

Moral Injury and Spiritual Distress - What is it?

Moral injury (MI) is the damage done to one's conscience or moral compass when that person perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent events that transgress their own moral and ethical values or codes of conduct. These events are considered morally injurious if they "transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations." Spiritual distress (SD) is a disturbance in a person's belief system. This may occur when there is damage done to their core morality or moral worldview as a result of a stressful or traumatic life event. Some individuals view MI/SD as separate conditions because all morally injurious events do not necessarily cause a person to suffer spiritual distress.

As an Airman, you may experience MI/SD during your course of duty by directly participating in acts of combat, failing to prevent the immoral acts of others, or witnessing behaviors that conflict with your moral beliefs. Such beliefs may stem from holding a deep religious, spiritual, or culture-based foundation, in addition to your personal thoughts about the value of life.



Source: *Psychology Today*

Distinguishing Moral Injury and Spiritual Distress from PTSD

While the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and MI/SD may be similar, they are the result of different underlying emotional, psychological, and spiritual concerns. MI/SD occurs when your moral foundation (e.g., ethics and beliefs) is disrupted, while PTSD derives from a perceived physical threat and fear for self or others.

MI/SD can lead to emotional responses that include, but are not limited to, feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety, and anger. Behavioral responses following MI/SD may also include self-sabotaging behavior (e.g., alcohol or drug use, suicidal thoughts) and alienation, among others. If the injury is severe enough, it may become nearly impossible to distinguish your present self from your former self.

Although the conditions of PTSD and MI/SD overlap in some areas, they each have unique characteristics resulting from similar traumatic experiences. A PTSD diagnosis may not sufficiently capture the shame, guilt (e.g., survivor's remorse), and self-handicapping behaviors that often accompany MI/SD.

Recovering from Moral Injury and Spiritual Distress

If you are experiencing the signs or symptoms of MI/SD, it is important that you take the initiative to seek help. Reach out to your local chaplain or medical care provider to learn effective strategies that will assist in your progress.

Chaplain Corps

Military chaplains are a resource you can confide in for comfort, support, and inspiration. Chaplains are readily available to help you navigate various life challenges, including your moral well-being. They can provide you with short-term counseling (or pastoral care), long-term counseling, or therapy.

Chaplains are co-located with either deployed or non-deployed service members and can be easily accessed. To contact a chaplain in your military community, schedule an appointment with your nearest chapel on base. If you do not live on base or near a military installation, you can use the [Local Community Resource Finder](#) to locate resources in your area.



Healing from MI/SD is possible. If you or someone you know is dealing with MI/SD, be sure to talk to someone to address moral tension and increase your resiliency.

April is designated as the Month of the Military Child (MOMC). Since its introduction by the Secretary of Defense in 1986, we take time each year to acknowledge the important role children play in our Armed Forces communities.

Military children face unique challenges that ordinary youth may never experience. From frequent deployments to new schools, military children can readily adapt to their changing environments.

MOMC recognizes some 1.9 million U.S. military children who have one or both parents serving in the Armed Forces. They play an important role in contributing to the spirit of the Armed Forces, promoting peace and readiness through their strength.



The [PURPLE UP! For Military Kids](#) event encourages people to come together and show their support for military children by wearing purple in addition to several events that are hosted at your nearest military school.

To learn more about MOMC activities and events, visit your local Airman and Family Readiness Center (A&FRC), [Department of Defense Education Activity's \(DoDEA\) website](#), or your nearest on-base Child Development Center.