assessment and clinical counseling service from Australia’s Department of Veterans’ Affairs, experiences that can lead to moral injury include:

- doing (or failing) to do something that goes against your moral code or values (e.g., you harmed someone or failed to protect someone from harm),
- seeing a person (or people) do something or fail to do something that goes against your moral code or values (e.g., you witnessed cruel behavior), or
- being directly affected by someone doing something or failing to do something that goes against your moral code or values (e.g., being betrayed by someone you trust).

The following excerpt from a conversation with leaders in a large manufacturing environment offers an example of a moral

injury. One production manager shared, “With everything going on right now, I’m so worried about triggering someone. It has become easier not to say something when I see a safety issue. I know I have stop work authority, and it is an expectation here, but I’ve heard many stories of retaliation by employees and our own human resources and legal departments. If anything is keeping me up at night, it is this guilt I feel. It is tearing me up inside, and I know I’m not the only one.”

#### Impact on Safety Culture

**Trust erosion.** Moral injuries can lead to a breakdown in trust between employees and the organization, disrupting team dynamics by creating a sense of distrust and division among employees. If individuals perceive that their moral values are being compromised, it creates a sense of betrayal. Trust is paramount in the context of safety, as employees must feel confident that their well-being is a top priority for the organization.

**Employee morale and engagement.** When employees experience moral injuries, their morale and engagement levels are negatively affected. When individuals feel a sense of moral dissonance, it can negatively affect motivation and commitment to their work. A disengaged worker is more likely to overlook safety protocols, increasing the risk of incidents.

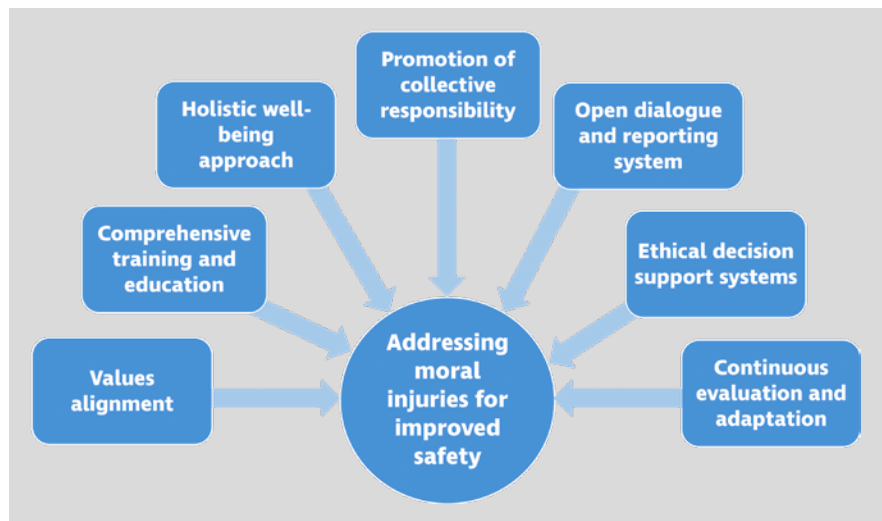
**Psychological well-being.** Moral injuries directly impact the psychological well-being of individuals within an occupational setting. When employees experience a conflict between their personal moral values and the organization’s actions or decisions, it can lead to stress, guilt and emotional distress.

**Organizational reputation.** In the era of social media and increased transparency, organizational reputation is more critical than ever. Moral injuries, if unaddressed, can lead to negative perceptions among employees and the public, and create negative perceptions of the company and its brands.

**Burnout.** Moral injuries contribute to employee burnout by generating

FIGURE 1

## ADDRESSING MORAL INJURIES FOR IMPROVED SAFETY CULTURE



psychological distress, creating cognitive dissonance (where individuals hold conflicting beliefs about their work and its ethical implications), eroding job satisfaction, reducing motivation and engagement, straining relationships, increasing vulnerability to stressors, and diminishing a sense of purpose at work. This lack of a meaningful connection to one's work further contributes to burnout by decreasing the intrinsic rewards that typically buffer against stress.

### Addressing Moral Injuries for Improved Safety Culture

This section outlines some ways safety professionals can address moral injuries to improve safety culture (Figure 1).

**Values alignment.** The concept of moral injuries underscores the need to align an organization's stated values with actual practices. A consistent alignment fosters trust and confidence among employees, contributing to a positive safety culture where individuals feel that their personal values are respected and upheld. Organizations must ensure that their stated values align with their actions. Regularly revisiting and reinforcing these values can help bridge the gap between organizational rhetoric and actual practice, reducing the risk of moral injuries. Leaders should actively promote and exemplify ethical behavior, reinforcing the importance of safety and moral values throughout the organization. This top-down approach contributes to a culture where safety is prioritized at all levels.

**Comprehensive training and education.** Recognizing specific stressors that can lead to moral injuries is essential. Understanding these stressors allows organizations to proactively identify and address potential issues, preventing the erosion of trust and morale within the workforce. Comprehensive training and education that focuses on

recognizing stressors, ethical decision-making, the importance of upholding moral values, and moral resilience can mitigate the impact of moral injuries. Implementing such programs within efforts to improve safety culture can help employees navigate ethical dilemmas, fostering a culture that aligns with their moral values and contributing to a more conscientious and safety-focused workforce.

**Holistic well-being approach.** Moral injuries impact not only the professional but also the personal well-being of individuals. Organizations should adopt a holistic approach to well-being, addressing both physical and psychological aspects. Integrating mental health support into safety programs contributes to a more resilient safety culture.

**Promotion of collective responsibility.** Moral injuries often result from a perception of collective responsibility within an organization. Fostering a sense of collective responsibility for safety encourages collaboration and shared accountability. When individuals feel a shared commitment to ethical behavior and safety, it strengthens the overall safety culture and contributes to creating a high level of employee commitment to safety initiatives.

**Open dialogue and reporting systems.** Moral injuries often stem from a lack of transparency and open communication within an organization. By acknowledging and addressing these injuries, organizations can foster a culture of honest communication. This transparency is vital for preventing moral injuries. Establishing channels for employees to express concerns without fear of reprisal is essential. Robust reporting systems and open dialogue forums allow individuals to voice ethical dilemmas, preventing moral injuries from festering, escalating and undermining the safety culture.

### Ethical decision support systems.

Organizations should look to implement ethical decision support systems to assist employees facing moral dilemmas. These tools can provide guidance and resources, empowering individuals to make decisions that align with their moral values while maintaining a strong safety focus.

### Continuous evaluation and adaptation.

Safety culture improvement is an ongoing process. Organizations should continuously evaluate their safety and human resources programs, adapting them to address emerging ethical challenges. Regular assessments ensure that safety initiatives and overall culture evolves to meet the dynamic nature of the workplace.

### Conclusion

Moral injuries are important to understand within the context of occupational culture because they directly influence the workplace psychological, social and reputational aspects. By incorporating these learnings into safety programs and organizational practices, companies can create resilient and sustainable environments that prioritize physical safety and address the ethical dimensions of work, enhancing trust, boosting employee morale and fortifying their commitment to safety, ultimately fostering a workplace where both physical and moral well-being are prioritized. **PSJ**

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