

# MORAL INJURY

**TAKING ACTION TO PREVENT MORAL INJURY: QUICK TIPS FOR LEADERS**

# WHAT IS MORAL INJURY?

## People are exposed to mental health risks at work.

This is true for professions that care for the health and well-being of others (like nurses and paramedics) and those that protect the well-being and safety of others (like the military, RCMP and correctional officers). Occupational mental health risks might include moral injury.

When a person feels they have done something that goes against their strongly-held moral beliefs, they have experienced a potentially morally injurious event.<sup>1,2</sup> This might be caused by any of the following:

- their own action or inaction,
- being a witness to someone else's actions,
- an organization or individual failing to provide care and protection, despite a duty to do so.

A moral injury can occur when one or more morally injurious events lead to psychological, social, and spiritual distress or impairment, and have negative impacts on mental health, relationships, and quality of life.<sup>3</sup>

As a leader, you have a role to play in reducing this risk. Below are proactive steps you can take to support your staff's mental health:

## COMMUNICATE OPENLY AND HONESTLY

Keep messages simple, consistent, timely, and delivered by multiple credible and trusted sources.<sup>4</sup> Acknowledge when you don't know the answer and commit to finding one.<sup>5</sup> Express your gratitude for the work being done and your empathy for the challenges.

## LISTEN TO YOUR WORKFORCE

Use mechanisms such as leadership walk-arounds to understand the types of moral stressors your team is facing, and how your team is coping. Your team wants to feel assured that you have their back. Listen to their concerns and work with them to identify and implement solutions.<sup>6</sup>

## REVIEW GUIDELINES AND POLICIES THAT DEAL WITH ETHICALLY CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

As circumstances evolve, recheck that existing policies meet current realities, and be prepared to make changes.<sup>10-12</sup>

## 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 hierarchies and to mitigate the impact of power dynamics. The most senior levels of leadership may need peer connections outside of their immediate organization.

## PROMOTE A SUPPORTIVE CULTURE WITHIN THE WORKPLACE

Arrange access to a range of support services for the entire workforce.<sup>13</sup> Establishing a peer support program could be particularly beneficial towards developing an understanding that others are experiencing similar stressors, and that they are "not alone" in their situations.<sup>8, 14</sup>

## 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.<sup>15</sup>

## CELEBRATE SUCCESSES, BIG AND SMALL

Great things are happening within your organization. Find and share successes, and identify ways to build on your success throughout your organization.<sup>7</sup>

## RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT MORAL INJURY AMONGST YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

Let them know staff may avoid talking about moral stressors, but they may hear narratives, beliefs, or statements that suggest an individual is struggling. Prepare them 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.<sup>7-9</sup>

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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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