



**VA**  
HEALTH  
CARE

Defining  
**EXCELLENCE**  
in the 21st Century



# The Role of Moral Elevation in PTSD and Moral Injury

Adam McGuire, PhD

Postdoctoral Fellow

*VISN 17 Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans*

*Texas A&M University*

*Baylor University*

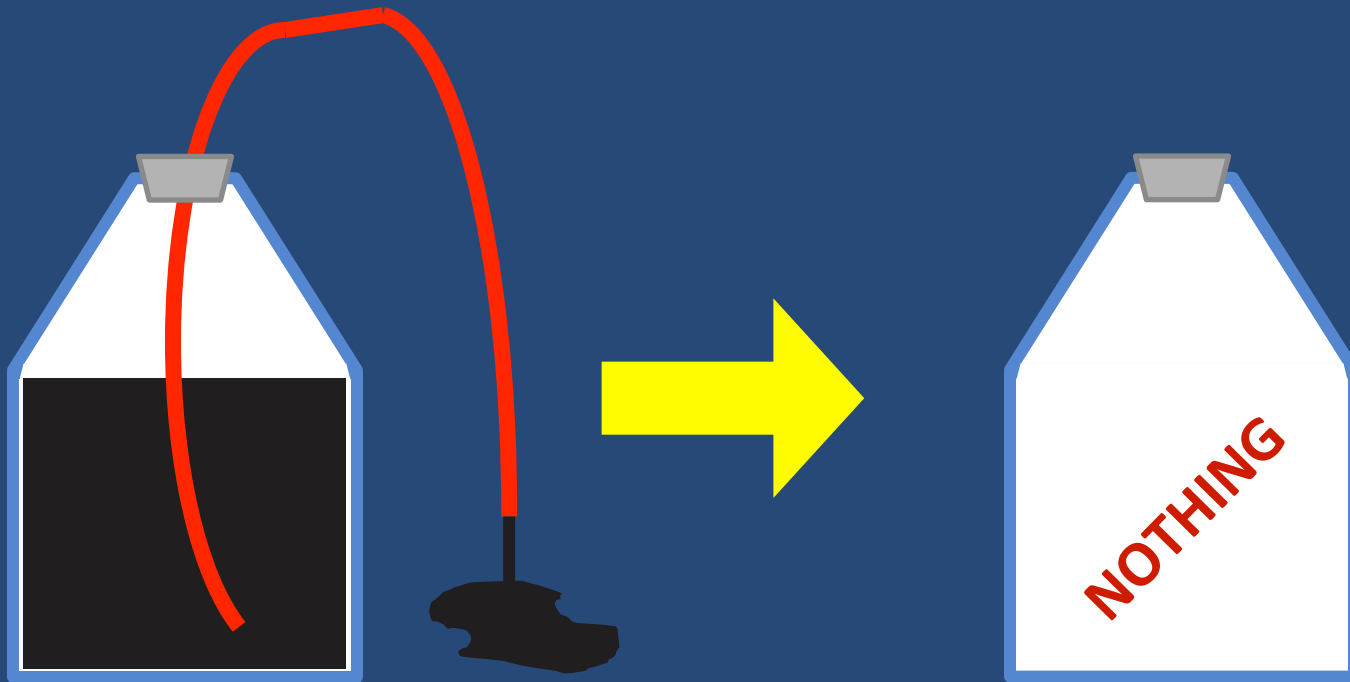
# Outline

- Background
- Define Moral Elevation
- Link with PTSD and Moral Injury
- What's Next?

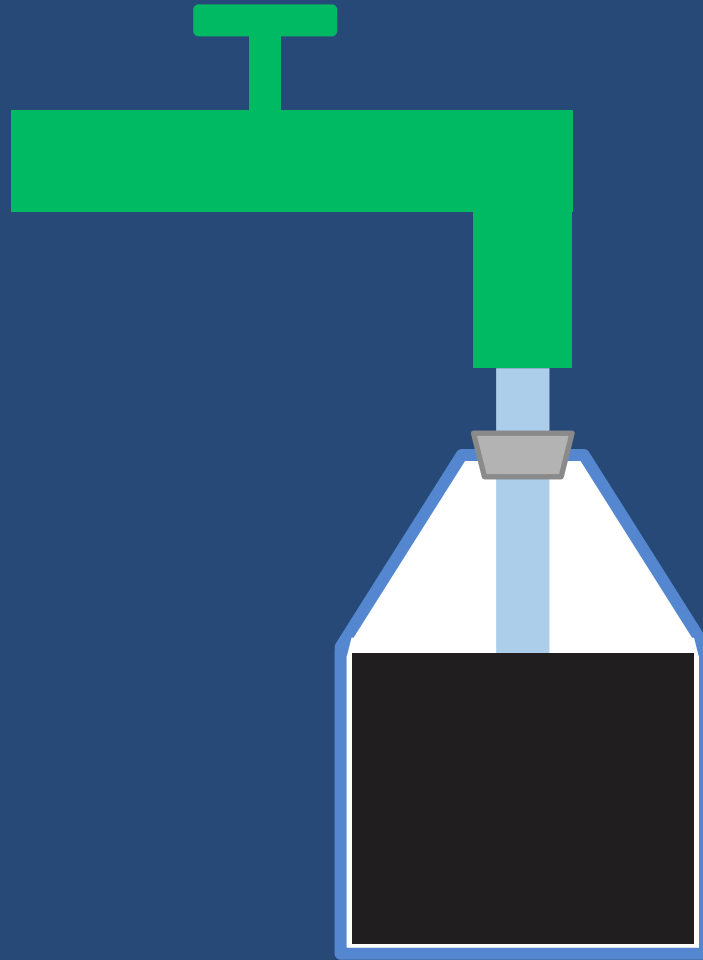
## Research Focus:

Integrating prosocial or “other-praising”  
emotions into trauma treatment

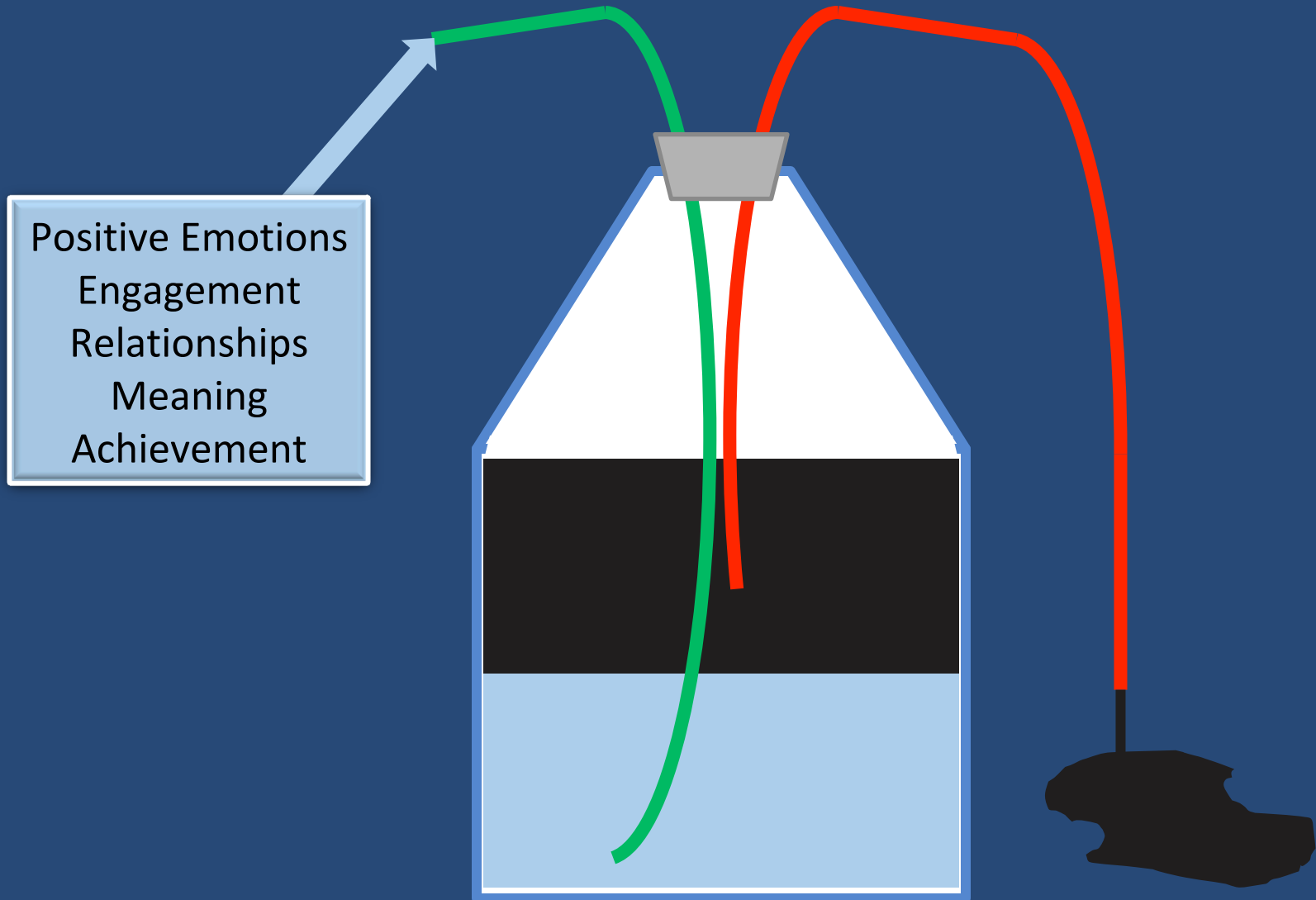
# Medical Model for Trauma



# Positive Overload Model



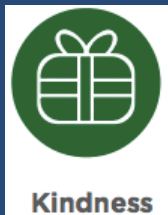
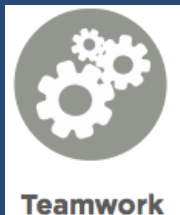
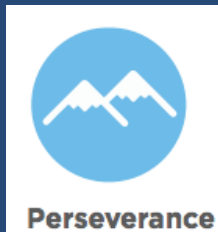
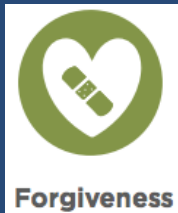
# Integrated Model



# What is Moral Elevation?

## 1) Trigger

Witness a  
virtuous  
behavior



## 2) Response

Emotional &  
physical  
changes

Emotional:

- Inspired
- Uplifted
- Moved

Physical:

- Warmth in chest
- Lump in throat
- Chills/tingles
- Tears in eyes

## 3) Behavior

Desire to  
imitate virtuous  
behavior

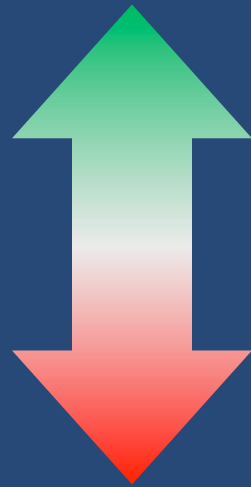
***"I want to become a  
better person"***

***"I want to do  
something good for  
another"***

***"I want to  
demonstrate  
BRAVERY, too"***

# Benefits

Moral elevation leads to improved mental health symptoms and greater social functioning



PTSD and moral injury lead to distressing symptoms and significant impairment

# Moral Elevation and Trauma

## 1) Trigger

Witness a  
virtuous  
behavior



*"No one can be  
trusted"*

## 2) Response

Emotional &  
physical  
changes



*Emotional Numbing*



## 3) Behavior

Desire to  
imitate virtuous  
behavior



*Avoidance &  
Isolation*





# Moral Elevation in Treatment

Elevation by Group  
Measure



**“Walk the Walk” Award:**

*In the past week, who demonstrated exemplary effort and behavior during treatment?*

# Moral Elevation in Treatment

Higher moral elevation linked with more group engagement, lower PTSD avoidance symptoms, and lower moral injury distress

# What's Next?

## Phase 1: Experimental Study

- Cognitive, emotional, & physiological changes

## Phase 2: Develop specific interventions

# Thank You!

EMAIL: [adam.mcguire@va.gov](mailto:adam.mcguire@va.gov)

