

Fact sheet: Moral challenges, moral distress, & moral injury

Explore the impact of moral challenges and distress on emotions, behaviours, and beliefs, and discover ways to heal and reclaim your sense of purpose

Sometimes you are exposed to situations that challenge your sense of right and wrong. These experiences can vary in how long they last and how intense they feel. They can stir up feelings that range from mild moral frustration to more serious moral injury.

Understanding moral challenges

- A moral challenge might cause **moral frustration**, such as worrying about the state of the world. Usually, this feeling does not affect you too deeply or last for very long.
- **Moral distress** can bring up emotions like anger, sadness, and guilt, although it rarely has a lasting negative effect. Being lied to or having something stolen might cause moral distress.
- A **potentially psychologically traumatic experience** can be a singular event or an ongoing situation. It is a rare but intense violation of your deeply held moral beliefs. Many PPTs are high-stakes scenarios that can create long-standing challenges in how you see yourself or other people.

Types of potentially psychologically traumatic experiences

PPTs can happen in different ways, such as:

- **Transgressions of the self** involve doing (or not doing) something you think is right.
- **Transgressions of others** happen when someone else's actions or inactions go against your morals.
- **Betrayals** occur when people or institutions you trust let you down.

Examples of potentially psychologically traumatic experiences

Things that might be considered PPTEs include:

- Seeing something harmful or immoral happen and being unable to stop it.
- Experiencing misconduct from a trusted person or institution.
- Feeling unsupported by leadership after a major event that went against your beliefs.
- Carrying out orders you believe are immoral.
- Feeling like you should have done something to prevent someone's death or injury.
- Witnessing suffering in others caused by actions that were committed by you or someone else.

Signs of moral injury

After a PPTe, you might notice changes in your emotions, behaviours, and social life — perhaps even your beliefs. These could include:

- Feeling exhausted or disconnected from your work and the people around you.
- Feelings of shame, guilt, anger, or hopelessness.
- A sense of betrayal or injustice.
- Loss of purpose or sense of identity.
- Having difficulty concentrating.
- Losing trust in yourself or others.
- Isolating or feeling cut off.
- Blaming yourself.
- Struggling with your spiritual or existential beliefs.
- Self-sabotaging, self-harming behaviours, like using alcohol or drugs to cope.

What can help?

If this sounds familiar and you think you are experiencing a moral injury, here are some steps you can take:

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- Write down your thoughts and reflect on the values that matter to you.
 - Talk to people you trust, like colleagues, family members, spiritual advisors, peer supporters or your friends.
 - Seek help from a mental health professional.
 - Learn more about moral injury within your community (e.g., first response, health care, military).

Resources

If you are interested in learning more about moral injury – particularly among essential service workers – you can read:

- A Guide to Moral Injury (<https://www.moralinjuryguide.ca/>)
- Organizational recommendations for supporting and enhancing health care provider mental health (<https://healthcaresalute-soinsdesantesalute.com/resources/organizational-recommendations/>)
- Covid Trauma Response Working Group Rapid Guidance Moral Injury in Healthcare Workers Associated with COVID-19 (https://www.traumagroup.org/_files/ugd/95d7e1_70fe0bc417df4e6cbcb77385ec4db87a.pdf)