



Ascension

Ascension WI EAP

Moral Injury

For physicians and other health care providers

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 an act that violates deeply held moral convictions. People in every setting are susceptible to it, and in times of crisis, with high demand for help but decreased resources to supply it, health care providers may be required to make agonizing decisions regarding patient care. Situations like these will undoubtedly lead to increased moral injury, but don’t despair! There are many things you can do to recognize and mitigate the effects of moral injury in your life.

What is moral injury?

Moral injury is sometimes referred to as a deep soul wound. It occurs when a person sees, perpetrates, or fails to prevent an action or event that goes against deeply held moral beliefs. Some examples may include a mother who is pressured to abort her pregnancy, an administrator who forges documents to demonstrate compliance with regulations, a child protection worker who is not able to protect a mistreated child, or a doctor who must decide which patient gets the life saving treatment and who doesn’t, due to limited supply. The potential for moral injury is endless, and anyone with strong morals and a capacity for empathy is susceptible to its effects.

Related Terms: Burnout

Health care workers, counselors, teachers and others in helping fields are often accused of experiencing burnout. Burnout is physical, mental or emotional exhaustion due to

prolonged stress, often related to work. It can result from a number of things, including high caseloads, insufficient support, lack of acknowledgement, bureaucracy, inadequate compensation, inefficient systems, and irrelevant or cumbersome administrative duties that take time, effort and attention away from direct service. Though burnout is related to moral injury, the concept of burnout fails to consider the deep emotional wounds that broken, inefficient or irrelevant systems create. Those who truly care, want to do a good job, and are passionate about their careers become frustrated by their inability to do the work that really matters—and do it well. Their physical symptoms may be described as burnout, but the emotional toll goes much deeper.

Related Terms: PTSD

In addition to burnout, moral injury is often confused with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Though symptoms of each overlap

(anger, depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, etc.) the emotional impacts of each are quite different. When a person experiences a traumatic event their primary emotions tend to be fear, helplessness and horror, whereas a person who experiences moral injury tends to feel guilt, shame and anger. In addition, when a person experiences trauma their basic need of safety has been violated, while moral injury violates the basic need of trust. It is important to recognize these differences, as moral injury and PTSD are not the same thing, and recovery from each requires very different interventions.

Getting Help for Moral Injury

People are often reluctant to get help for moral injury. One reason is that they don't understand moral injury, and though they may be feeling the effects they may not be able to accurately understand or describe it. They may not even recognize that they need help. Second, there is a lot of shame and stigma associated with moral injury. Even in instances where individuals are faced with impossible decisions they may worry that they made the wrong choice, or believe that if they could have just [fill in the blank] they could have avoided a negative outcome. Individuals may be worried about their reputation, job security, or even legal consequences if they admit to circumstances or perceived personal failures which led to moral injury. Carrying the burden of moral injury is hard enough, and for some people, the potential consequences of talking about it may seem to make things worse.

In times of crisis moral injury can likely not be avoided, but the good news is that there is help! Researchers and mental health practitioners are discovering effective interventions that are

helping people mitigate and recover from the effects. Here are some strategies that can help:

1). Acknowledge moral injury. Hopefully this article has brought some awareness and understanding so you can clearly see how you may have been impacted by moral injury, or can more easily recognize circumstances from your own life or career that may cause moral injury. That is a great first step.

2). Work toward forgiveness. People who don't hold grudges are happier and healthier than those that do. Forgiveness may need to be extended toward others who have (or you perceive they have) perpetrated injury—such as higher level decision-makers in your line of work, supply companies who couldn't get you needed resources, co-workers who made mistakes in patient care, or close friends and loved ones who didn't provide support when you needed it, etc. The potential for forgiveness is endless. It's important to identify every person or entity you may be holding a grudge towards so that you can actively work on letting it go, however; many people find that they also need to forgive themselves. Whether the circumstance was completely unavoidable, or the mistake was an obvious act of negligence or misconduct, it benefits no one to carry around that guilt and shame forever. Self forgiveness is crucial.

3). Develop self compassion. Many people find it helpful to create a narrative of the circumstances which led to moral injury, and clearly describe their own role in it, leaving nothing out. Sometimes it is ok to do this kind of work on your own, but often it is beneficial to work on it in partnership with a trained mental

health professional. They can help you regulate your emotions as you work through deeply distressing material, and can help you stay engaged and focused on the difficult work during the times when you'd rather avoid it.

After you have finished your narrative, the next step is to imagine sharing it with a kind, compassionate, morally upright role model. This could be a coach, mentor, or even a religious figure. As you share your story with this imagined person, visualize their feelings toward you. Imagine their compassion and forgiveness for you and accept it graciously. You might imagine them speaking kind words of affirmation to you, or picture their love and compassion washing over you like waves. The more ways you can envision and experience this compassion the more likely you are to accept it. It may take many repetitions of this exercise for you to fully receive it. Don't give up! After you have embraced these gifts of compassion from your imagined mentor, then it's time to offer these same gifts to yourself.

4). Consider sharing your story with a real person that you trust. Often, the condemnation that we expect from others is exaggerated and a product of our own negative imaginations. Take a risk and share your story with someone you trust. This may be a family member, clergy, or close friend. Research has found that significant healing can come from sharing dark secrets, especially if the receiver demonstrates love, compassion and forgiveness for you. This step is a little risky, because we never really know how someone is going to respond. If they do respond with a negative, or even a neutral response we may feel rejected or even condemned, so it's important to be mentally

ready to handle that if it happens. However, there is great healing in vulnerability, and you may find that the acceptance and forgiveness given to you from the other person will have an immense healing effect that you didn't even expect.

4). Don't allow the transgression to define you. We all make mistakes or do things we regret. Resilience is the idea that we can bounce back from difficulties, struggles, or even poor choices that we have made. Is there a way to make amends for what happened? How can you live in line with your values and beliefs going forward? You can't change the past, but you can direct your future, so define your best self and live life accordingly, to the best of your ability, from now on.

You don't have to struggle alone!

Moral injury can have deep, lasting negative impacts, but help is available. Call your EAP for free and confidential help in recovering from moral injury. Our experienced team of counselors genuinely want to help. We're here for you!

Ascension WI EAP

800-540-3758

eap@ascension.org

AscensionWIEAP.org
