

Healing From Moral Distress

A Guide for Physicians



Ascension EAP

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Moral Distress

Most people have heard of “burn out” or “post traumatic stress,” but not everyone has heard of “moral injury.” Though related, moral injury is uniquely different in that it involves violations of deeply held moral convictions. Moral distress is the precipitating feelings of regret, shame, or despair when health care providers know the right thing to do, but due to constraints outside of their control, implementing the solution becomes difficult or even impossible.

People in every setting are susceptible to moral distress, and in times of crisis, with high demand for help but decreased resources to supply it, health care providers may be faced with increasing demand to make agonizing decisions regarding patient care, safety, and even their own wellbeing. Situations like these will undoubtedly lead to increased moral distress and injury.

There are a lot of quandaries in healthcare that make it difficult for providers to do what is right for their patients. For example, physicians are pushed to meet quality metrics and productivity standards, while working with reduced staff, and without compromising patient satisfaction. That can feel like an impossible task! This pressure to produce day after day after day may push providers into personal crises. They may wonder how they can go on at the pace they are going, or if they can even go on at all. Perceived failures may be personalized, and the provider may believe that if they were just [*smarter, stronger, more efficient, fill in the blank*] they could solve these conundrums. But the reality is--that just isn't so.



Moral Resilience

The good news can be found in the concept of moral resilience. Moral resilience is the idea that people can maintain their sense of integrity and personal wellbeing in response to moral adversity. In large part this is done through the skills of being intentional about meeting your own needs, recognizing what is and is not within your control, and focusing on living out your personal purpose and mission in light of and despite your current circumstances.

Self Awareness

It is so important to get into the habit of paying attention to ourselves and our body's reactions. Think of it this way--what is the first thing that happens to a patient when they come in for an appointment? Height, weight, pulse, blood pressure, temperature--right? Why do providers need this information? To get a baseline of how the patient is doing today, and also to note changes over time. Isn't it the same thing with our own mental health and wellness? If we check in with ourselves frequently, we are going to notice when there are anomalies, events, or circumstances that affect us, and that we need to attend to.

As you know, the fight or flight system sets off a chemical reaction that causes all kinds of changes and sensations in your body, but when was the last time you actually noticed this process at work? For example, as I am working on this manual, my boss sent an email saying she needs it to be done sooner than I expected.



In milliseconds I was overcome with anxiety. I felt my heart speed up and that familiar stress sensation throughout my body. But then I reminded myself that I'm diligent and competent, and though it's stressful, it's not a crisis. I took several long, deliberate breaths, dropped my shoulders and opened my chest, and over the course of just a few seconds I felt my heart rate slow and my body relax. Then I got back to work. That was my fight or flight system in action.

Think back to your day. Did anything stressful happen that may have triggered your fight or flight? Even just a small thing? If you can't think of anything today, how about sometime this week? This month? Consider the self reflection questions below, and write your answers in your notebook or on the lines provided.

The last time I noticed my fight or flight in action was:

The "trigger" (situation, event, or thought that initiated this response) was:

What symptoms did you notice? (Check all that apply):

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Racing heart | <input type="checkbox"/> Sweating/clammy skin | <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty concentrating or remembering details |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shallow/quick breath | <input type="checkbox"/> Vivid senses (acute hearing/vision) | <input type="checkbox"/> Other sensations: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Muscle tension | <input type="checkbox"/> Tingling or numbness | <hr/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Butterflies in stomach or nausea | <input type="checkbox"/> Shakiness | <hr/> |

Our bodies communicate with us all the time. Our emotions and physical sensations give us wisdom and motivation to act. For example, if you got a message that your bank account was overdrawn you might feel anxious, worried, or threatened. If your card was declined while trying to pay at the store you might feel embarrassed. Although those may not seem like feelings that improve our overall well-being, understanding emotions (and the accompanying physical sensations)--even when they are negative--will help motivate you to action. If you just didn't care that your bank account was overdrawn you probably wouldn't do anything about it. But because you have such strong negative emotions you are motivated to resolve those feelings, so you may call the bank, transfer money, have a conversation with your spouse about money management, or create a budget. Even unpleasant emotions are important to our wellbeing, and it is imperative that we are paying attention!

Body Scan

The body scan exercise is a great practice to build self awareness. But the key is PRACTICE! The more you do it the better your skills will become. The one below is very short--you can complete it in only 1-2 minutes. It's ideal for those busy days when you just don't have much time.

Take a moment to get comfortable in your seat. Take a few slow, deep breaths.

Starting at the top of your head, notice places of tension in your head, cheeks, jaw, neck and shoulders. (Pause)

Move your attention down your arms, torso, and back. (Pause)

Shift to your seat, hips, legs, knees, calves and ankles. (Pause)

Now focus on your feet. Push them hard into the ground and notice the tension it creates. Release.

Notice areas in your body that feel strong and well. When experiencing pain or stress, bring your attention to these areas.

After practicing the body scan technique, I felt:

What other strategies or techniques do I already use to pay attention to my body and my emotions?

Ideas I have to practice self awareness more often:

Stay Grounded

Everybody has emotions. Some people feel emotions strongly and have to work very hard at regulating them, while other people have very minimal reactions and find that regulating emotions doesn't take much effort at all. For example, many health care workers are regularly faced with situations where there is no "good" answer. Some might respond with strong feelings of anger or regret (moral distress), while others may only feel minor irritation. Regardless of where you fall on the spectrum, everybody has emotions, and sometimes they can become overwhelming.

I am not depressed or overly anxious. I practice self awareness and regulation strategies a lot (I do, after all, practice what I preach to my clients). Generally speaking I am happy, healthy, and grateful for a blessed life. Yet, despite all this, two days ago I had a good ol' cry.

As I drove home from work in the peaceful sanctuary of my car, I began to reflect on some of my clients; particular ones who had endeared themselves to my heart and who had endured more than their fair share of heartache in life. If only their families would help more, try more, care more! If only there were better programs to support them and meet their needs! If only I was a better counselor... If only I could help more... If only... I realized I was experiencing moral distress. I had been carrying a heaviness about all of this for a while now, and I just needed to let it go. So I cried. And it felt great.

After my cry I pulled into my driveway, wiped the tears from my eyes, and walked into the house, only to be greeted by big smiles and exclamations of "Mom's home!" In that moment, right there, right then, I was ok. I was better than ok. I was great.

Grounding is the ability to focus on what is happening right now, and to anchor yourself in that moment. It is a highly effective emotion regulation strategy. Shelly Maxwell, LCSW says that "Grounding is [giving yourself] something that's safe and secure to focus on." Sometimes it's a literal pause to push your feet into the ground, notice where you are and acknowledge how you are doing. Sometimes it's more of a reflection on what is most important and remembering why you got up this morning. Usually it's an acknowledgement that right here, right now, you are ok. There are many ways to ground, and most of us do it without even realizing that we are doing it. However, this skill is profoundly helpful, and intentionally practicing it can make a huge difference in a person's wellbeing.



What is most important to me?

What motivates me?

Is it true that in this moment, right here, right now, I'm ok? How do I know?

Watch this video on YouTube to review information about your sympathetic nervous system, and consider evidence-based strategies for improved mental health.

[Introduction to Grounding and Deep Breathing](#)

One thing I learned or was reminded of from this video was:

Ways I can practice grounding throughout my day include:

Action vs. Acceptance

Most people have heard of the Serenity Prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

That’s the trick--knowing the difference. So many people get so worked up trying to control the uncontrollable, when a better strategy is to settle down and accept the situation for what it is. Sometimes we really can’t change it. And that’s hard.



On the other hand, sometimes we have power to control or at least influence things, but we don’t realize that we do. So instead we get frustrated and maybe even resentful about things we feel powerless over, when in reality there is something we can do. But maybe we just don’t feel like it’s enough.

Let me tell you about Jerome. Jerome is dying of a treatable form of cancer because he didn’t have insurance and didn’t come in for his screenings in time. If you’re like me, you get upset; angry at the system and the society that failed him. Maybe you’d be disappointed in his family who won’t bring him to his chemo appointments because they’re “too busy.” Maybe you would think about Jerome before bed or when you’re hugging your kids and remember that Jerome’s kids won’t come see him, even in the last stages of his life. Or

maybe you would compartmentalize Jerome, because that’s how the cookie crumbles sometimes and there’s nothing you can do. But there is something we can do. There’s always something we can do.

Maybe you can’t reverse time and give Jerome the screening that could save his life. But you can show Jerome care, concern and compassion every time you see him. You can smile, and be human, and touch his hand and let him know he’s not alone. You’re busy, but you can write him a note and send it to his house, letting him know that he’s not forgotten. You can learn more about his cancer, so you can give him the best possible treatment. You can advocate for better social policies and programs to help people like Jerome. And you can pray. Probably the best and most important thing you can do for anybody is pray.

Yes, there’s always something we can do, and our unpleasant feelings and moral distress motivate us to act. The trick is to act with intentionality, and not just out of agitation and an unregulated sympathetic nervous system. We gain wisdom from our emotions, then use rational thinking to determine the best course. And even when you’ve done all these things, Jerome will probably still die.

And allowing that to be true without reacting wildly or ferociously resisting it is difficult, but that peaceful space where you just allow things to be as they are is acceptance. You may still be sad. Disappointed. Angry. Hurt. But you acknowledge those feelings and allow them to be as they are--acceptance. You attend to them while they are present and then let them go when it is time for them to leave, because each moment offers a new present with things to attend to. That is life.

Ancient King Solomon is reputed to be the wisest man that ever lived. In his famous poem, found in Ecclesiastes 3, he writes:

*To everything there is a season,
A time for every purpose under heaven:*

*A time to be born, And a time to die;
A time to plant, And a time to harvest;*

*A time to kill, And a time to heal;
A time to break down, And a time to build up;*

*A time to weep, And a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, And a time to dance;*

*A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones;
A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing;*

*A time to gain, And a time to lose;
A time to keep, And a time to throw away;*

*A time to tear, And a time to sew;
A time to keep silence, And a time to speak;*

*A time to love, And a time to hate;
A time of war, And a time of peace.*

King Solomon knew that nothing lasts forever. When we try to hold on to something that's no longer meant for us, we can become depressed, anxious, resentful, or bitter. It's better to hold everything with an open hand, allowing it to come and go according to the season that we are in. This is difficult for many people to grasp, and even more difficult to practice. To live this way means that you have to come to grips with the bad news: sadness, disappointment and loss are inevitable and a natural part of life. The good news is that so are joy, love, hope and peace.

Is there anything in my life that I've had difficulty accepting?

When I think about those things, how do my body and emotions react?

How can I practice acceptance over things I cannot change?

Am I holding any grudges or resentments? What could I do to let those go?

What areas of my life have I felt powerless?

When I feel powerless, what are some things I could do?

Live with Purpose

Purpose gives life meaning. Research overwhelmingly shows that people who have a strong sense of purpose are happier, healthier, and have a better quality of life than those who don't. Living with purpose helps you stay focused on what's most important, guides decision-making, and is your most powerful strategy in achieving your goals.

Life is busy, though, and it's so easy to get distracted. My purpose is always to "be a light!" To me that means be kind and compassionate in every way I can--whether it's holding the door for someone, or volunteering with a food pantry. Every act of kindness is a way to be a light. I shout this to my kids every time they leave the house, and it's what I strive for everyday. But sometimes I get tangled up in requests, demands, emails and tasks. I get irritable and overwhelmed. Add in lack of sleep, hunger, loneliness, pain, fear, or any other distress, and I quickly lose sight of my purpose. I begin to believe that life is meaningless and mundane. I feel more and more hopeless, underappreciated, and ineffective. I'm spinning my wheels but getting nowhere. Have you ever experienced that?

Discovering and living out your life's purpose can be much easier said than done. The questions below are meant to prompt you to consider your purpose and deeply integrate that into your life. The more you reflect on and intentionally practice living life with purpose, the easier and more liberating it becomes. Grab a notebook or journal, find a quiet space, and take your time. Discovering your purpose isn't something that has to be done in an hour, or even an afternoon. When you are ready, consider everything you wrote and try to articulate your purpose in only 1-2 sentences, then repeat it to yourself often. Are you ready?

- **How do you describe yourself to someone you just met?**
- **What are you great at? What do you love to do?**
- **What would you do if you could not fail?**
- **What would you do if money was no object?**
- **What do you consider your biggest accomplishments? What accomplishments would you still like to achieve?**
- **Write your own eulogy as if you had died yesterday. What would people say about you? What would you say about yourself? What legacy would you leave?**



- Write your own eulogy as if you had lived your best possible life. What would people say about your best self? Your ideals? Your accomplishments? What legacy would you leave?
- If today was the very last day of your life, how would you spend your time?
- What brings you joy?
- What struggles, habits, hurts or character traits still trip you up sometimes?
- What struggles have you faced in life? How did they hurt you? How did they make you stronger?
- If you could have a “do over” for any part of your life, what would you do over and why?
- What faith or spiritual beliefs do you hold? How do these impact your life? How would you like them to impact your life?
- What do you believe about good and evil?
- What comforts you?
- If you had a public platform, what message would you like to convey to the world?
- What can you do to make a difference?

My purpose is:

Ways I can focus on and live out my purpose are:

Don't Do It Alone

Human beings are social creatures by design. We are meant to live in community with each other, sharing struggles and celebrating successes, yet Western society has taught us that we need to be strong and independent. Though that mentality serves us well in some things, it causes a stumbling block in others.

Over the course of my career I have had several clients who refuse to shed tears in front of me. It doesn't matter if they are welling up, about to spill over--the client will clench their jaw, look to the ceiling and brace themselves until the feeling passes. They need to be strong, they tell me. Somewhere along the way someone has taught them that it is weak to cry. This couldn't be further from the truth.

The reality is that it takes a lot more strength and courage to be vulnerable than it does to be tough. I've seen it time and time again--the "tough" guys (and gals) are the ones that have defensive walls that become so rigid that eventually they crack and break. These are the people who look great on the outside, but on the inside they are struggling to survive.

There's nothing strong about letting your body, mind and soul deteriorate from the inside out. There's nothing strong about suppressing feelings because it's easier than dealing with them, and there's nothing strong about pretending you can do it all by yourself. Tough guys (and gals) don't impress me much. It's the people who allow themselves to be vulnerable and are willing to share their pain and struggles with others; the people who are willing to be human--those are the people whose strength impresses me.

Research overwhelmingly finds that quality relationships are a foundation to any type of recovery--whether it be drug addiction, trauma, physical illness or injury, mental health or moral distress. Quality relationships are the key. It's more important that you have a few good people in your life that you can be completely open and honest with, than 1000 Facebook friends who barely know you. We need each other.

Quality matters, but basic human connection also matters. Kevin Hines was a man who was hurting. He walked on to the Golden Gate bridge, determined that if even one person asked if he was ok he wouldn't jump. He walked, and he walked. People passed by without a word or even a glance. As the minutes became hours, Kevin became convinced that nobody cared. So he jumped.



Don't underestimate your power or influence. Whether in big things or small things, your life matters to someone else. Your courage will inspire someone else, and your concern might save someone else. We need people, and they need us. Don't try to do it alone.

How have I built quality relationships, and with who?

What has stopped me from building quality relationships in my life?

Have I taken any of my relationships for granted?

What would happen if I became more vulnerable with people I trust?

In what positive ways have I impacted others?

How have I let others positively impact me?

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