



Employee Assistance Program Newsletter

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Moral Injury in Law Enforcement: Understanding the Hidden Impact

Law enforcement professionals are trained to make difficult decisions under pressure, often in situations where there are no perfect outcomes. While much attention has been given to trauma and stress in policing, a lesser-known but equally important concept is moral injury - a psychological and emotional response that can occur when an individual's actions, or inability to act, conflict with their deeply held values.

Moral injury is not a sign of weakness or failure. Instead, it reflects the reality of working in environments where competing priorities, life-or-death decisions, and ethical dilemmas are part of the job.

What Is Moral Injury?

Moral injury occurs when a person experiences, witnesses, or participates in events that challenge their core beliefs about right and wrong. This can include situations where an officer feels they:



Did something that conflicts with their values



Failed to prevent harm when they believe they should have



Witnessed actions that violated their sense of justice

These experiences can create an internal conflict that lingers long after the incident is over. Over time, this conflict may alter how individuals view themselves, others, and the world around them.

Why It Matters in Law Enforcement

Law enforcement professionals are uniquely vulnerable to moral injury due to the nature of their work. Even when actions are legally justified and professionally appropriate, they may still feel morally distressing.

Moral injury can also arise from less dramatic, but equally impactful, situations, such as feeling responsible for an unintended outcome or questioning one's decisions after the fact.

Possible Cues of Moral Injury

1

Social and behavioral problems

- Social withdrawal and alienation
- Aggression
- Misconduct
- Sociopathy (behaviorally expressed as an inability to get along with others or abide by societal rules)

2

Trust issues

- Lack of trust in self or others

3

Spiritual and existential issues

- Loss of religious faith
- Loss of trust in morality
- Loss of meaning
- Fatalism (behaviorally expressed as powerlessness or an attitude of resignation)
- Negative changes in ethical attitudes and behavior

4

Psychological symptoms

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Impulse to seek revenge

5

Self-deprecating emotions and cognitions

- Shame
- Guilt
- Self-loathing (behaviorally expressed as self-blame, self-attack, and self-destructive behaviors)
- Feeling of being damaged

6

Unwanted reexperience of morally injurious events

- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Intrusive recollections

Left unaddressed, these experiences can contribute to broader mental health challenges, including depression, substance use, and decreased job performance.

Sources: Kent D. Drescher, David W. Foy, and Caroline Kelly, "An Exploration of the Viability and Usefulness of the Construct of Moral Injury in War Veterans," *Traumatology* 17, no. 1 (March 2011): 8-13; William P. Nash and Brett T. Litz, "Moral Injury: A Mechanism for War-Related Psychological Trauma in Military Family Members," *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 16, no. 4 (December 2013): 365-75; and B.T. Litz et al., "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (December 2009): 695-706.

Resilience and Recovery

It is important to recognize that not everyone exposed to morally challenging events develops long-term difficulties. Many law enforcement professionals demonstrate strong resilience and continue to function effectively after difficult experiences.

Research suggests that recovery is influenced by several factors, including:

- Personal coping skills
- Support from peers, family, and leadership
- Access to trusted mental health resources
- Opportunities to process and make meaning of experiences

Acknowledging moral injury as a normal response to abnormal situations is a key step toward recovery.



Strategies for Addressing Moral Injury

While there is no single solution, several approaches can help mitigate the impact of moral injury and support long-term well-being:



Seek Support Early

Connecting with Trauma Team Members, counselors, or EAP services can help process experiences before they become overwhelming. Speaking with professionals who understand law enforcement culture is especially important.



Normalize the Conversation

Discussing ethical challenges and emotional reactions within teams can reduce stigma and reinforce that these experiences are not uncommon.



Engage in Meaningful Activities

Physical activity, hobbies, and time with family can provide balance and reduce emotional strain.



Explore Personal Values and Purpose

Some individuals benefit from reconnecting with their sense of purpose, whether through service, mentorship, or spiritual practices.



Practice Self-Forgiveness

Recognizing the limitations of any one person in complex situations can help reduce self-blame and promote healing.



The Role of Leadership

Leadership plays a critical role in addressing moral injury by:

- Promoting a culture where seeking help is supported
- Providing education on moral and ethical stressors
- Integrating mental health resources into routine operations
- Encouraging peer support and open dialogue

Proactive efforts not only support individual well-being but also enhance overall mission readiness and performance.

Staying Mission Ready

Moral injury is an often-unseen consequence of doing the job with integrity in difficult circumstances. Recognizing it, talking about it, and addressing it early can make a meaningful difference.

If you or someone you work with may be experiencing signs of moral injury, reaching out is a sign of strength - and a step toward maintaining both personal well-being and professional effectiveness.

Work–Family Spillover and Emotional Withdrawal: Understanding the Impact at Home

Personnel across the agency operate in demanding environments characterized by high workloads, time sensitivity, exposure to critical information or events, and sustained performance expectations. While much attention is placed on managing occupational demands, less visible is how work-related stress carries into personal life. This phenomenon, known as work–family spillover, can influence relationships, communication, and emotional availability at home.



Understanding Work–Family Spillover

Work–family spillover occurs when experiences, stress, and emotional states from the workplace affect functioning in the home environment, and vice versa. Within an agency setting, spillover may be influenced by:



High workload or time-sensitive operational demands



Exposure to critical or sensitive information



Extended or irregular work hours



Cognitive fatigue and sustained concentration requirements



Organizational pressures and performance expectations

While some degree of transition between work and personal roles is expected, sustained spillover can begin to affect interpersonal dynamics and overall well-being.



How Spillover Manifests at Home

A common manifestation of spillover is emotional withdrawal. After demanding work periods, individuals may:

- Be less communicative or responsive
- Have reduced emotional bandwidth for interaction
- Prefer solitude or minimal engagement
- Appear physically present but mentally preoccupied

This response is often not intentional. It can reflect a need to decompress, mentally reset, or compartmentalize after prolonged cognitive or emotional demands.

Impact on Relationships

When emotional withdrawal becomes more frequent or prolonged, it may be perceived by family members or close contacts as:



Disinterest or lack of engagement



Emotional distance or detachment



Reduced investment in the relationship

These perceptions can lead to misunderstandings, frustration, and decreased connection. Over time, both individuals may experience a sense of strain or disconnection, even when the intent is simply to recover from work-related demands.



The Interaction Between Stress and Availability

Occupational stress reduces the cognitive and emotional resources available for personal interactions. When combined with personal responsibilities, this can create a cycle:

1. Workplace demands deplete energy and focus
2. Reduced availability leads to withdrawal or limited interaction
3. Withdrawal contributes to relational tension or misunderstanding
4. Additional stress from these dynamics further compounds overall strain

Recognizing this cycle is an important step in addressing it proactively.

Strategies to Improve Connection and Reduce Spillover

Managing work–family spillover requires intentional effort and awareness of transition between roles.

<p>1. Allow Time for Transition</p> <p>Where possible, build in a brief period between work and home life to decompress and shift focus.</p>	<p>2. Communicate Needs Clearly</p> <p>Briefly expressing the need for time to reset can help set expectations and reduce misinterpretation by others.</p>	<p>3. Re-Engage Deliberately</p> <p>Intentional connection, whether through conversation, shared time, or check-ins, supports relationship continuity even during demanding periods.</p>
<p>4. Recognize Patterns of Withdrawal</p> <p>Awareness of tendencies to disengage during high-stress periods allows for earlier adjustments and improved balance.</p>	<p>5. Prioritize Recovery</p> <p>Adequate rest, physical activity, and downtime support cognitive and emotional restoration, reducing the likelihood of prolonged spillover.</p>	<p>6. Utilize Available Resources</p> <p>Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services provide confidential avenues for processing stress and strengthening coping strategies.</p>

Recognizing Stress in Children and Maintaining Connection Despite Demanding Schedules

Personnel across the agency often balance demanding professional responsibilities with significant personal and family commitments. While operational and organizational demands can limit time and energy, children remain highly sensitive to changes in routine, availability, and emotional engagement. Understanding how stress presents in children, and how to maintain meaningful connection despite limited time, is essential to supporting both family stability and overall well-being.



How Stress Manifests in Children

Children may not always have the language to express stress directly. Instead, it often appears through behavioral, emotional, or physical changes. These indicators may vary by age but commonly include:

Increased irritability, mood swings, or emotional reactivity

Withdrawal from family members or social activities

Somatic complaints such as headaches or stomachaches

Decline in school performance or concentration

Increased need for reassurance or attention

Regression in behavior (e.g., clinginess, difficulty separating)

Changes in sleep patterns or appetite

These responses do not necessarily indicate a clinical concern; rather, they may reflect an adjustment to environmental changes such as inconsistent schedules, reduced availability, or heightened stress within the household.

Sources of Stress in the Family Environment

Children are often attuned to shifts in their environment, including:

- Changes in parental availability due to work demands
- Perceived emotional distance or reduced engagement
- Household tension or increased stress levels
- Disruptions in routines or consistency
- Limited opportunities for interaction due to schedules

Even when not explicitly discussed, children may interpret these changes internally, which can influence their sense of stability and security.



The Importance of Connection

Consistent, meaningful connection serves as a protective factor in a child's emotional development. It supports:

- Emotional regulation and security
- Trust and communication within the family
- Resilience in the face of change or stress
- A sense of predictability and stability

Importantly, connection is not solely dependent on the amount of time available, but on the quality and consistency of interactions.

Maintaining Connection With Limited Time

Given the demands of agency work, time with family may be limited or irregular. However, intentional approaches can help maintain strong relationships with children:



1. Prioritize Consistency Over Duration

Short, consistent interactions can be more impactful than infrequent extended periods. Predictable routines such as check-ins, bedtime conversations, or shared meals when possible, can help reinforce stability.



2. Be Present During Interactions

When time is available, minimizing distractions and focusing attention fully on the child enhances the quality of engagement. Even brief moments of undivided attention can be meaningful.



3. Create Small, Repeatable Rituals

Simple, recurring activities, reading together, a daily question at dinner, or a quick conversation before bed, can create a sense of continuity and connection.



4. Acknowledge the Child's Experience

Children benefit from knowing their feelings are recognized. Briefly acknowledging their emotions, without overexplaining adult concerns, can help them feel understood and supported.



5. Maintain Communication Appropriate to Age

Providing age-appropriate explanations about schedules or absences can reduce uncertainty. Children often respond well to clarity and predictability.



Recognizing When Additional Support May Be Needed

While fluctuations in behavior are normal, sustained or significant changes in a child's functioning may warrant additional attention. Indicators may include:

- Prolonged withdrawal or isolation
- Persistent changes in sleep or appetite
- Ongoing behavioral challenges at home or school
- Difficulty coping with routine transitions

In such cases, consulting with a professional or utilizing available support resources may be beneficial.

Supporting Both Presence and Stability

Balancing professional demands with family responsibilities requires intentional effort, particularly when time is limited. Recognizing signs of stress in children and prioritizing meaningful connection can help maintain stability within the home environment.

Even in demanding schedules, small, consistent efforts to remain engaged and attentive can have a lasting impact on a child's sense of security, development, and overall well-being.



Who is Eligible for EAP Services?

**DEA
Employees**

**Spouses of
DEA Employees**

**Children of DEA Employees
26 or younger**

**Employee's Children
(Any age with special
needs)**

**DEA Employee's Parents, In-
Laws, and/or Others Living IN the
employee' home as a family member**

We are here to help with our culturally competent clinical team that uses trauma-informed strategies to address the unique needs of DEA employees and their families. Asking for help is the first and most important step you can take to begin the process of healing and recovery.

Contact Us

For a counseling referral in your area, contact The Counseling Team International's DEA EAP Hotline at:

800-275-7460

EAP Office at HQ (571) 776-2990 / eap@dea.gov

EAP Administrator, Adrienne Wright-Williams, LMFT

EAP Specialist, Shane Arnett, LCSW

EAP Program Support Specialist, Darlene Flowers

Lifecare

866-426-0416