

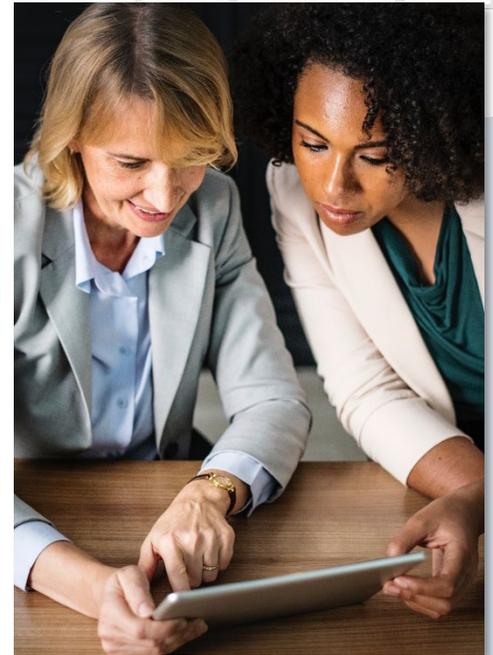


Understanding Moral Distress

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Defining Moral Distress in Child Welfare

- Moral distress happens when a professional knows the ethically appropriate action but cannot take that action due to internal (personal) or external (institutional) constraints, leading to painful feelings and psychological difficulties.
- Examples of constraints include not being able to get needed resources to families or having to spend more time on paperwork than with children and families.
- Moral distress reflects a violation of one's values and moral code.
- For child welfare professionals, where moral distress may be happening for extended periods of time, the experience and effects of moral distress could be cumulative and compounding.
- Child welfare workers' value of helping others is an integral part of their core identities, both personally and professionally. When a worker knows what they need to do to help families, but constraints get in the way of them being able to do that, they feel frustration, anxiety, guilt, sadness, and powerlessness – all emotions associated with moral distress.



SESSION 3 OF 5

Discussion with Dr. Amy He, Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver, and lead evaluator for NCWWI

Event date:

06/23/2021

Recording available:

<https://vimeo.com/567149631>

- Data from NCWWI's study of almost 2,000 public child welfare caseworkers show:
 - Over 60% of workers encountered morally distressing conditions
 - More than 40% of workers reported that their job required them to do things against their better judgment
 - More than half of workers reported that too many rules and regulations interfere with how well they can do their jobs
- Low psychological safety (i.e., feeling unsafe to take risks, feeling undermined in expertise, or being afraid to disagree with a supervisor) was the main factor associated with moral distress. Job stress and time pressure also increased workers' likelihood of experiencing moral distress.
- What are the internal constraints workers experience that prevent workers from doing what they know is right?

How Participants Connected the Dots

- We all have times when we know it will end up badly, but policy/politics usurps what is morally and logically correct.
- Systems are much more likely to blame a caseworker than trust their expertise
- Being prepared and having knowledge and expertise could be seen as an internal constraint
- We want to think more about how moral distress and secondary traumatic stress (STS) intersect; also want to consider workplace stress and personal stress
- Moral distress is as subjective as trauma – it's a personal experience
- The concept of psychological safety resonates with all. In addition to supporting psychological safety, we need to think about how workers have psychological flexibility and supporting reflective practice to assure workers' abilities to navigate values and ethics as they show up in the work – and to examine bias.
- Dealing with external and institutional constraints is easier than dealing with internal constraints. Need to explore what are ethics vs values and where does bias come into that.
- Moral distress is different for new workers and the current workforce; there is moral distress when new programs roll out and are implemented with not enough support; sometimes agencies ask for input from workers and then don't listen or make any meaningful changes; case reviews and check-ins can help with consensus decision-making



Strategies for Mitigating Moral Distress

- Add screening tools in the hiring process for selecting workers who have natural supports/resilience so they can survive the job. Use validated tools that can gauge the person's resiliency and capacities to address conflict/hostility rather than relying on Title IV-E programs to drive our hiring practices.
- Improve psychological safety by including frontline staff's feedback, suggestions when making changes. Respect the expertise of workers.
- Supervisors need to support transfer of learning when staff go through training
- Use opportunities for advancement as a way to recognize and reward excellent workers
- Strengthen supervision
- Recognize staff's emotional intelligence/give staff a voice to feel safe to speak to someone about their thoughts and give suggestions
- Establish peer support structures
- Staff a caseworker hotline with counselors on standby to provide an immediate session for caseworkers who experience a difficult time/moral distress
- Provide opportunities for mindfulness drop-in sessions with multiple sessions available throughout the week. Don't have to sign up, you can just click on the link if you feel like participating (separate from EAP benefits)
- Include caseworkers when making changes to the organization (policy, adding programs, etc.) to provide the agency with opportunities to advance equity and support the workforce
- Address how to retain skilled staff
- Create an environment that welcomes open discussion so staff can share experiences

Next Steps

- Acknowledge it!
- Share information about moral distress with supervisors
- Practice awareness, affirmation, and validation
- Advocate for programs to help all staff feel comfortable communicating their moral distress and how it impacts individual performance and the organization/agency
- Add this to what we teach students about STS and burnout. Help students develop the ability to identify moral distress and make plans for what they are going to do when faced with it.
- Create a safe space to process moral distress when it comes up, in real-time!



- Take this information back to our fearless leaders to educate them on what moral distress is because oftentimes we experience it, but we can't name it, and it's similar to the term of burnout.
- Do self-care plans with my supervisors directly as a preventive measure - What happens if you're feeling some of these triggers? What are you going to do? What does your support system look like? I look for it.
- Share the information, especially from the [1-page resource](#) about moral distress. When I looked at this, it felt like there was finally a name for what we have all been feeling!
- Conduct an organizational-wide survey to gather information on level of moral distress and help determine what the organization could do to address it
- Challenge myself to think on an individual level for workers. Try to understand what could create moral distress for them while recognizing that it's a subjective experience for everyone. Consider how to prepare ourselves to be aware of, recognize, and identify what those individual factors might be on the personal level.
- Seek out things like this for myself and those I work with while we wait for our system to adjust to meet the needs of people.

