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Healing the Invisible Wounds: Exploring Moral Injury in Healthcare

Do you remember how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a heartwarming global ritual each evening where people would gather on their porches, balconies, or windows to make noise? The air would fill with the sounds of clapping, cheering, or honking horns to show solidarity for those working tirelessly to keep everyone safe and care for people who had contracted the virus. This gesture of appreciation boosted morale during a very uncertain time when the entire world was particularly vulnerable.

But we're no longer banging pots and pans at dusk to show gratitude for healthcare workers. Instead, we've snapped back to pre-pandemic norms in some ways, retracting from a poignant reminder of the selfless efforts of healthcare heroes and the resilience of that community.

What we often don't realize is how healthcare workers regularly face situations that put them at risk of experiencing moral injury because the tools of their profession – that is, the systems,

resources and processes they work with daily – continue to experience significant strain which often forces them into situations where they must wrestle with ethical dilemmas and face internal struggle. The feeling of being torn between competing needs is at the heart of the concept of moral injury. It's where caregivers, committed to the well-being of those they serve, confront situations that test their principles. They are often forced to make choices that have lasting effects on their mental health, identity, and sense of purpose. Moral injury is a battle that healthcare workers must contend with in the ongoing conflict to balance care and constraints.

In this article, we'll look more deeply at the concept of moral injury and explain how it is different from PTSD, compassion fatigue, and burnout, which also impact healthcare workers. We will explain common symptoms of someone experiencing moral injury and talk about why healthcare workers have a higher risk of developing it.

We'll also look at prevention and coping strategies that help lead back to the sense of collective compassion and recognition for how tough working in healthcare can be. We must take responsibility for addressing moral injury in healthcare environments to ensure we are supportive and operate ethically to help workers in their roles as caregivers.

What is moral injury?

Moral injury can happen because of extreme and prolonged emotional and psychological distress from being in situations where people must make decisions or take actions that don't align with their "core values."¹ That kind of deep injury can cause a person to be tormented by inner conflict, guilt, anger, shame, and a sense of betrayal. Moral injury will "alter [their] worldview," making it difficult to trust others.²

Healthcare workers regularly face situations where they must navigate challenging ethical dilemmas. For example, they may be facing the challenge of providing high quality care while dealing with limited resources and a lack of time to spend with patients because of the sheer volume of people who need treatment. As a result, they are much more vulnerable to moral injury. It's important to understand that "circumstances, not character, produce this struggle."³

Generally, someone enters the healthcare profession because they are committed to helping heal people. They pledge to uphold principles and codes of ethics. However, frequently during the workday, healthcare workers must make decisions that significantly change the course of people's lives. Sometimes, that can include determining which critically ill patient will receive a life-saving treatment. When they encounter these kinds of conflicting circumstances, it can lead them to feel a loss of purpose and lack of fulfillment and cause profound moral distress.

Unfortunately, the strain can be all too much. Researchers found that while "suicide among physicians is a longstanding problem," the effects of working to provide care during the healthcare crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the "rationing of care" have only intensified the issue.^{4,5} There has been a steady increase in stressful working conditions, including "overwork and loss of autonomy," that make people in this profession far more susceptible to burnout, anxiety, depression, episodes of severe mental health distress, and moral injury.⁶

What are some symptoms of moral injury?

Moral injury in healthcare workers can be challenging to spot because often, people "don't yet have the vocabulary to

describe what is happening to them"⁷ and they continue to work, often masking symptoms due to the work culture not allowing space for disclosure.⁸

Symptoms can include:

- Intense feelings of guilt or shame.
- Emotional distress, inner turmoil.
- Loss of trust (in self and others).
- Questioning their value, meaning and purpose.
- Emotional numbness or detachment.
- Anger, irritability, or resentment.
- Difficulty forgiving oneself or others.

What makes healthcare workers more prone to develop moral injury?

Healthcare workers are more prone to developing moral injury because they are frequently exposed to ethical dilemmas and situations that challenge their core values. Certain behaviours are also ingrained as part of the workplace culture. There is less self-compassion and a reluctance to sharing vulnerabilities because of the stigma of experiencing mental health challenges and a perception that it indicates a weakness amongst peers.⁹

Risk is higher when circumstances include:

- Exposure to morally challenging situations.
- Resource scarcity.
- Organizational pressures and conflicting values:
 - Public versus private/for-profit healthcare systems.
 - Conflicts with insurance companies.
 - Government regulations.
 - Recommendations related to service codes and time quotas per patient that are tied to compensation.
- A lack of support and recognition of ethical concerns.

What are the differences between moral injury, PTSD, burnout, and compassion fatigue?

Moral injury is distinct from other mental health challenges that healthcare workers often experience because it is focused on ethical trauma where "they are suffering from a severe disconnect between the moral principles they live by and the reality of what is happening or has happened" that calls into question the "sense of who [they] are as a person."¹⁰

We wanted to compare the causes, symptoms, risk factors, prevention, and coping strategies of moral injury with other diagnoses that people are more familiar with and frequently associated with healthcare professionals. This chart is a simplification and does not capture the complexity of each condition.

	Moral Injury	PTSD	Burnout	Depression	Compassion Fatigue
Causes	Compromised Ethics	Trauma	Prolonged Stress	Various	Exposure to suffering
Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guilt • Shame • Loss of meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flashbacks • Hyper-sensitivity • Constant state of arousal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional exhaustion • Detachment • Disassociation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistent sadness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced empathy
Risk Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical dilemmas • Lack of support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma exposure • Vulnerability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High workload • Lack of control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biology • Environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy • Caregiving
Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical training • Organization support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma-informed care • Support (emotional, social, clinical) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workload management • Support (emotional, social, clinical) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health awareness • Support (emotional, social, clinical) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-care • Boundaries
Coping Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek support • Self-reflection • Self-compassion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Therapy • Medication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-care • Boundaries • Workload rebalancing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Therapy • Medication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive supervision • Self-care

How can moral injury be prevented?

We must promote greater awareness and understanding of moral injury in healthcare settings. It can be helpful to use case studies because the storytelling puts the situations into the forefront and allows others to understand the real situations healthcare workers face. This approach can avoid sanitizing the circumstances to diminish the emotional toll it takes.

Organizations play a crucial part in prevention. They can:

- Offer ethics training to build resilience and understanding of vulnerability.
- Offer strong support by establishing expectations for patient conduct to address abusive, behaviours.
- Establish an encouraging peer network.
- Provide access to professional supports.
- Task leaders with more accountability for addressing ethical concerns so they gain a better understanding of the pressures healthcare workers face.

- Promote kindness and offer reminders of successful and productive ways to engage with people.
- Conduct job hazard assessments to evaluate procedures and protocols to mitigate risks to the best of their abilities.
- Engage in changes where possible to systemic barriers for clients/staff.

Coping strategies for healthcare workers

There are several actions that healthcare workers can take to help them cope with moral injury, including:

- Bringing concerns forward to their leader’s attention to ensure they know what the challenges are.
- Seeking therapy and professional help.
- Practicing mindfulness and regular self-reflection.
- Participating in activities and events that build a sense of community.

- Actively engaging in peer support.
- Consciously working and advocating for changes that address ethical concerns.

With increased awareness and understanding of moral injury, we can all offer better support to ensure the well-being of healthcare workers so they can continue in their vital roles in society. Increased empathy and kindness go a long way. We must hold ourselves accountable for how we act so that we can be part of a solution. We need to promote a culture that recognizes solid support for ethical practices. It's a viable way to champion the dedicated healthcare workers who tirelessly serve our communities.

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