MORAL
INJURY

WHAT IS IT AND WHAT CAN LEADERS DO ABOUT IT?

WHAT IS
MORAL INJURY?

On any given day, caring professionals make numerous decisions and perform countless actions. Most of these decisions and actions are routine, but some will inevitably challenge the strong professional and personal morals and values that guide compassionate care and service. These moral and ethical challenges are more common during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the decisions and actions your workforce will undertake are likely less clear, and certainly less ordinary. At times, professionals may be required to go against what they strongly feel is "right" or "true."

When people feel they have done something that goes against their strongly held moral beliefs, they have experienced a potentially morally injurious event.[1,2] This can be because of their own action or inaction or as a witness to someone else's actions. It can also occur when an organization or individual fails to provide them with care and protection, despite a duty to do so. Such events are potentially injurious because not everyone will experience them in the same way.[2]

A moral injury occurs when one or more potentially morally injurious events lead to psychological, social, and spiritual distress or impairment, with adverse impacts on mental health, relationships, and quality of life.[7] A moral injury can:

- impact all aspects of a person's personal, social, and occupational life,

- result in feelings of guilt, shame, anger and sadness, a negative self-image, self-condemnation, and lack of self-forgiveness, social withdrawal, and difficulty coping with stressors, including occupational stressors,[8]

- be associated with longer-term mental health problems including post-traumatic stress disorder, and symptoms of depression or anxiety.[9]

Potentially morally injurious events are moral stressors inherent to the COVID-19 environment and cannot necessarily be avoided. Therefore, organizations need to adopt a proactive "whole of organization approach," which may reduce risk and maximize opportunities to protect mental health.[7, 10]

As an organization, you likely have practices, policies, and programs that are designed to support team members who may be experiencing moral stressors. Undertaking an asset mapping process can highlight what you are already doing, how your assets are being used, and where new resources may need to be provided. For support with identifying your assets and opportunities for managing moral injuries, please refer to our brief guide to asset-mapping.

EXAMPLES OF POTENTIALLY MORALLY INJURIOUS EVENTS

- being required to deny treatment to a patient who will die without it,[3]

- having to prevent family members from being at the side of a dying relative,[4]

- preparedness to put oneself in harms way to help others, but wanting to avoid infection or illness for self or family,[5,6]

- feeling denied appropriate access to PPE by the government.[5]

AS A LEADER,
WHAT CAN YOU DO?

COMMUNICATE OPENLY AND HONESTLY

People do not typically process information the same way during a crisis. Messages must be simple, consistent, timely, and delivered by multiple credible and trusted sources.[11] Acknowledge when you don't know the answer and commit to finding one.[12] Most importantly, express your gratitude for the work being done and your empathy for the challenges. Your communications can be informal or formal, but make sure everyone, at all levels of your organization, recognizes and appreciates your team's sacrifices and their compassion.[13]

LISTEN TO YOUR WORKFORCE

Awareness of what is happening will allow you to respond to needs and stressors more rapidly. Use mechanisms such as leadership walk-arounds, listening sessions, roll-up communication, and stress-pulse surveys to be aware of the types of moral stressors your team might be facing, and how your team is coping. Your team wants to feel assured you have their back. Listening to their concerns and working with them to problem-solve and identify solutions is key.[14]

RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT MORAL INJURY AMONGST YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

Your team may avoid talking about moral stressors, but you may hear narratives, beliefs, or statements that suggest an individual is struggling. Prepare your team to reach out and proactively offer support. Provide them with the skills and knowledge to help staff make meaning of morally challenging events and decisions.[15-17] Allow space for staff to talk through the particular situation and event, to acknowledge the moral dilemma, and reinforce the value and importance of their work.[18]

REVIEW GUIDELINES AND POLICIES THAT DEAL WITH ETHICALLY CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

As circumstances evolve, recheck whether existing policies meet current realities, and be prepared to make changes.[5, 19-20] Applying guidelines and policies in real time can be difficult, so look for ways to support your team. For example, consider having committees of experienced personnel and ethicists to help apply guidelines, or make and implement ethical decisions, so the moral and ethical burden does not fall only on frontline workers.[21]

CREATE PEER SUPPORT OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUR LEADERS, INCLUDING YOURSELF

Like staff, leaders need opportunities to receive support from their peers. When developing peer groups or connections, try to be mindful about leadership levels and to mitigate the impact of power dynamics. The most senior levels of leadership may need peer connections outside of their immediate organization. These peer support opportunities may also provide benefit beyond the pandemic by forming or strengthening relationships that will persist beyond the period of acute response.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Self-care is often difficult. Nevertheless, taking opportunities to care for yourself is imperative for sustaining health throughout challenging careers. Leaders should model and facilitate helpful coping skills and behaviours so their teams feel safe to do so too.[24] This approach may involve drawing on coping skills or strategies that have helped in the past and applying them to the current context.

PROMOTE A SUPPORTIVE CULTURE WITHIN THE WORKPLACE

Arrange access to a range of support services for the entire workforce.[22] Be aware of what is already available in your organization and work with others to communicate these regularly in several different ways. Establishing a peer support program could be particularly beneficial, assisting individuals in your workforce in understanding that others are experiencing similar stressors, and that they are "not alone" in their situations.[16, 23]

CELEBRATE SUCCESSES, BIG AND SMALL

Great things are happening within your organization. Find and share your successes, and identify ways to build on your success throughout your organization.[7] Be sure to acknowledge not only leaders but also the successes of front line workers at both a group and individual level.

For more information about moral injury, please visit: *Moral Stress Amongst Healthcare Workers During Covid-19: A Guide to Moral Injury*

https://www.moralinjuryguide.ca

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