

# Moral Distress In Nurses



# Definition of Moral

1. Concerned with the principles of right and wrong behaviour.
2. Concerned with or derived from the code of behaviour that is considered right or acceptable in a particular society.
3. Holding or manifesting high principles for proper conduct.



# What is Moral Distress?

- Knowing the ethically right decision to take but feeling powerless to take that action.
- Individuals moral integrity is seriously compromised.
- Same as ethical dilemma?

# Proof We Are Not Powerless

No matter your struggle, there is at least  
one thing you can do right now to begin  
to create change.



# Who is susceptible?

- Nurses
- Doctors
- Students
- Social Workers
- Psychologists
- HCA
- Pharmacists
- OT/PT

# Sources of Moral Distress

- Continued life support though it is not in best interest of patient
- Inadequate communication about end of life care between providers, patients and families
- Inappropriate use of healthcare resources
- Inadequate staffing or staff who are adequately trained to provide required care
- Inadequate pain relief provided to patients
- False hope given to patients and families.
- Clinical situation that is unnecessary or futile treatment
- Inadequate informed consent

# Find a partner....

Share an experience of moral distress

- What was at stake for you?
  - What supported you?
- How have you made sense of it?

- New sources of Moral Distress have been identified during the Covid-19 pandemic....



# Moral Distress and Covid-19

- Significant amongst all health professionals, especially nurses.
- Lack of knowledge and uncertainty regarding how to treat a new illness.
- Being overwhelmed by the depth and breadth of Covid-19.
- Fear of exposure to the virus leading to suboptimal care.
- Adopting a team model of nursing care that caused intra-professional tensions and miscommunications.
- Policies to reduce viral transmission that prevented nurses to assume their caring role (visitation policy and PPE policy).

- Practicing within crisis standards of care.
- Dealing with medical scarcity.

# Nurses.....

- Observation that nurses across all specialties in hospital setting have described experiencing moral distress when caring for patients.
- Similar themes of cause but differs slightly depending on setting and/or experience.

# Recognising Moral Distress

- Often involves feelings of frustration and anger
- Feelings that threaten one's moral integrity
- Often these feelings are not spoken about openly
- Complicating factor is that in any given situation, not everyone will be morally distressed.

# Potential Consequences of Moral Distress

- Providers become morally numbed to ethically challenging situations
- May no longer recognise or engage in clinical situations requiring moral sensitivity
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Burnout

# Approaches to Reducing Moral Distress

- Four A's – ask, affirm, assess and act

# Ask....

- Stage of self awareness and self reflection
- Am I, or members of my team feeling distressed, or showing signs of suffering?
- Have co-workers, friends, or family members noticed these signs and behaviours in me?
- Physical, Emotional, Behavioural, Spiritual
- **You become aware that moral distress is present**

# Affirm....

- Affirm you distress and your commitment to take care of yourself
- Validate your feelings and perceptions with others
- Affirm your professional responsibility to act
  
- **You make a commitment to address moral distress**



# Assess....

- Identify sources of distress
- Under what circumstances do the signs and symptoms occur?
- Do other people experience distress/suffering related to these sources?
- Assess your ability to make a change. Ask yourself, “What can I do personally? How can I contribute if this is organisation wide?”
- Do a deep dive to understand the root causes of distress

# Act.....

**Take personal responsibility to try to implement the changes that you desire**

- **Address internal and external barriers**
- **Consider personal changes that will make you a more viable agent of change**
  - Develop a self care plan
  - Identify appropriate sources of support
  - Investigate outside resources for guidance

# Strategies to reduce moral distress

- Speak up
- Be deliberate
- Be accountable
- Focus on changes in the work environment
- Participate in moral distress education
- Make it interdisciplinary
- Find root causes
- Develop policies

# Strategies....

- Te Ara Whakapiri – Last Days of Life Guidance
- Formal debriefing
- Continued education to junior medical staff
- Continued education to nursing staff in all settings
- Encourage ACP discussions in all settings

# Self -Care

- Acknowledge and Understand Your Reactions.
- Be Aware and Monitor Your Wellbeing.
- Activate Your Parasympathetic Nervous System to Combat Stress.
- Take time for your mental health.

# Acknowledge and Understand Your Reactions..

- Appreciate that you will have reactions, such as stress, anxiety, and grief, to the increased stressors you are encountering.
- Exercise self-compassion.

# Be Aware and Monitor Your Wellbeing..

- Check in with yourself and monitor for the common physical and mental warning signs of extreme stress.
- Seek help if these symptoms impact your ability to provide care to your patients.

# Activate Your Parasympathetic Nervous System to Combat Stress..

- Practice breath awareness.
- Eat regularly scheduled meals.
- Use a daily routine to prepare for bed in order to promote quality sleep.
- Try a mind-body practice like mindfulness or yoga.



# Take Time for Your Mental Health..

- Create ongoing supportive connections with colleagues who can validate and normalise your experiences.
- Take a break from media coverage around Covid-19.
- Schedule time for self-care, such as talking with a friend, reading a book, journaling, or meditating.
- Seek out a friend or mental health professional to help ensure that you are acknowledging your extreme stress, processing it and have the support you need to manage the impacts over time.