

# When Trust Becomes Survival

A Unified Model of Betrayal Trauma and Moral Injury



## Unified Assessment Guide: Betrayal Trauma and Moral Injury

*Use this guide to assess both intimate and institutional betrayal while tracking moral injury, survival adaptations, and regulation needs.*

### 1. Locate the betrayal

- Who or what was depended on for safety, attachment, identity, livelihood, community, or calling?
- Did the betrayal occur in an intimate relationship, a family system, a church, a workplace, a healthcare setting, or another institution?
- What made full acknowledgment costly or dangerous?

### 2. Assess trauma and moral meaning

- What symptoms followed the betrayal: intrusion, hypervigilance, dysregulation, shutdown, anxiety, dissociation, overfunctioning?
- What values feel violated: honesty, dignity, loyalty, justice, faithfulness, integrity, protection?
- What meanings has the client made about self, others, and the world?

### 3. Listen for survival mechanisms

- Betrayal blindness: minimization, forgetting, confusion, reinterpretation, self-doubt, delayed recognition
- Moral numbing: shutdown, compartmentalization, constrained reflection, emotional flattening, “just getting through it”
- Survival bind indicators: “I cannot leave,” “I should have known,” “If I name this clearly, everything changes”

### 4. Pace the assessment

- Track regulation moment to moment; fuller recognition may increase flooding or collapse.
- Use therapeutic presence, attunement, and pacing as part of assessment rather than waiting to “start treatment.”
- Avoid shaming the client for staying in a relationship or system they still depend on.

### 5. Move toward treatment planning

- Begin with stabilization and safety when regulation is limited.
- Use cognitive and meaning-making work for betrayal and moral stuck points.
- Consider trauma-processing approaches when the client has sufficient stabilization and clear targets.
- Support values-guided action, repair decisions, and realistic boundary planning.

## References

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