

MORAL DISTRESS

When you know what is needed, but cannot do it.

Healthier people. Stronger workplaces. A brighter tomorrow.

People
Support
People
Change
Communities

1 What is moral distress?

Moral distress is the distress that can happen when your values and professional judgment are blocked by limits, policies, resources, or systems.

You know what would make a difference, but you are unable to do it. This can create a deep sense of frustration, conflict and emotional strain.



2 How it may feel



Frustration

When you cannot do what you know is right.



Guilt

Feeling you have let people down or not done enough.



Anger

At the barriers, red tape or injustice.



Helplessness

Feeling stuck and powerless to create change.



Self-doubt

Questioning your decisions or whether you are doing enough.



Emotional exhaustion

Feeling drained by the ongoing tension.

3 Common situations

Moral distress often shows up when there is not enough:



Time

Not enough time to provide the care, support or follow through that you believe is needed.



Staff

Not enough people to meet the needs you see.



Space

Lack of physical space or safe environments to do the work well.



Support

Limited backing from leadership, colleagues or systems.



Authority

Not having the decision-making power to act on what you know is needed.

4 What helps

While the causes are often complex, there are meaningful ways to cope and respond.



Name it

Acknowledge and validate what you are feeling. It is real and it matters.



Engage in ethical reflection

Revisit your values and what matters most to you in your work.



Seek consultation

Talk with a trusted colleague, mentor or ethics resource.



Have team discussions

Create space to share experiences and explore possible solutions.



Set boundaries

Be clear about what you can and cannot do, and protect your energy where possible.



Access supportive supervision

Receive guidance, validation and space to process.

5 What organizations can do

Workplaces play a key role in reducing moral distress by:



Reduce impossible demands

Align expectations with available resources, time and capacity.



Invite staff voice

Create regular opportunities for input, feedback and shared decision-making.



Improve communication

Be transparent about constraints, changes and the reasons behind decisions.



Attend to ethical pressure points

Identify areas where values and care are most at risk, and develop strategies to address them.

Caring people notice.
Courageous workplaces respond.

6 When more support may help

Consider reaching out for professional support if you notice:



Lingering anger that doesn't ease



A sense of hopelessness or cynicism



Withdrawing from others or feeling isolated



Reduced ability to function at work or in daily life

You're
not alone
in this.

7 Important to remember

Moral distress is often a signal of strain between people and systems, not a personal flaw.

It shows that you care, have a strong sense of what is right, and want to make a positive difference. Your response is human. With the right support and compassionate workplaces, change is possible.

Values
matter.
People
matter.
You matter.