Response to Traumatic Stress

# Moral Injury

Street intervention workers reflected high levels of empathy in their engagement with clients and community members based on previous experiences of harm and hurting others. Violence intervention work provides a redemptive opportunity for individuals to “correct” past mistakes. However, study participants described instances where they felt that nonprofit organizations capitalized on the empathic and redemptive nature of the work in ways that contributed to traumatic stress. When street intervention workers feel ‘used’ or ‘betrayed’ by their supervisors or their organizations, it can impact their outlook on work and life more generally.

Moral injury is a term used to describe psychological distress which occurs after an individual is involved in or witnesses events that violate their moral code[[1]](#footnote-1). Moral injury can occur among street intervention workers when a worker is risking their life in their role and feels like their organization does little to recognize this risk. Street supervisors experience conflict over the balance of managing worker productivity and program outputs perhaps at the expense of worker wellness.

*So, managing an outreach program, I think should not be just about reducing the violence and all that. How are we gonna take care of this human being? We're do- we're doing something very cruel. Well, we said it, right? We take a former alcoholic and send them right back to the bar to try and get people out of the bar, right?*

The tasks that supervisors hold their staff accountable for may be sources of traumatic stress. Balancing worker productivity and worker wellness is complex without well-defined boundaries that are based on the leadership styles and culture of the organization. Street intervention workers similarly described experiences of being undervalued by their supervisors and organizations. This led to feelings of being demoralized and unsupported in their roles:

*We wear a lot of hats, man, we wear a lot of hats, and we risk our lives doing it with very minimal pay. And especially compared to police officers and law enforcement officers, and- very little assurance of safety, right? Because we put our lives on the line and our bodies on the line with very little ways to, you know, try to combat anything that might come at us.*

Street intervention workers also described client loss as a major source of moral crises within the profession as well. Client loss is traumatic in of itself; however, street intervention workers added that it is even more painful to lose a client who was beginning to show ‘progress’ (i.e., change their way of thinking, transition out of street life, consider going back to school, etc). Even though the participants were changing, their environment wasn’t changing along with them; they were transitioning away from a lifestyle associated with violence, while remaining in a community with high rates of violence. When loss occurs within this context, the street intervention workers may feel like their efforts are worthless or futile- does it matter if one person makes changes in their life if they still die in the end? Staff may begin to experience self-doubt and feel helpless or powerless in preventing violence. This internalized sense of failure may challenge their morals or beliefs that in the possibility of positive change in their clients and/or the communities they serve in.

# Food for Thought

* Are there any situations that have occurred during the course of violence intervention work when staff members have felt guilt or shame over their behaviors?
* Have staff ever described instances where they felt like they acted in ways that violated their own morals or values while conducting violence reduction work?
* Have staff described situations where they have trouble forgiving themselves or forgiving others for something that occurred while conducting violence reduction work?
* In each of the questions above, what was the source of the guilt, shame, or moral violation? Was it an exchange that occurred external to the organization (for example, with clients, community members, police, etc.) or internal to the organizational (with coworkers, supervisors, etc.)?

1. Griffin, B. J., Purcell, N., Burkman, K., Litz, B. T., Bryan, C. J., Schmitz, M., Villierme, C., Walsh, J., & Maguen, S. (2019). Moral injury: An integrative review. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 32*(3), 350-362. https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22362 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)