

Systematic Review

Moral Injury and Mental Health Among US Military Service Members and Veterans

Military service members can be exposed to situations in which their own actions or the actions of others conflict with deeply held values. Moral injury (MI) describes an intense and distressing response to such exposures, which are referred to as potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs).

To inform VA clinical practice and research efforts, VA's Integrative Mental Health initiative, supported by the Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, requested a synthesis of evidence on the relationship between PMIEs and MI and mental health outcomes among US Veterans and military service members. Review authors from the VA ESP Coordinating Center identified 50 relevant studies using systematic literature searches conducted in early 2024.




Key Takeaways

Available evidence suggests MI and PMIEs are linked with adverse mental health outcomes. Understanding of MI is evolving, and research is needed to confirm causal relationships and to identify interventions that address the psychosocial impacts of MI.


Main Findings

Association of PMIEs and MI with mental health symptoms

 **Studies:** Ranging from 13 to 41 observational studies per outcome

MI symptoms are likely correlated with more severe PTSD, depression, and anxiety symptoms and may be correlated with suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Exposure to PMIEs may be correlated with more severe PTSD, depression, and anxiety symptoms and with suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Associations between MI and PTSD, depression, and anxiety symptoms were more consistent and precise than for other outcomes. Confidence in findings was limited for all outcomes by study methodological concerns.

Association of PMIEs and MI with substance use and functioning

 **Studies:** Ranging from 3 to 17 observational studies per outcome

MI symptoms and PMIE exposures may be correlated with greater substance use, poorer relationship functioning, and reduced social engagement. Relatively few studies are available for these outcomes compared with mental health outcomes, and confidence in findings was further limited by study methodological concerns and inconsistency and/or imprecision in results.

Limitations to available evidence

Most available research uses cross-sectional designs that cannot confirm causal relationships. Measures of MI symptoms and/or PMIE exposures used in some studies may not reliably assess or differentiate the constructs, due to a lack of consensus about the conceptual definitions of MI and PMIEs. Future studies should make use of improved measures and longitudinal designs to better characterize the psychosocial impacts of MI and PMIEs.

[Access completed ESP reports !\[\]\(3342c215b2a8b663596a81468d5dc314_img.jpg\)](#) or [nominate a topic for an ESP review !\[\]\(5e22d44aef1f9548ca8274cbfb388e9d_img.jpg\)](#)

Questions about the report **Moral Injury and Mental Health Among US Military Service Members and Veterans: A Systematic Review and Evidence Overview** or the VA Evidence Synthesis Program (ESP) can be directed to esp.cc@va.gov.

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