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This material is based upon work supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Office of Military Family Readiness Policy, U.S. Department of Defense under Award Numbers 2015-48770-24368 and 2019-48770-30366.

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Moral Injury: Suicide Risk, Survivor's Guilt & Other Clinical Manifestations



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Today's Presenter



Shira Maguen, Ph.D.

*Professor, UCSF Medical School
Mental Health Director, Post-9/11 Integrated Care Clinic
Staff Psychologist, San Francisco VA Medical Center*



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A silhouette of a person parachuting against a vibrant sunset sky with orange and red hues. The parachute is fully deployed and dark against the bright background.

VA **UCSF**

Moral Injury: Suicide Risk, Survivor's Guilt, & Other Clinical Manifestations

Shira Maguen, Ph.D.
Professor, UCSF School of Medicine
San Francisco VA Medical Center

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Outline

- Moral injury framework: definition and clinical model
- Moral injury and suicide
- Moral injury and survivor's guilt (vs. PTSD)
- Self-forgiveness as a clinical manifestation
- Case example
- Treatment options for moral injury

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Moral Injury Definition

- Perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.
- Moral injury requires an act of transgression that contradicts personal or shared expectation about the rules or the code of conduct, either during the event or at some point afterwards.



Litz, Stein, Delaney, Lebowitz, Nash, Silva, Maguen, 2009

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PTSD vs. Moral Injury

PTSD

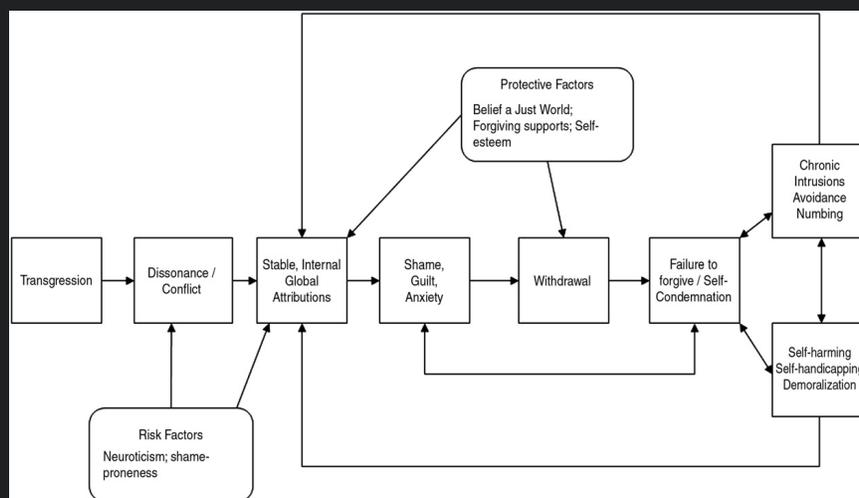
- DSM-5 Diagnosis
- Needs to be traumatic exposure + symptoms below
- Includes re-experiencing symptoms, avoidance, emotional numbing, negative thoughts/feelings, and arousal
- Treatment for PTSD is grounded in fear-based theories and exposure/habituation to trauma

Moral Injury

- Dimensional issue involving spirituality sense of self
- Involves guilt, shame, loss
- Exposure not sufficient, needs to be perceived transgression
- Often involves functional impact and self-sabotaging behaviors
- Spirituality, self-forgiveness and making amends are key

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Causal Framework for Moral Injury



Litz, Stein, Delaney, Lebowitz, Nash, Silva, Maguen, 2009

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Moral Injury & Suicide: Noah Pierce



<https://themilitarysuicidereport.wordpress.com/tag/noah-pierce/>

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Moral Injury & Suicide: Noah Pierce

“Noah Pierce’s headstone gives his date of death as July 26, 2007, though his family feels certain he died the night before, when, at age twenty-three, he took a handgun and shot himself in the head. No one is sure what pushed him to it....it could have been the memory of the Iraqi child he crushed under his Bradley....It could have been the unarmed man he shot point-blank in the forehead during a house-to-house raid, or the friend he tried madly to gather into a plastic bag after he had been blown to bits by a roadside bomb, or—as the fragments of Noah’s poetry might lead you to believe—it could have been the doctor he killed at a checkpoint.”

Gillbertson, 2008

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Moral Injury & Suicide

From Noah Pierce Suicide Note:

“Mom, I am so sorry. My life has been hell since March 2003 when I was part of the Iraq invasion...I am freeing myself from the desert once and from all...I am not a good person. I have done bad things. I have taken lives. Now it is time to take mine.”

- Veterans who had higher killing experiences had twice the odds of suicidal ideation, compared to those with lower or no killing experiences (OR = 1.99, 95% CI = 1.07-3.67), even after adjusting for demographic variables, PTSD, depression, substance use disorders, and adjusted combat exposure.

Maguen et al., 2012

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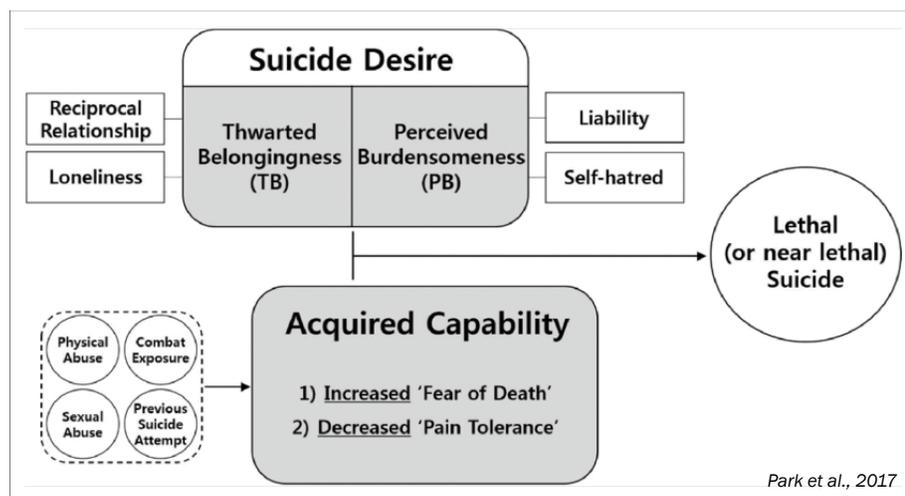
Moral Injury & Suicide

- Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide (IPTS) (Joiner, 2005) as a theoretical model for understanding the relationship between combat-related killing and suicide.
- IPTS proposes that thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness cause suicidal desire, whereas prior experiences with pain, provocation, and death result in habituation to the fear and pain associated with suicide, thus influencing one's capability for suicide.
- Combat-related killing impacts suicidal behavior through its association with the acquired capability for suicide. Additionally, we propose that combat-related killing impacts suicidal ideation through its effects on perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness.

Maguen & Monteith, 2018

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Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide



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Moral Injury & Suicide

- Among AD personnel, moral injury was associated with more severe suicidal ideation and behavior
- Bryan et al. studied 930 National Guard personnel
- PTSD and moral injury represent separate constructs with unique signs and symptoms.
- Having both PTSD and moral injury =
 - Increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors
 - Differentiates between those who have attempted suicide and those who have only had suicidal thoughts

Bryan et al., 2014, 2018

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Moral Injury & Suicide

- Among Israeli Veterans, MI experiences were significantly related to suicidal ideation and behavior.
- Self- and betrayal-based MI experiences were significantly associated with sense of entrapment.
- Entrapment = subjective perception of individual's circumstances being uncontrollable, unremitting, and inescapable.
- The relationship between MI and suicidal ideation and behavior was mediated by entrapment and depression.
- Treatment must also target depression and sense of entrapment, perhaps by instilling hope and increasing functional capacity.

Levi-Belz & Zerach, 2018

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Moral Injury & Suicide

- Among 131 US Army Iraq/Afghanistan veterans, potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs) were directly related to suicide ideation (SI).
- There was also an indirect relationship between PMIEs and SI through meaning-making.
- More specifically, the greater the ability to make meaning of the MI experience, the less intense the suicide ideation.
- This helps pave the path for interventions that can help Veterans with making meaning out of their morally injurious experiences.
- This will involve directly addressing the MI experience and helping process this in a safe environment.

Currier et al., 2014

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Moral Injury & Suicide

- In 189 wounded combat veterans, association between moral injury and suicidality decreased with greater mindfulness and social connectedness.
- Implications for treatment include increasing mindfulness components that are palatable and tailored to individual preferences and culture.
- Social connection can occur in many shapes and sizes; exploring whether this can be in groups or at the individual level, with like-minded others.
- Can also combine mindfulness and social connection to reduce risk of suicide in those with moral injury.

Kelley et al., 2019

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Moral Injury & Survivor's Guilt

- While in PTSD survivor guilt is about fellow service members who did not get to survive, with moral injury it is about those who the Veteran harmed or killed in war (and still survived).
- How did I get to survive when I killed others?
- Often coupled with a sense of having to pay a lifelong debt for survival in the midst of killing others.
- This debt can manifest in self-sabotaging or self-harming behaviors.
- One Veteran described it as “taking away someone else’s soul” and feared that he or family would be harmed in return.
- Lived in fear that something would happen to him or his family.

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Moral Injury & Survivor's Guilt

- This notion of karmic retribution is common with moral injury
- Idea that the scales need to be re-balanced, “righting the wrong” that has been done.
- Emerges as thoughts about not deserving to be happy, have a family, etc. when someone else was deprived of these.
- Can also emerge as suicidal thoughts of behaviors
- The person will actively sabotage any opportunity to be happy or successful at work, home, etc.
- Commonly emerges during major life milestones
- Underlying thought: I get to experience life when the person I harmed or killed does not.
- Survivor guilt from moral injury linked to inability to self-forgive

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Self-Forgiveness

- *“The person who habitually works toward a state of genuine self-forgiveness exhibits an important virtue: she recognizes her own intrinsic worth, which she retains in spite of her wrongdoing.” – Margaret Holmgren (1998), Self-Forgiveness and Responsible Moral Agency*
- Oftentimes, individuals with moral injury become their wrongdoing, fostering a sense of deep personal shame.
- Suicide can happen when self worth = wrongdoing
- Importance of reconciling what you did with who you are in all its complexity.

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Moral Injury & Self-Forgiveness

- “[S]elf-forgiveness [is] a process in which a person (a) accepts responsibility for having harmed another; (b) expresses remorse while reducing shame; (c) engages in restoration through reparative behaviors and a recommitment to values; and (d) thus achieves a renewal of self-respect, self-compassion, and self-acceptance.” -Cornish & Wade, 2015
- Forgiveness is a key component of the moral injury model

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Why Forgiveness?

- Recent systemic review and meta-analysis found that forgiveness interventions are effective in reducing:
 - Depression
 - Anger and hostility
 - Stress and distress
- Forgiveness interventions are also effective in promoting positive affect.
- Overall, forgiveness can be effective in promoting different dimensions of mental well-being.

Akhtar & Barlow, 2018

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Moral Injury & Self-Forgiveness

- Self-forgiveness is a process involving moral engagement
- Authentic self-forgiveness is a painful process that can involve self-challenge, cognitive processing, spiritual engagement, and shifting perspectives.
- Deliberate process involving accountability, reconciliation, and self-acceptance through human connectedness and commitment to change (*Webb et al., 2017*).
- Forgiveness often starts with guilt that can act as a catalyst of change if it does not flourish into intense self-condemnation.... (*Purcell et al., 2018*)

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Moral Injury & Self-Forgiveness

- Forgiveness continues with desire for change.
- Ideas about self-forgiveness come from culture, family, military, or spirituality.

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Moral Injury & Self-Forgiveness

Barriers to self-forgiveness can be: 1) “To forgive is to forget”;
2) Feeling that act was too horrible to be forgiven; 3) That only higher powers can forgive; 4) Only victims can forgive; 5) Self-forgiveness is not deserved

“Articulation of barriers to self-forgiveness also empowers the veteran to begin analyzing and disentangling destructive beliefs about the self, finding small openings that illuminate a potential pathway to the restoration of moral identity and self-regard—a pathway that must ultimately honor the veteran’s most deeply held convictions and values.” -Purcell et al., 2018

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Moral Injury & Self-Forgiveness

- Path to self-forgiveness includes: accepting responsibility, building self-compassion, making amends and reconciliation, reconstructing an intact moral identity, and self-reintegration
- Monitoring improvements in functioning can serve as a barometer for the process of self-forgiveness.
- Has relationship and work/education functioning improved? Have they reengaged with their spirituality?

Purcell et al., 2018

<https://free-images.com/>

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How can addressing self-forgiveness help?

“It’s freedom from being captive, It’s not that I am guilt free or shame free; it’s just that I am not packing around all that load, that weight. . . How do you describe opening a door to a new life.” -Veteran who participated in IOK TX program



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How do we treat moral injury & cultivate self-forgiveness?

- PTSD treatments are grounded in fear-based theories
- Exposure to trauma plus cognitive components
- Moral injury treatments go beyond diagnosis, recognizing that MI is multi-dimensional and contains a spiritual component



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One Option: Impact of Killing (IOK)

- CBT treatments provide a helpful base for killing treatment module, particularly when debilitating cognitions exist
- Killing treatment module designed to be used *after* vets have done some work talking about trauma
 - Does not have to be their killing-related trauma
 - 10 sessions, 60-90 minutes



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How is IOK Different?

Challenge vs. Acceptance	Spiritual & Moral Concerns	Self-Forgiveness
Tailored Letter Writing	Connection & Amends	Catalyst vs. Resolution

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Addressing Self-Forgiveness: IOK

- Raise topic of self-forgiveness directly.
- Invite discussion of personal meaning, cultural relevance, and spiritual significance of forgiveness.
- Explore self-forgiveness barriers and facilitators.
- Create a personalized, patient-driven, action-oriented “forgiveness plan” that is designed to serve as a springboard.
- Exercises to define self-forgiveness, to delineate cultural beliefs about forgiveness, and to conceptualize how they have applied forgiveness to the self and others.
- Write forgiveness letters that facilitate perspective taking.
- Develop an amends plan, identifying specific actions they can take to reaffirm their violated values and reconnect.

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Addressing Self-Forgiveness: IOK

“I had to learn to love myself. At one time I couldn’t love myself. . . I had to forgive myself.” —Combat Veteran, IOK study

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IOK Treatment Overview

Session	Description	Content
1	Pre-Treatment Evaluation	Assessment, past work, barriers to treatment, and coping skills
2	Common Responses to Killing-Part 1	Physiology, instinctual decisions, and initial reactions
3	Common Responses to Killing-Part 2	Emotions, behaviors, beliefs
4	Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) Elements	CBT framework, meaning of killing, killing cognitions
5	Becoming Unstuck	Maladaptive killing cognitions (cont.), behavioral activation, intro to acceptance
6	Acceptance and Moral Injury	Acceptance (cont.), role of betrayal in moral injury, related sequelae
7	Forgiveness-Part 1	Defining forgiveness and self-forgiveness, barriers to self-forgiveness, and intro to forgiveness plan
8	Forgiveness-Part 2	Areas of forgiveness, function of self-forgiveness, forgiveness letters
9	Taking the Next Step	Forgiveness letters (cont.), making amends, connection to others
10	Maintaining Gains	Healing as a process, plan to continue work

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Example of Relevant Cognitions

Category	Example Cognition
Survival Guilt	"I feel guilty for surviving when I killed others."
Suicide	"I don't deserve to live because I took someone else's life."
Self-Blame	"I deserve to suffer for killing."
Self-Forgiveness	"I don't deserve to be forgiven after killing."
Moral Violation	"No good person would have done what I did."
Spiritual Disillusionment	"I don't deserve to practice my faith because I killed."

Behavioral Manifestations of Cognitions Include:

- Self-harming behaviors
- Alcohol or drug use
- Self-Sabotaging behaviors
- Withdrawal

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Homework Assignments

Forgiveness Plan (after Session 4)

- Self-forgiveness assignment
- Pros/Cons of Self-forgiveness
 - Pros: Ability to connect w/ others , suffered enough, want peace
 - Cons: don't condone actions, don't want to forget, honor the dead
- Forgiveness Letters
 - From present-day self to younger self
 - To individual killed or injured
 - From fallen soldier to veteran

Amends Plan (after Session 5)

- Action plan that honors veteran's values
 - Time w/family
 - Time w/veterans
 - Self-care
 - Nature
 - Trips, activities, hobbies
 - Spiritual practice

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IOK: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean \pm SD	Median (min-max)
I find that I have more compassion for myself.	4 \pm 1.11	4 (2-5)
I feel closer to my family.	3.05 \pm 1.47	3 (1-5)
I feel closer to my fellow veterans.	3.95 \pm 1.18	4 (1-5)
My relationship with spirituality feels less troublesome.	3.22 \pm 1.66	3.5 (1-5)
I am more accepting of myself.	3.95 \pm 1.31	5 (1-5)
I have a better understanding of what self-forgiveness means to me.	4.16 \pm 1.17	5 (1-5)
I am more self-forgiving.	3.74 \pm 1.41	4 (1-5)
I recognize the process of healing is ongoing.	4.68 \pm 0.67	5 (3-5)
I feel there are specific things I can do to continue healing.	4.79 \pm 0.54	5 (3-5)
I am more accepting of different aspects (parts) of myself.	4.47 \pm 0.91	5 (2-5)

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Case Presentation



- Iraq War Veteran, AA in his 40's
- Served 3 tour in Iraq as Infantryman
- Childhood trauma: physical abuse
- Strong religious upbringing, currently lost faith
- Recent hospitalization following suicide attempt
- SUD post-deployments
- Killed child in Iraq who he thought was armed
- Returned home to his own child
- Profound survivors guilt
- Fear of karmic retribution (increasing isolation and feelings of paranoia)

Note: Some details changed to protect identity

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Case Presentation



- Feels like he cannot be forgiven
- Worried what will happen if others find out so isolates.
- Engaged in IOK after drop out of EBP
- Recognized that suicidal thoughts and attempt was result of “balancing the scale” and survivor guilt.
- Recognized he wanted to increase fx but felt undeserving of self-forgiveness
- Trying to reconcile who he is morally with killing a child.
- What does this mean about me?
- Explored pros/cons of forgiveness
- Wrote multiple letters

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Case Presentation

- Discussed self-forgiveness in detail
- Recognized that his own child and family were suffering
- Part of his forgiveness plan was to continue to write letters, next one to his son.
- Recognized he needed to reconnect with spiritual community, and was embraced upon return
- Also recognized need to be more present for family rather than haunted by survival guilt
- Articulated healing was an ongoing process, but greatly increased functioning and reduced suicidality

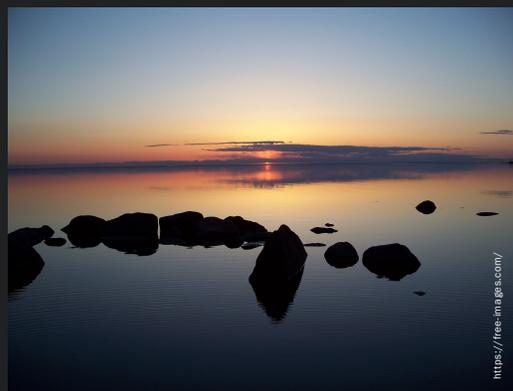


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Other Treatments for Moral Injury in Vets

- Adaptive Disclosure (Litz, 12 session, individual)
- Building Spiritual Strength (Harris, 8 session group)
- ACT-MI (Borges and Farnsworth, 12 session group)
- Trauma Informed Guilt Reduction (TrIGR) therapy (Norman, 4-7 individual)
- Moral Injury Group (MIG; Antal & Yeomans, 12-week group), community involvement



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Thank You!

- Thanks to all of the Veterans that participated in this research and shared their stories and experiences with us.
- We would like to thank Kristine Burkman, Ph.D., Erin Madden, MPH, Julie Dinh, BA, Jessica Keyser, PhD, Jeane Bosch, MPH, Martha Schmitz, PhD, Thomas Neylan, MD, Rosemary Griffin, MPH, Peter Yeomans, PhD, SFVAMC PTSD clinicians, and the many others who provided referrals and feedback, without whom this work would not be possible.
- This research was funded by VA Health Services Research and Development RRP 12-237 (PI: Maguen); University of California, San Francisco REAC 525014-36248 (PI: Maguen); and VA Health Sciences Research and Development Research Career Development Award 06-042 (PI: Maguen)



Questions or Comments?

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Questions?

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Upcoming Event

Keep Calm & Carry On: Working with Difficult Clients



May 20, 2020

11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. EST

Event Page:

<https://militaryfamilieslearningnetwork.org/event/64656/>

In this webinar, we explore techniques of de-escalation, communication, and expressions to understand and address people we feel are problematic.

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