



Centre of Excellence - PTSD

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Moral Stress Amongst Healthcare Workers During COVID-19: A Guide to Moral Injury

Executive Summary

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, frontline health care workers and first responders have been under considerable stress. Every day they are engaged in a balancing act making critical decisions around which patients will receive life-saving care when resources are limited, having to discharge someone earlier than recommended to avoid the risk of infecting others, or having to eliminate 'non-essential' care during the crisis.

Being stretched physically and mentally, and unable to provide optimum care to everyone, may lead to moral injury. Moral injury refers to the impact of extremely challenging, morally laden experiences that upset one's value system. If not addressed, moral injury can result in long-lasting emotional and psychological damage.

Health care workers need organizational, team, and individual supports now.

The Centre of Excellence on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder at The Royal Ottawa and Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health have co-developed *A Guide to Moral Injury* that addresses this situation among health care workers. A practical resource for health care workers and organizations, the guide: i) defines moral injury; ii) lays out the stressors and harms that may lead to moral injury, focusing on those prevalent in the health care setting related to COVID-19; iii) provides a framework for managing events in the workplace that can lead to moral injury; and iv) outlines actions that can be taken at the organizational, team, and individual levels to mitigate and reduce the harms that can lead to moral injury.

Background on Moral Injury

In the military and veteran context, the guide identifies moral injury as the “psychological, social, and spiritual impact of events involving betrayal or transgression of one’s own deeply held moral beliefs and values occurring in high-stake situations,” such as those likely to occur during the current pandemic (*Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* by J. Shay).

Moral Injury in the Health Care Setting

A Guide to Moral Injury lays out the stressors and associated harms that can lead to moral injury among health care workers. These include:

- having to decide which patients to provide life-saving care to when resources are limited
- discharging clients earlier than recommended to avoid infection risk (e.g., mothers with newborns)
- not being able to provide optimum care to all patients

A Framework to Guide Preventative Action and Support Health Care Workers

Being aware of the risk factors that may increase the likelihood of moral injury is a first step to supporting health care workers. The guide recommends a whole-of-organization approach that considers the role that managers, leaders, peers, and individuals can play in managing potentially morally injurious events and reducing the risk of moral injury in health care settings.

In many care settings, informal community supports and services — where individuals can draw on the experiences, support, and strengths of trained volunteers who have experienced similar circumstances and challenges — offer an opportunity to enhance existing care. However, informal community services often lack the funds and infrastructure required to support the mental well-being of their own workers. Just as with formal care settings, it is imperative that these programs are provided with the necessary resources to support the health and safety of the people who provide care and services to so many.

The guide promotes a framework or ‘map’ for how to implement preventative and early intervention structures to support health care workers before they are morally injured; and outlines the supports that need to be provided at the organizational, team, and individual levels.

At the organizational level:

- recognizing the moral stressors that health care workers face due to COVID-19
- promoting a supportive culture, including support services, for staff
- ensuring there are sufficient resources to support the health and safety of informal and volunteer service providers, who also play an important role in health care
- rotating staff between high and low stress roles
- establishing policies to guide staff through ethically difficult decisions
- removing ethical difficult decisions from frontline workers
- arranging rosters for shift workers, with a cycle of morning to afternoon to evening shifts

At the team level:

- providing strong leadership and establish cohesive teams with high morale
- being prepared to discuss moral and ethical challenges
- helping team members understand moral stressors
- encouraging self-care and help-seeking as required
- celebrating successes, large and small
- connecting staff to further support and counselling, if needed

At the individual level:

- learning about moral stressors and moral injury
- using relaxation therapy, mindfulness, or meditation to reduce stress

- eating well, get regular exercise, maintain social connections, and get enough rest
- supporting your colleagues
- seeking professional help if you are feeling distressed about what you are going through

Companion pieces to the guide include practical online toolkits, including a COVID-19 resource directory for veterans, families, and service providers and a list of resources for frontline workers. In addition, the Canadian Centre is working with partner organizations across the country to develop tangible resources to aid leaders, frontline workers, and peer support organizations.