



Leveraging Technology to Target PTSD and Moral Injury with Moral Elevation

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Disclosures



The statements, findings, and perspectives in this presentation are those of the presenter and do not the official policy or position of the Department of Veterans Affairs or US government.

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Disclosures & Resources



Although this presentation was designed to be helpful, some aspects may be triggering for attendees with experiences of PTSD, moral injury, or sexual assault.

- Veterans Crisis Line: Call 988, press 1 if you're a Veteran; chat online (www.veteranscrisisline.net), or text 838255.
- VA Family Caregiver Assistance Program: 855-260-3274; www.caregiver.va.gov
- VA Military Sexual Trauma Resources www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome/resources.asp
- DOD Safe Helpline - Sexual Assault Support: 877-995-5247; www.safehelpline.org
- Moral Injury in Health Care Workers: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral_injury_hcw.asp

Agenda



Target overview: PTSD and moral injury
Describe moral elevation and theory
Research support

- Experimental study
- Pilot trial
- Daily diary study

Gaps
Future directions
Moral elevation practice

Target Overview



PTSD

- A. Exposure to traumatic event
- B. Intrusion symptoms
- C. Avoidance symptoms
- D. Negative changes in cognitions and mood
 - Persistent neg emotional state
 - Neg beliefs about self, others, world
 - Inability to feel positive emotions
- E. Arousal and reactivity symptoms

Moral Injury

- Exposure to potentially morally injurious event
 - Perpetrating or witnessing a transgressive act that violates one's moral values/code
 - Self- vs other-related harms
- Intense and impairing emotions, beliefs, and social behaviors
 - Hostility/anger, guilt, shame
 - Neg beliefs about self, others, world
 - Isolation and loneliness

What is Moral Elevation?



What is Moral Elevation?

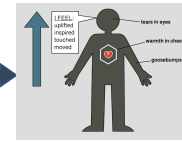


1. TRIGGER: Witnessing a virtuous act

What is Moral Elevation?



1. TRIGGER: Witnessing a virtuous act

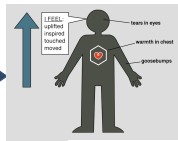


2. RESPONSE: Emotional & physical

What is Moral Elevation?



Positive Emotion Distinction:
Gratitude
Joy
Amusement
Awe (nature, art)



Benefits:
Prosocial behavior & compassion motives
Enhanced social engagement
Self-improvement motives
Reduced mental health symptoms



Eliciting Moral Elevation: Videos



Positive Emotion Distinction:
Eliciting joy or amusement

Eliciting Moral Elevation: Videos

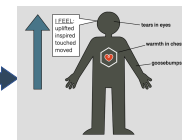


[Make the Connection](#)
Robert: I'm not a
victim anymore

Theoretical Framework: Trauma Distress



1. TRIGGER: Witnessing a virtuous act

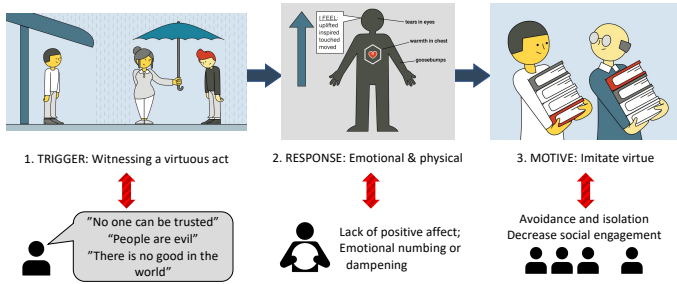


2. RESPONSE: Emotional & physical



3. MOTIVE: Imitate virtue

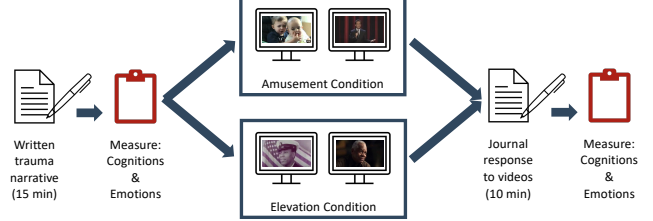
Theoretical Framework: Trauma Distress



Elevation Research: What Do We Know?



Experimental Study

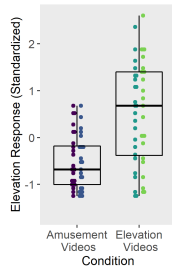


Elevation Research: What Do We Know?



Experimental Study

Veterans w/ PTSD report noticeable differences in responses to elevation versus positive stimuli



Elevation Research: What Do We Know?



Pilot Trial: MOVED

Moral Elevation Online Intervention for Veterans Experiencing PTSD and Moral Injury

48 veterans w/ probable PTSD and moral injury distress

Randomized to elevation or control condition

Control condition: no treatment, completed 8 repeated surveys of experiences in past few days

8 sessions over 4 weeks, self-guided, no therapist



Elevation Research: What Do We Know?

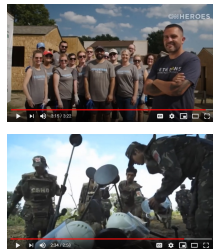


Pilot Trial: MOVED

Intervention tasks included

- Elevation-eliciting exercise
 - Watching elevation-eliciting videos (Sessions 1-4)
 - Recalling recent real-life events that elicited elevation (Sessions 5-8)
- Goal setting activity
 - Set a goal motivated by elevation exercise, to be completed before the next session

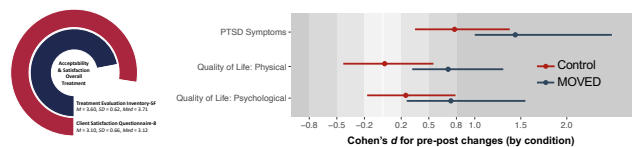
*Participants journal about reactions after all tasks



Elevation Research: What Do We Know?



Pilot Trial: MOVED



Strengths of MOVED identified by participants:

- Web-based format
- 2 sessions per week
- Use of elevation videos
- Brief sessions (<30 min)
- Perceived as good "first step" to recovering from trauma exposure

Elevation Research: What Do We Know?



Pilot Trial: MOVED

Qualitative Feedback: Social functioning and relationship improvements

"Even with my children, they wouldn't be as interactive, but now it's different." (Male, age 41)

"It helped, I guess, build a better bond with my son... and start sharing a little bit of things with him." (Male, age 37)

"I've noticed that my relationships with co-workers have improved tremendously." (Male, age 36)

"I used to do things without [my wife] and now, after seeing the first video, I told her I wanted to start doing workouts with her, so we started at least walking and jogging. This study has pushed me to do more things with her." (Male, age 43)

Elevation Research: What Do We Know?



Pilot Trial: MOVED

Qualitative Feedback: Cognitive and emotional changes

"The exercises in the program just made me more aware of how I [was] going through life not noticing the little goods in people or in myself. And I guess ultimately, that's a good thing that I'm forced to think about it." (Female, age 33)

"I had a hatred for people for a very, very long time. I think this is what got me back to sort of seeing the good in folks that's out there, you know? I say this taught me to be loving towards other people again." (Male, age 37)

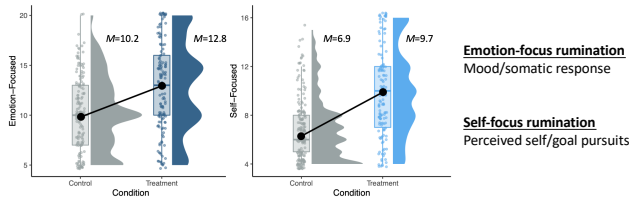
"I'm not as angry or point fingers at myself you know?... I wasn't disappointed at myself for the things I've seen or have had to do." (Female, age 50)

Elevation Research: What Do We Know?



Pilot Trial: MOVED

Veterans in the MOVED condition reported **more positive rumination or savoring** than the control condition across two styles.



Elevation Research: What Do We Know?

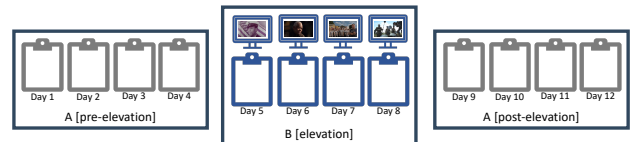


Elevation and Moral Injury in Daily Life

27 combat veterans w/ significant moral injury distress

Screened with Expressions of Moral Injury Scale – Military Version

12 days of brief surveys: *elevation after video, positive and negative affect, suicidal ideation, compassionate motives, self-improvement motives, and purpose in life*

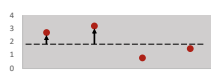


Elevation Research: What Do We Know?

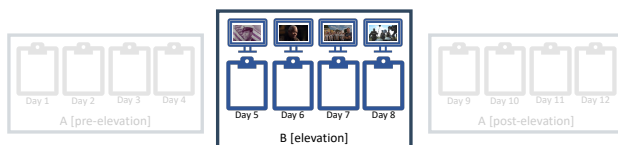


Elevation and Moral Injury in Daily Life

On days when Veterans reported higher elevation than what is typical for themselves (personal average)...



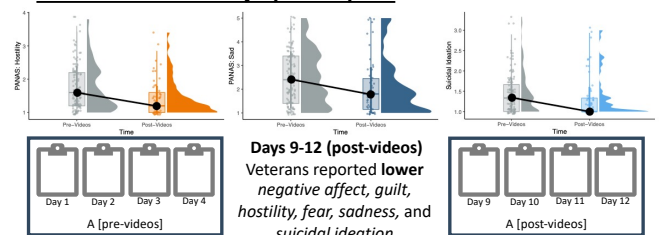
...they reported **higher**:
self-improvement motives
compassion motives
positive affect
purpose in life



Elevation Research: What Do We Know?



Elevation and Moral Injury in Daily Life



What Don't We Know?



Gaps

What predicts elevation response in Veterans with PTSD or moral injury?

Who is most likely to report strong elevation responses?

Who is most likely to benefit?

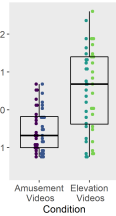
What videos resonate with what people?

At what point is integrating moral elevation most helpful in trauma recovery?

Before starting standard trauma-focused treatment?

At the same as treatment; integrated as module(s)?

After completing treatment to foster growth or boost effects?



What's Next?



Future Directions

Expand pilot trial to examine treatment efficacy of MOVED

Explore positive rumination and changes in negative emotions/cognitions as potential mechanism of action for treatment effects

Explore other mediums for eliciting benefits of elevation
Music-based moral elevation using songs written by and for Veterans

Expand elevation stimuli and strategies

Develop strategies to personalize videos/stories to increase likelihood of strong elevation response



SongwritingWithSoldiers.



*SW:S to be used for future research; not a clinical resource endorsed by VA

How Can You Use Elevation?



Moral Elevation Exercise

1. Find a video or story that makes you feel **INSPIRED**, **TOUCHED**, or **UPLIFTED**.
2. Try to identify what virtue you witnessed and what you felt like imitating.
3. Come up with **1 concrete act or behavior** you could do in the following week that would demonstrate that virtue.



Thank you!

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