

# 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 <sup>1, 2</sup>	You are feeling distressed because...	Common Emotions	Trigger Phrases
<b>Moral-Uncertainty Distress</b>	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>
<b>Moral-Conflict Distress</b>	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>
<b>Moral-Constraint Distress</b>	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>
<b>Moral-Dilemma Distress</b>	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>
<b>Moral-Tension Distress</b>	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>

<sup>1</sup>Morley, 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)

<sup>2</sup>Morley et al., 2019. What is 'moral distress' in nursing? A feminist empirical bioethics study. *Nursing Ethics*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0969733019874492>

# 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 values<sup>3</sup>

**The Crescendo Effect:** when unresolved residual feelings accumulate into a crescendo, causing you to have stronger reactions to similar future situations<sup>3</sup>

**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.

<sup>3</sup>Epstein, 2009 Moral Distress, Moral Residue, and the Crescendo Effect. J Clin Ethics. 2009 Winter; 20(4): 330–342