

# **Moral distress and covid-19**

RESOURCE PACKAGE

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## What is Moral Distress?

Moral distress can occur when you *know* what the **morally right thing** to do is, but you can't follow through because of **constraints** such as rules, regulations, procedures, lack of time or resources, fear of negative repercussions and other factors related to your workplace or larger system.

These are situations where you recognize your moral responsibility, evaluate the various courses of action, and identify, in accordance with your values, the **morally correct decision** – but are **prevented** from following through.

Your integrity and authenticity may feel undermined by not being able to do what you believe is right. However, when addressed, moral distress can lead to an increase in work satisfaction and positive changes in individuals and organizations.

## Individual Strategies<sup>1</sup>

### Step One: Identify your source of Moral Distress

#### A. What type of distress are you feeling?

Do you think it's **moral distress**, **burnout**, **empathic strain** or a combination of all three?

*To help you assess this, you can go read [here](#) for more information on each of these factors*

Here are questions from the Moral Distress-Appraisal Scale (MD-APPS)<sup>2</sup> to help you assess this (your answers may range from *totally disagree*, *disagree*, *rather disagree*, *rather agree*, *agree*, *totally agree*.)

1. I am prevented from carrying out my work in a way that I believe is morally right.
2. I can work in accordance with my norms and values.
3. I am required to do things that are contrary to my own norms and values.
4. I am helped to work in a way that I believe is morally right.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from <https://www.aacn.org/~media/aacn-website/clincial-resources/moral-distress/recognizing-addressing-moral-distress-quick-reference-guide.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Baele, C.A., Fontaine, J.R. (2021) The Moral Distress-Appraisal Scale: Development and validation study. *JAN*, Vol 77, Issue 10.

5. I can work in a way that I believe is morally right.
6. I am compelled to do things that I believe are morally wrong.
7. I am supported to act ethically.
8. I am kept from working ethically.

## Step Two: Assess your levels of moral distress<sup>3</sup>

Symptoms may vary and can include:

### Emotional

- Frustration
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Sadness
- Feeling powerless
- Withdrawal

### Physical

- Muscle aches
- Headaches
- Heart palpitations
- Neck pain
- Gastro-intestinal symptoms

### Psychological

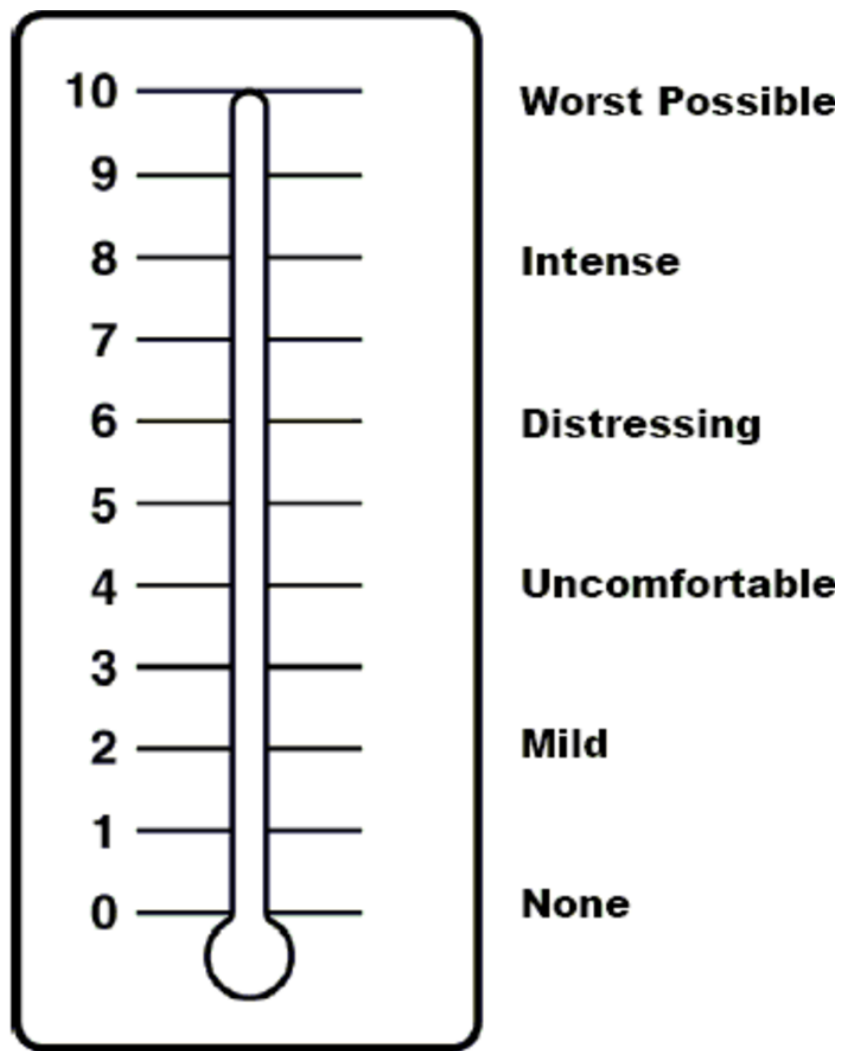
- Depression
- Emotional exhaustion
- Low self-worth
- Nightmares
- Loss of job satisfaction
- Loss of empathy for clients/patients

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from <https://www.aacn.org/~media/aacn-website/clinical-resources/moral-distress/recognizing-addressing-moral-distress-quick-reference-guide.pdf>

## Use the moral distress thermometer<sup>4</sup>

Please circle the number (0-10) on the Moral Distress Thermometer that best describes how much moral distress you have been experiencing related to work in the past week including today.



<sup>4</sup> Wocial, L. (2010) The Moral Distress Education Project, University of Kentucky. <https://moraldistressproject.med.uky.edu/mdp-resources>

### Step Three: Assess your sources of constraints

Is it an **internal** factor? (my own values are colliding with what I am being asked to do/not do)

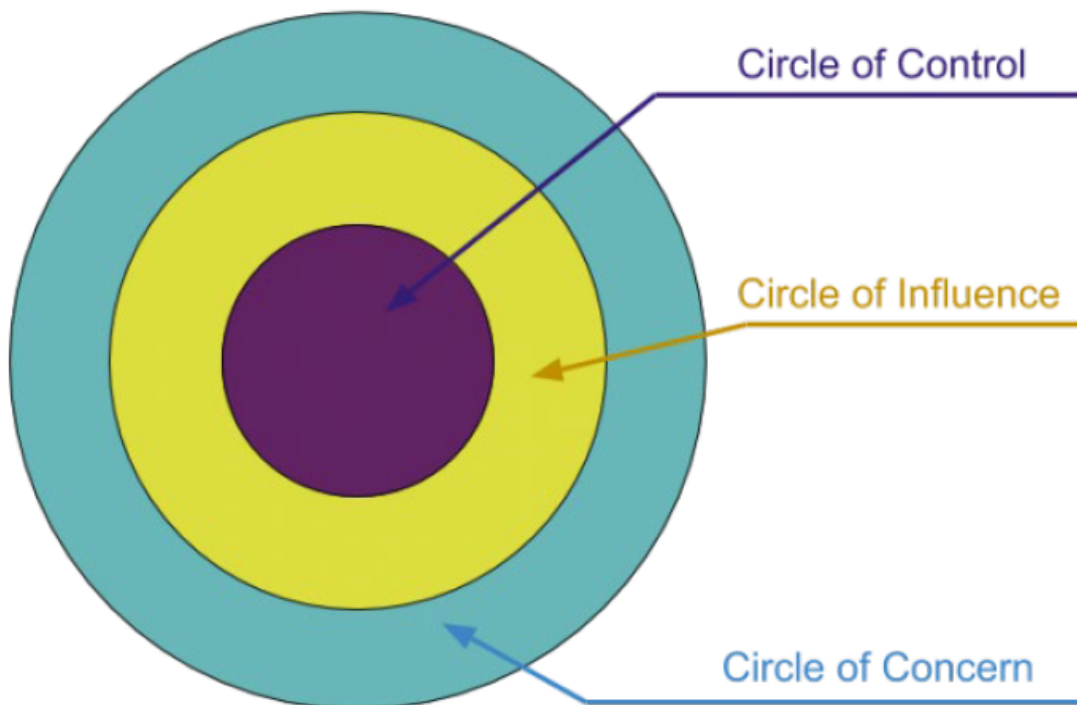
Is it an **external** factor at my **unit** level? (Work-related pressures such as inadequate staffing, poor communication, incompetent colleagues, workplace bullying)

Is it an **external** factor at the **organizational** level? (Insufficient staffing, lack of resources, pressures to increase productivity/reduce costs, budget cuts, other)

### Step Four: Make an action plan

Use Covey's Circles of Control and Influence to clarify your level of control on this factor<sup>5</sup>

To help you work through Covey's circles, you can access a [free worksheet](#) from the ThenSomehow website.



<sup>5</sup> Thensomehow.com: <https://www.thensomehow.com/circles-of-influence/>

## Step Five: Tools for Coping with Moral Distress

### Social Support: Peer support is crucial for resilient teams

- Care for each other during shift and check in on co-workers, especially in difficult cases.
- Support other's courage to speak up about morally distressing issues, encourage help-seeking.

### Low Impact Debriefing: Share your experience without harming others

Download our LID infographic postcard [here](#)

1. **Increased self-awareness** – Become aware of the level of detail in a story to ensure others are not traumatized.
2. **Fair warning** - Allow the listener to prepare to hear information that may be traumatic.
3. **Consent** - Ask for permission to share at this time. Allow the listener to decline or qualify what they can hear.
4. **Limited disclosure** – Decide how much to share. Start with the least traumatic parts and move towards the core.

### Ethics Discussions: Discuss morally distressing situations collaboratively

- **Collaboration** through inter-professional communication in a space where everyone can be heard and thoughtfully considered while expecting that reasonable, competent clinicians will sometimes disagree
- **Reflect** on morally distressing experiences using discussion groups or facilitated ethics conversations
- **Bring concerns** to management and request that system level problems be brought to leadership
- **Listen and connect** with each other with an attitude of non-judgement

## Resources

AACN Ethics Work Group. (2004). American Association of Critical Care Nurses, *The 4 A's to Rise above moral distress*. Aliso Viejo, CA: AACN.

The Hastings Center: <https://www.thehastingscenter.org/ethics-resources-on-the-coronavirus/>

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The Moral Distress Education Project, University of Kentucky:  
<https://moraldistressproject.med.uky.edu/mdp-resources>

Schwartz Rounds: <https://www.theschwartzcenter.org>

Thensomehow.com: <https://www.thensomehow.com/circles-of-influence/>

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