

Well@Work Podcast
Season 3, Episode 4:
Positive Coping to Decrease Moral Distress

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA through the Kentucky Department of Behavioral Health to the Center on Trauma and Children. On this episode, Emily Smith discusses positive coping to decrease moral distress.

I'm Emily Smith with the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. The impact of the COVID pandemic on workers has been profound. Research has linked the pandemic to decreased well-being, higher rates of anxiety and depression, and increased rates of burnout among professionals. Many media reports on workforce shortages emphasize these psychological impacts, but few have reported on the increased impact of moral distress during the pandemic. Experiencing morally distressing events is expected among workers who value caring for others, but the pandemic increased the frequency of these events. Workers in caring professions have strong core values that can be protective, but the cumulative impact of the trauma, stress, and exhaustion has taken a toll, which has increased the impact of morally distressing events. In this podcast, I'll share skills that can increase positive coping, well-being, and resilience to help address the impact of moral distress.

You may be able to think of a specific incident where your instincts, training, or values urged you to take one set of actions, but colleagues, supervisors, or policies required you to take other actions, leading to moral distress. Moral distress can also occur when someone is unable to prevent an event in a way that conflicts with personal beliefs or values. This can cause feelings of shame or guilt. Some may be angry at themselves or others over what has happened. It may also be difficult to forgive or forget the actions taken when providing care during the COVID pandemic. And because many of the events that cause moral distress may also be traumatic, workers may develop PTSD or other stress responses. This can lead professionals to turn inward and increase negative self-talk, some may become isolated, others may leave their field. Although those in the caring professions may continue to experience moral distress, there are ways to mitigate the impact of those experiences.

That's something that Monica has been working on recently. Over the course of the COVID pandemic she's been able to rebound after stressful work events, but a recent event was too much for Monica to handle alone, so she chose to get some help from a counselor through her EAP. During conversations with a counselor, Monica expressed feeling ashamed and guilty about the action she took in care of a patient. She shared how she frequently finds herself questioning the decision she made that day, worrying that she could have done something differently to prevent the patient's outcome. And she thinks that others who assisted with the patient seem to be dealing with things better than she is.

She also worries that she should be better at coping with things. Here are the five skills that Monica is learning to incorporate into her daily practice.

Step 1: build problem solving skills. Begin by breaking down large problems into smaller more manageable chunks. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. When you're overwhelmed by next steps, setting an outcome goal and defining a resolution to the problem can help to identify what to do next. Sometimes the best solution is several smaller steps.

Step 2: exercise agency. Morally distressing events can lead to feeling out of control, to counter this consider times you were able to solve problems effectively, what did you do? No doubt it involved making a plan and sticking to it. Do some research to find out how others have addressed similar problems. Talking over potential solutions can help you gain confidence that you can solve problems that may arise. Let's use Monica as an example, she said that she felt powerless to change the patient's outcome and now feels that way frequently with other patients. Monica is reviewing treatment protocols to regain her confidence, which has made her feel empowered to speak up if she sees a problem. Monica also knows who to bring her concerns to and knows what steps to take if she feels that an ethics consult is necessary.

Step 3: manage reactions. Knowing the triggers that prompt strong emotional reactions can help reduce stress. Make time to prepare for and practice your response, this can help you self-regulate emotions and feel more in control. Monica shared that she would freeze whenever she felt stressed, so her counselor suggested she practice what steps to take during events that commonly happen over the course of a workday. Monica also begins her day with a breathing exercise which calms her and helps her feel ready to start the day. Learn more about breathing exercises and other mindfulness-based activities from previous Well@Work podcasts, you can find links in the episode notes.

Step 4: engage in helpful thinking. Helpful thinking can lead to positive emotions. Conversely, negative self-talk limits our ability to make positive changes and can cause additional distress. To counter it, identify unhelpful thoughts and reframe them, this can be a challenge, but it can get easier with practice. It can help to place positive cues like images or affirmations in your workplace, they help you to focus more on helpful thoughts. On her desk, Monica has two sentences written "Is it true?" and "Is it helpful?" These remind her to challenge thoughts she has like, "The situation is hopeless" and "There's nothing I can do to make this better."

Step 5: build positive social connections. Another way to lessen the impact of moral distress is through helpful social support. Many studies have shown the benefits of these relationships, from increased well-being to protection from workplace stress. Time spent with friends and family who are positive and have good problem-solving skills can help you feel reassured, understood, and supported. Stay away from those who see the glass as half empty or engage in excessive negative self-talk. Friends, family, and colleagues can help you to put these new skills into practice and remind you that you aren't alone.



Taking these steps can help you increase your positive coping and enable you to stay Well@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. [Music]