

MORAL DISTRESS

The psychological distress that occurs as a result of a moral event or ethical issue.



You may be experiencing moral distress if:

- › You feel **uncertain** about what the right thing to do is.
- › You are **engaged in conflict** with a colleague about what the right thing to do is.
- › You feel **unable** to do what you believe is right.
- › You feel **internally conflicted** about what the right thing to do is.
- › You feel **unable to share** your beliefs with others.

Signs of Moral Distress

Type of Moral Distress ¹	You are feeling distressed because...	Common Emotions	Trigger Phrases
Moral-Uncertainty Distress	You are uncertain about whether you are doing the right thing.	Torn, Conflicted, Uncertain, Frustrated	<i>"I feel torn about what we should do"</i> <i>"I don't know whether this is the right thing to do"</i>
Moral-Conflict Distress	You are conflicted about the most appropriate ethical action.	Conflicted, Frustrated, Angry, Sad	<i>"I feel like they don't understand my point of view"</i> <i>"I feel like we have different moral perspectives"</i>
Moral-Constraint Distress	You are constrained from doing what you think is the ethically appropriate action.	Angry, Frustrated, Sense of Injustice, Powerless	<i>"I feel like I'm not doing the right thing"</i> <i>"I feel like I am complicit in causing suffering"</i>
Moral-Dilemma Distress	You are unable to choose between two or more ethically supportable options.	Guilt, Regret, Torn, Sense of Injustice, Sad	<i>"I feel like I'm like I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place"</i> <i>"Both options seem to be equally bad"</i>
Moral-Tension Distress	You are unable to share your beliefs with others (this might include your colleagues, manager or other providers).	Sad, Angry, Frustrated, Powerless	<i>"I don't feel like I can talk to anyone about my beliefs"</i>

¹Morley, 2018: [https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/en/theses/what-is-moral-distress-in-nursing-and-how-should-we-respond-to-it\(08e7e5ca-14f6-443d-91a2-b50d4cd00cbc\).html](https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/en/theses/what-is-moral-distress-in-nursing-and-how-should-we-respond-to-it(08e7e5ca-14f6-443d-91a2-b50d4cd00cbc).html)

If the moral event or distress is not addressed then you may experience...

Moral Residue: the lingering negative emotions experienced when you feel you have compromised your core values²

The Crescendo Effect: when unresolved residual feelings accumulate into a crescendo, causing you to have stronger reactions to similar future situations²

Turnover: leaving your position or healthcare entirely despite your passion for patient care; interferes with organizational efficiency and continuity of care

Resources for Moral Distress

Effective strategies to manage moral distress consider the need to address

(1) the moral event and (2) the distress (psychological/emotional/spiritual).

Moral Event & Distress

Moral Distress Reflective Dialogues (MDRD) are facilitated by an ethicist and licensed social worker or chaplain and provide caregivers with a safe moral space to reflect on the moral event(s) that cause them to experience distress. During the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual MDRDs are available.

Visit <http://portals.ccf.org/ope/Who-We-Are/bioethics> for more information.

Moral Event

The Ethics Consultation Service (ECS) provides support to patients, loved ones and healthcare professionals grappling with ethical issues in the provision of patient care.

Refer to the On-Call Directory via the intranet to contact the ECS for support.

Distress

Caring for Caregivers is available to support caregivers through life's challenges, providing counseling and Critical Incident Response services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 30-minute Boost appointments are also available to talk through feelings and provide support.

Call Caring for Caregivers at 216.445.6970 for support.

Spiritual Care is available 24/7 for coping with loss, stress, suffering and more as well as for faith-based concerns. All visits are conducted via phone or FaceTime and free of charge. Anonymous calls welcomed.

Call the Grief and Relief Support Line at 844.204.7433 for support.

²Epstein, 2009 Moral Distress, Moral Residue, and the Crescendo Effect. J Clin Ethics. 2009 Winter; 20(4): 330–342