Moral Suffering: Moral Distress or Injury

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

MORAL INJURY
- Distress arising from participation in, failure to prevent, or observation of, acts that conflict with an individual’s deeply held moral beliefs.
- 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.

CAUSES OF 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.
- 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 INJURY
- There are similar rates of moral distress across types of clinicians. Possible PA scenarios:
  - 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.

CONSEQUENCES OF MORAL DISTRESS
- Moral distress or injury can cause short- and long-term stress-related disorders, including anxiety and depression.
- Individuals also may experience feelings of resentment, hopelessness, worthlessness, guilt, shame, or other negative emotions.
- Problematic organizational indicators related to moral distress, including employee job dissatisfaction, burnout, and turnover, may ultimately result in moral suffering.
WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS TO MORAL SUFFERING?

- Organizations should enhance resources available to healthcare professionals for moral decision making. Such resources could include:
  - 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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REFERENCES


