



Volunteers of America®

Moral Injury: A Struggle with Identity and Meaning



▼ **“I returned ... to sleepless nights, to thoughts and memories of war. Those disturbing thoughts and memories blew like the wind, and there was no moral shelter with which to protect myself; it had all been laid flat. ‘Moral injury’ helps me name something about myself that resists my knowing it completely – a disconnect, or a rift, I feel between the self that went to and supported the war and the self that looks back on it as anathema to who I am.”**

– *Michael Yandell, U.S. Army and Iraq War veteran*

Since 1896, Volunteers of America (VOA) has been a cutting-edge leader in human services. For more than a century, we have provided innovative, empathetic and effective care to the formerly incarcerated, seniors, veterans, children and families, and the homeless. Today, we’ve expanded our mission to address another crucial need: repair of moral injury within our communities.

What is Moral Injury?

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs defines moral injury as “the violation of what is right in high-stakes situations by a person with legitimate authority” and “a syndrome of shame, self-handicapping, anger and demoralization” resulting from experiences that challenge “deeply-held beliefs and expectations about moral and ethical conduct.” Such experiences include “killing, perpetration of violence, betrayals of trust in leaders, witnessing depraved behavior or failing to prevent serious unethical acts.”

While moral injury first emerged in research on military veterans, anyone who works in high-stakes situations or who has endured trauma can experience it. When life offers dilemmas that deliver devastating consequences, moral injury can happen to anyone, anywhere and at any time. A crisis of conscience is a normal response to an experience of witnessing or inflicting harm that cannot be integrated into an existing moral system.

The effects of moral injury are pervasive in our society and contribute to homelessness, self-harm, suicide, rage,

addiction, compulsive overwork and/or depression. But unlike some causes of such distress, moral injury is not a mental illness. It is an existential crisis in identity and meaning because of devastating life circumstances, and it can happen at any age.

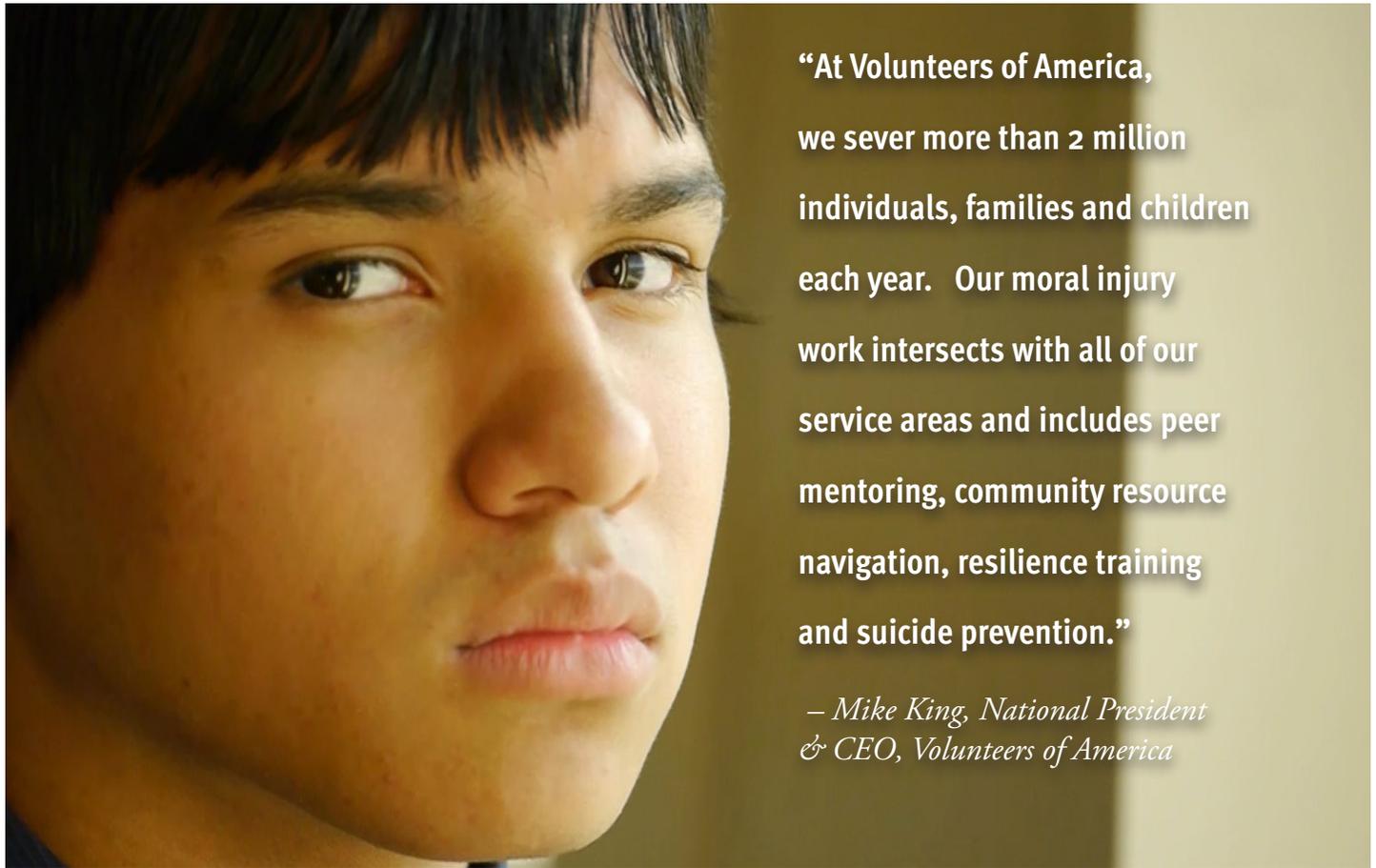
What is Volunteers of America doing to address Moral Injury?

VOA is committed to broadening the public, faith-based and medical community’s knowledge about the effects of moral injury. Our goals are the widespread acknowledgement that moral injury is a legitimate obstruction to personal well-being for a vast spectrum of populations and communities and extensive training in how to address it in those populations.

VOA’s moral injury repair initiatives have increased our capacity to serve veterans in crisis and at risk of suicide. Engaging staff who are veterans and who are certified mental health specialists (via certification as Veteran Peer Support Specialists, a recognized mental health specialty), our training programs offer critical skills to strengthen veterans against the challenges they face.

Volunteers of America’s moral injury efforts as of Fall 2018 include:

- Training and certifying veterans and active duty military who are VOA employees to serve as peer support specialists to lead ongoing suicide prevention efforts in various communities
- Development of spiritual resilience training for at-risk and/or homeless veterans



“At Volunteers of America, we serve more than 2 million individuals, families and children each year. Our moral injury work intersects with all of our service areas and includes peer mentoring, community resource navigation, resilience training and suicide prevention.”

– Mike King, National President & CEO, Volunteers of America

- Launch of a national communications campaign to increase awareness of veterans’ risk of moral injury
- Development of formal training curriculum centered on moral injury for VOA staff, ministers and other front-line service providers
- Publication of *The Momentum of Hope: Personal Stories of Moral Injury*, based on many life experiences and professions, provides both information and 30 stories of how people cope with and recover from moral injury
- Convening stakeholder focus group events and moral injury trainings across the country that engage hundreds of thought leaders and community providers
- Launch of a “Moral Injury Repair” pilot that serves 50 at-risk veterans with counseling and educates hundreds of potential referral sources in Chicago and across the nation

Future plans for addressing moral injury include:

- Adapting the Resilience Strength Training program for veterans to help new populations such as the formerly incarcerated and parents in the child welfare system
- Advocacy and development of a mental health processing program, in partnership with the Department of Defense and others, for all those leaving military service called “Boot Camp Out”
- Development of an educational program for training chaplains for social movements and emergency situations who are informed about trauma, moral injury and spiritual care
- Creation of programs to support caregivers in high-stakes work

As advances in research on moral injury treatment and repair continue, VOA will continue to provide innovative care for individuals and their communities.

Volunteers of America has strong partners in the effort to repair moral injury in veterans and others in our community. Partners like the HSBC and the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation have provided millions of dollars in grant support for moral injury programs in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York City and Texas.



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voa.org/moral-injury