

PA CAREER GUIDE

WHAT IS MORAL DISTRESS?

- Ethical dilemmas based on a conflict between individual and collective moral responsibility.¹
- Occurs when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional or other constraints make it difficult to pursue the desired course of action.²

WHAT IS MORAL INJURY?

- Distress arising from participation in, failure to prevent, or observation of, acts that conflict with an individual's deeply held moral beliefs.³
- While it has roots in the military, it also applies to healthcare; clinicians are often exposed to death, suffering, and many other intense clinical situations.

WHAT CAUSES MORAL DISTRESS OR INJURY?

- Clashing with institutional regulations because of following one's moral beliefs or being unable to act according to one's moral convictions due to institutional constraints, which can cause a moral quandary.^{1,4,5}
- Classic circumstances triggering moral distress are prolonging life, performing unnecessary tests, not being able to provide necessary treatment, or desiring to tell the truth.

WHO EXPERIENCES MORAL DISTRESS OR MORAL INJURY?

- There are similar rates of moral distress across types of clinicians. Possible PA scenarios:⁶
 - A PA practicing critical care medicine who is instructed to continue life support measures on a patient who has no chance for a meaningful recovery.
 - A PA practicing primary care medicine who is unable to spend adequate face-to-face time with patients because of administrative responsibilities.
 - A PA in medical oncology who is instructed to prescribe third-line chemotherapy for a patient with relapsed refractory cancer and poor quality of life.
 - Any PA who is unable to provide first line care because a patient lacks health insurance or is otherwise unable to pay.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF MORAL SUFFERING?

- Moral distress or injury can cause short- and long-term stress-related disorders, including anxiety and depression.¹⁰
- Individuals also may experience feelings of resentment, hopelessness, worthlessness, guilt, shame, or other negative emotions.^{10,11}
- Problematic organizational indicators related to moral distress, including employee job dissatisfaction, burnout, and turnover, may ultimately result in moral suffering.¹⁰



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WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS TO MORAL SUFFERING?

- Organizations should enhance resources available to healthcare professionals for moral decision making. Such resources could include:³
 - Ethics workshops.
 - Organizationally mandated safe spaces to discuss emerging ethically distressing patient care circumstances.
 - Interprofessional ethics rounds where hallmark cases are debriefed and best practices are advocated.

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