

Current Challenges in the Treatment of Moral Injuries

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Facets of Identity (Core Self): Targets of Moral Injury and Moral Repair



Targeting Authority Over Self: Rebuilding Prefrontal Cortex



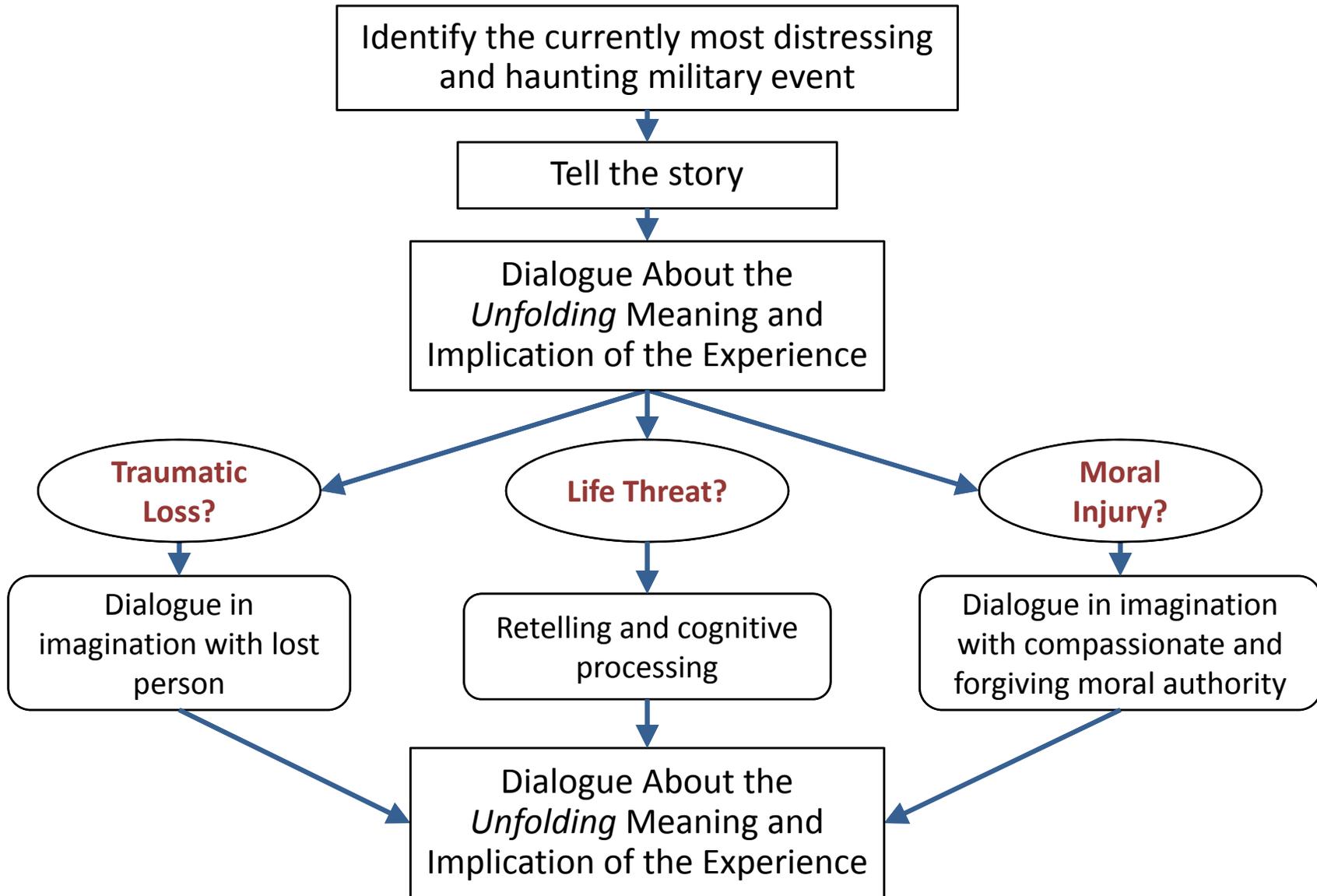
- First, put out the fire!
- Reduce stress load
- Stop panic attacks or rage outbursts
- Sleep, exercise, diet
- Meditation
- Yoga
- Practice self-calming under stress
- Medication: SSRIs, sleeping meds

Targeting Self-Concept: Cognitive Therapy



- Listen to enough of the patient's narrative to identify likely cognitive distortions
 - Over-generalizations
 - Black-and-white thinking
- “Reprocess” those cognitions
- Requires therapist to be a moral authority

Adaptive Disclosure: Session Schematic



Targeting Concept of the World: Social Justice, Spirituality



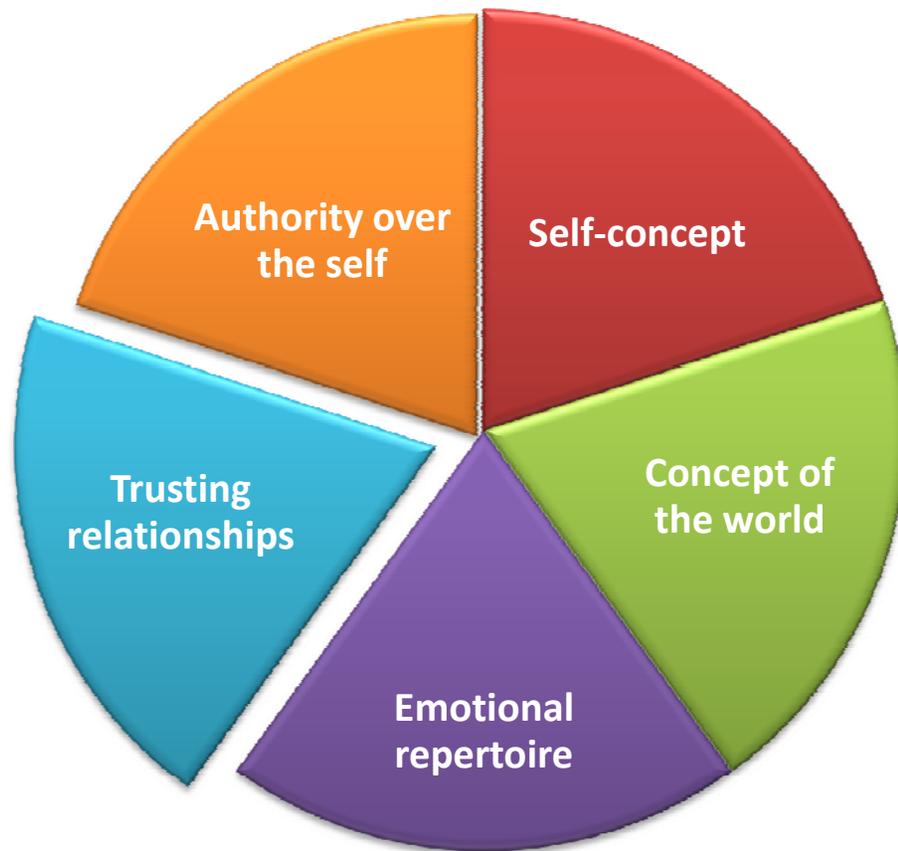
- Return to the world
- Give or seek amends
- Seek organizations or entities that still deserve respect and idealization
- Make the world a better place
- Religion
- Art, Journaling

Targeting Emotional Repertoire: Exposure Therapy, ACT



- Learn to tolerate intense negative moral emotions
- Mindfulness meditation
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
- Practice positive moral emotions
 - Joy
 - Awe

Targeting Trusting Relationships: Peer, Family, Community



- Overcome barriers to trust
- Sharing stories in a trusting relationship
- Mentorship
- Reinforcing cultural values
- Mirroring

Role of Community in Moral Repair

- Moral repair requires reconstruction of damaged moral covenants and networks of trust
 - Making and seeking amends
 - Asking, giving, and accepting forgiveness
- Community leaders (in family, church, military organizations, nation) are responsible for social justice as an adjunct to moral repair
- Trusted moral authorities may have unique abilities to forgive or encourage forgiveness
- Community-based rituals, ceremonies, and symbols of honoring and forgiveness may be powerful (ancient Greek concept *katharsis* as ritual cleansing for *miasma*)

Psychoanalysis and Spirituality

- Freud was notoriously anti-religion and anti-illusion
- Later psychoanalysts from Object-Relations and Self Psychology have taken a very different view
- Kohut (1971) coined the term “sustaining self-object”
 - Someone or something with whom our identities have become entwined: simultaneously self and not-self
 - Similar to “transitional object” (Winnicott, 1953), but lifelong
- Kohut made a compelling case that everyone needs two kinds of relationships throughout life to grow and thrive:
 - Mirroring by a self-object
 - Idealization of a self-object
- Meissner, S.J., M.D. (1984): religion and spirituality are transitional or self-objects

Role of Self-Objects in Moral Injury

- I hypothesize that moral injury always involves the partial or complete loss of sustaining self-objects
 - Loss of mirroring (so others don't seem to reflect your inherent goodness and value back to you)
 - Loss of idealizations (so greater goods don't seem so great any longer)
- Moral repair must involve the restoration of sustaining (both mirroring and idealized) self-objects
- **Nothing can be more personal and individual than who or what one chooses to be self-objects**
 - Infants must choose their own “security blankets”
 - At every age, we must choose our own image of God
 - We love who and what we love

Empathy and Self-Empathy

- Empathy requires the accurate perception of another person as a whole person, with strengths and faults
- Self-empathy requires an accurate perception of oneself as a whole person
- Empathy and self-empathy are likely fundamental to the two targets of moral repair:
 - Acceptance
 - Forgiveness
- Empathy from a self-object (human or Divine) can encourage self-empathy
- But enduring acceptance and forgiveness require action
 - To become, oneself, more acceptable and forgivable
 - To make the world more acceptable and forgivable

Moral Traps

Definition (my own): Moral choices that appear attractive but are actually morally destructive and are hard to free oneself from



Characteristics:

- They meet a need we may not even be aware of
- They provide a simple solution to a moral dilemma
- They provide an illicit pleasure
- Their cost always exceeds their benefits
- But we do it anyway

Caution: This is a half-baked idea at best!

Moral Traps: Examples

- Revenge
- Pity
- Self-pity
- Taking none of the blame
- Taking all the blame
- Moral reassurance
- Addictions
- Narcissism
- Taking sides in moral dilemmas



Moral Reassurance vs. Moral Repair

- Moral reassurance is a common social practice in many settings, including counseling and cognitive therapy; e.g.:
 - “It’s not your fault”
 - “You did the best you could”
 - “God still loves you”
- Moral reassurance may lessen the sting of negative moral emotions
- But it can neither prevent nor repair moral injury
- Moral repair requires embracing the TRUTH, and taking action to create goodness (e.g., making or seeking amends) and to be good

Moral Dilemma Example

"Rebecca," he replied, "thou knowest not how impossible it is for one trained to actions of chivalry to remain passive as a priest, or a woman, when they are acting deeds of honour around him. The love of battle is the food upon which we live—the dust of the 'melee' is the breath of our nostrils! We live not—we wish not to live—longer than while we are victorious and renowned—Such, maiden, are the laws of chivalry to which we are sworn, and to which we offer all that we hold dear."

"Alas!" said the fair Jewess, "and what is it, valiant knight, save an offering of sacrifice to a demon of vain glory, and a passing through the fire to Moloch?—What remains to you as the prize of all the blood you have spilled—of all the travail and pain you have endured—of all the tears which your deeds have caused, when death hath broken the strong man's spear, and overtaken the speed of his war-horse?"

"What remains?" cried Ivanhoe; "Glory, maiden, glory! which gilds our sepulchre and embalms our name."

"Glory?" continued Rebecca; "alas, is the rusted mail which hangs as a hatchment over the champion's dim and mouldering tomb—is the defaced sculpture of the inscription which the ignorant monk can hardly read to the enquiring pilgrim—are these sufficient rewards for the sacrifice of every kindly affection, for a life spent miserably that ye may make others miserable? Or is there such virtue in the rude rhymes of a wandering bard, that domestic love, kindly affection, peace and happiness, are so wildly bartered, to become the hero of those ballads which vagabond minstrels sing to drunken churls over their evening ale?"

"By the soul of Hereward!" replied the knight impatiently, "thou speakest, maiden, of thou knowest not what. Thou wouldst quench the pure light of chivalry, which alone distinguishes the noble from the base, the gentle knight from the churl and the savage; which rates our life far, far beneath the pitch of our honour; raises us victorious over pain, toil, and suffering, and teaches us to fear no evil but disgrace. Thou art no Christian, Rebecca; and to thee are unknown those high feelings which swell the bosom of a noble maiden when her lover hath done some deed of emprise which sanctions his flame. Chivalry!—why, maiden, she is the nurse of pure and high affection—the stay of the oppressed, the redresser of grievances, the curb of the power of the tyrant—Nobility were but an empty name without her, and liberty finds the best protection in her lance and her sword."

Treatment of Moral Injury

1. Don't try to treat MI in a combat veteran without engaging veteran peer support (you, as a clinician, cannot be a war-zone moral authority)
2. If religious beliefs or practices are relevant, engage or refer to an appropriate minister
3. With the help of trusted peers and religious supports, ask patient to realistically **assess their own or others' culpability** (0-100%)
4. For the portion of guilt, shame, or anger based on real culpability, **make or seek amends**
5. Help the patient restore **honor** as an antidote to **shame**
6. Rinse and repeat until **forgiveness** becomes possible



Thank you