Introduction to Moral Distress for the Caring & Serving Professionals

CYNTHIA M.A. GEPPERT, MD, MA, MPH, MSB, DPS, MSJ
HEALTH CARE ETHICIST, VA NATIONAL CENTER FOR ETHICS IN HEALTH CARE
Disclosures

- No disclosures.
Objectives

At the end of the presentation the participant will be able to:

1. Define moral distress as a concept
2. Describe how it affects the well-being of caring and serving professionals and the culture of organizations
3. Describe common sources of moral distress in health care and social service
4. Formulate constructive responses to minimizing and managing moral distress
What is Moral Distress?

Moral distress occurs when professionals cannot carry out what they believe to be ethically appropriate actions because of internal (e.g., fear of repercussions; self-doubt) or external (e.g., lack of administrative support or follow up on concerns; hierarchies within healthcare systems) constraints.

You know what the right thing to do or say is but you cannot speak up or act on your feelings.
Who Experiences Moral Distress

- Nurses
- Doctors
- First responders
- Law enforcement
- Teachers
- Social workers
- Chaplains
- Military
Experience of Moral Distress

- Threaten your sense of integrity
- Lead to questioning of your own values
- Loss of trust in your own moral judgment
- Feeling isolated & devalued
- Compassion fatigue
- Defensiveness
- Moral residue
Source of Moral Distress in Health Care

- Difficulty speaking up when something is wrong
- Fear of retaliation
- Dysfunctional teams
- Poor communication
- Feeling of powerlessness
- Concerns about patient safety
- Ethical uncertainty
- Conflict of values about care decisions
Situations Leading to Moral Distress in Health Care

- Inadequate/unfair use of resources
- Patients and families given false hope or not told the truth
- Leaders don’t communicate to staff
- Aggressive treatment contrary to patient’s wishes
- Families demand life-sustaining treatment not medically indicated
- Defensive medicine that is not patient centered
- Staff without training/competence
Negative Organizational Effects of Moral Distress

- Absenteeism
- Decreased job satisfaction
- Turn-over
- Low morale
- Burn-out
- Risks to patient safety
- Reduced quality of care
- Low job retention
- Lack of collaboration

On a scale of one to five, how would you rate your job satisfaction?

1. Strongly Dissatisfied
2. Dissatisfied
3. Neutral
4. Satisfied
5. Strongly Satisfied
Leadership Interventions to Address Moral Distress

- Train and educate staff about moral distress
- Provide a safe space (LIKE THIS!) for open communication
- Ensure clear chains of command and lines of reporting concerns
- Support staff education in ethics
- Promote a culture that encourages speaking up
- Reward taking action
American Nurses Association Framework to Address Moral Distress
You may be unaware of the problem but be experiencing distress

- Is this moral distress or some other kind of suffering?
- Is the source of my distress work-related or something else?
- Are my co-workers showing similar signs of distress?

Goal of self-examination is to develop awareness of presence and nature of moral distress
Affirm you are distressed as the first step to making
  - A commitment to take care of yourself morally
  - Validate your perceptions and feelings with trusted wise ones
  - Confirm you have a professional obligation to act

Goal: to commit to addressing your moral distress
Assess

- Identify source of
  - Personal
  - Professional

- Assess the severity of your distress
  - Affecting your functioning at work or home?

- Consider your motivation to act
  - You acknowledge there is an ethical conflict but are ambivalent about taking action
  - List and weigh the pros & cons

- Goal: Be ready to make a plan of action
Act

- Prepare to act
  - Prepare yourself personally and professionally to take action
- Take action
  - Implement strategies to make the changes you want
- Sustain the changes you want
  - Prepare for and develop responses for setbacks and repercussions
  - Maintain the changes to respond to moral distress
- Goal: Through action preserve your integrity and authenticity
Moral resilience is the ability to deal with an ethically adverse situation without lasting effects of moral distress and moral residue. This requires morally courageous action, activating needed supports and doing the right thing. Morally resilient people also have developed self-confidence by confronting such situations so they can maintain their self-esteem, no matter what life delivers. (Lachman, 2016)
References and Resources

- McCue, C. (November 9, 2010) "Using the AACN Framework to Alleviate Moral Distress" OJ IN: The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing Vol. 16 No. 1
- VA Moral Distress Initiative
  https://www.va.gov/HEALTHCAREEXCELLENCE/about/organization/examples/moral-distress-initiative.asp