



## Well@Work Podcast Episode 2: Moral Distress

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is being brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA to the Department of Behavioral Health. On this episode of the podcast, Dr. Ginny Sprang discusses moral distress and gives some tips on what you can do if you think you are experiencing moral distress. And now, Dr. Ginny Sprang.

Hello, I'm Dr. Ginny Sprang, I'm a professor of psychiatry at the University of Kentucky and executive director of the UK Center on Trauma and Children. Welcome to today's Well@Work podcast. Today we're talking about moral distress. Nearly all health and mental health professionals experience moral distress at some point in their career, but research tells us that we don't know exactly what it is or what to do about it. Moral distress occurs when someone believes they know the right thing to do, but someone or something is preventing that right thing from occurring. Moral distress occurs because as a professional we may feel like in order to do our jobs as required we have to violate our own values, morals, and ethics.

So, there's two types of moral distress, initial and reactive. Initial moral distress is in the acute phase when you might be faced with institutional obstacles or conflicts that prevent you from doing what you think the right thing is. Here's some examples: suggesting the right course of treatment but learning that a patient or the client doesn't have the right insurance coverage or cannot afford to get the help they need, that can be really frustrating. Or maybe disagreements about the right course of treatment with your colleagues. Or how and when those treatments should be administered. Reactive moral distress occurs when the distress isn't resolved in any kind of acceptable way. Over time this can lead to moral residue and that's the unresolved moral distress that builds up after repeated failures to act in a way that's morally in alignment with our values.

During COVID-19, health care professionals reported watching patients die alone without their loved ones there to comfort them and say goodbye, this was necessary to prevent disease spread but certainly what not what many of us would want for ourselves or our loved ones. Here's some symptoms of moral distress: anger, frustration, anxiety, hopelessness and helplessness, loss of job satisfaction, and emotional withdrawal from our work.

Here's another example that might feel familiar to you, Jamal works at a clinic that provides necessary medications to homeless and individuals dealing with chronic health and mental health problems, many of whom have tested positive for COVID-19. He worries about his exposure to this illness because his 85 year old mother lives with him. He's dedicated to his job, but he worries that his work could threaten the health and maybe even the life of his fragile mother. He also knows the mortality rates are higher in the black population and he has concerns about his own health and well-being. His publicly funded clinic is low on PPE and he's working overtime almost every day because they're short staffed. He's raised these concerns to his supervisor, but they don't have the resources needed to address the situation. This isn't the first time Jamal has felt morally conflicted about work conditions, he's had numerous unresolved issues over the years. These concerns have created moral residue that has him wanting to leave his job and the profession altogether.

In fact, research documents that moral distress on an organizational level has been attributed to attrition, deterioration of teamwork, and decreased quality of care. This can really jeopardize patient or client outcomes and everyone's safety. So to be clear, emotional distress arises when the individual faces distressing situations, whereas moral distress develops when a person is acting against his or her core values. So what can you do if you think you're experiencing moral distress?

Tip number one, get an ethics consult. Depending on your organization, you may be able to reach out to an ethics committee or even page an ethicist when a situation arises that evokes moral distress. These trained professionals can help you find your voice and talk through your feelings and symptoms of moral distress. Speaking to an expert may not alter the outcome, but it may help you find a pathway towards peace. For example, if you make a determination that a patient needs a particular treatment but others disagree with you, their decision may stand. However, the moral distress consult may help mitigate symptoms of moral distress because just the act of seeking a consult is an active coping strategy. It can also build your ethical confidence to deal with these feelings and situations and give you information you can use next time a morally distressing event occurs. The more confident you feel, the more resilient you will be in dealing with these moral dilemmas. This is so important because morally distressing situations will occur frequently in our line of work.

Tip number two, identify and utilize an accountability partner. This work is physically, emotionally, and morally challenging. When a professional experiences moral distress, it's important that they feel supported and they have a place to process their thoughts and feelings about the situation in a safe and non-judgmental space with a trusted confidant. For Jamal, this might include using this confidant to process his concerns and brainstorm the best way to proceed, while keeping himself and his family safe. This accountability partner can assist in developing and maintaining internal capacity to restore and sustain personal integrity in response to moral distress, we call that moral resilience. Moral resilience is really this internal capacity to restore and sustain personal integrity in response to moral distress. Accountability partners can help one another develop moral courage, that is the strength to speak up despite the fear of repercussions.

Tip number three, use the four As. The American Association of Critical Care Nurses developed a framework to help us address moral distress, it includes four As. First A: ask yourself, am I feeling distressed or showing signs of suffering? Do I have some moral residue that's building up and making this situation feel even worse? Second A: affirm it. You may say to yourself "yes, I'm feeling this distress and I'm going to make a commitment to address it," this means calling on your moral courage. Third A: assess your ability to make a change. Ask yourself what can I do personally? How can I contribute if this problem is organization-wide? How can I contribute to my organization to try and mitigate moral distress for everyone? We're asking you to do a deep dive to understand the root causes of moral distress in your organization. Discuss these questions with your accountability partner or your supervisor. Fourth A: act. Take personal responsibility to try to implement the changes you desire. For Jamal, this might mean asking his accountability partner to check in with him about his actions and discuss the steps he's taking.



Tip 4, take a look at your code of ethics if you're not sure how to respond to any particular situation. Not all moral issues are ethical ones, but if they are you might find some guidance in your profession's code of ethics to help guide your response. You may also find comfort in the Moral Distress Education Project, the goal of this project is to elevate the understanding of moral distress and help viewers of the videos process their own experiences. You can find a link to this on the screen. This resource and all others that we've discussed are always available on our website so check that out and remember stay well at work.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast. Follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website and of course stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.