

Moral Distress and Moral Outrage

Moral distress is the pain or anguish affecting the mind, body or relationships in response to a situation in which the person is aware of a moral problem, acknowledges moral responsibility, and makes a moral judgment about the correct action; yet, as a result of real or perceived constraints, participates in perceived moral wrongdoing.

When moral distress cannot be relieved and integrity cannot be restored, moral or ethical outrage may ensue. Moral outrage has been described broadly as anger provoked by a real or perceived violation of an ethical standard such as fairness, respect, or beneficence.^{2,3} Pike ⁴(p351) describes moral outrage as “characterized by energy-draining frustration, anger, disgust, and powerlessness.”

Moral outrage, perceived as justified anger, is primarily directed toward another individual or group, rarely toward oneself. may feel frustrated at not being able to achieve the desired outcome for a patient and blame other clinicians or specialists for their inability to achieve their goals. Similarly, in some instances, the anger or outrage is directed toward the administration of the institution

a moral residue may persist in response to the ethical values that were not fully upheld but are highly valued

clinicians should distinguish between moral outrage that is grounded in principled discernment and action from an impulsive, unreflected emotional reaction that lacks sufficient grounding in ethical values or standards.

Ungrounded moral outrage can be disturbing and detrimental to all parties involved. When deeply held values are at stake, absolutism, either/or thinking, power struggles, and blaming or disconnection can arise.

With the nervous system stuck on high alert, the chronic activation of the stress response can arguably lead to depletion of vital energy, physical and emotional symptoms, unprofessional behaviors, and erosion of teamwork and patient centeredness. It can also lead to apathy when the person shuts down and becomes numb and morally mute. Bird ⁷(p2) says, “people are morally mute when they fail to defend their ideals and when they cave in too easily and do not bargain vigorously for positions they judge to be right.”

The sense of moral outrage can become contagious and, if unexamined, can exacerbate differences and fuel separation rather than connection and cooperation.

For moral outrage to be principled, one must cultivate the conditions for wisdom, empathy, and compassion to arise. The ability to perceive the situation and experience of the other and to attune to it allows us to experience moral outrage about our own circumstances and the circumstances of others, without being overwhelmed by it.⁸ Discernment, inquiry, and self-effacement are essential to determine the right and best response to these situations.⁹ Discerning

the right response invites an appraisal of one's mental and emotional stability to ground one's responses on a foundation of clarity and nonreactivity.

Principled moral outrage is grounded in a state of mental and emotional stability in which anger and distress are modulated and action is compassionate. In this sense, compassion is a rigorous, balanced stance of a “strong back” that allows one to be clear, nonreactive, courageous, and principled in the midst of the most challenging circumstances and a “soft front” of open heartedness, kindness, and empathy leading to compassion.

In principled moral outrage, separation of self from other dissolves, and the interconnection among all beings becomes primary. Action arises from the recognition that harm to one being constitutes harm to all beings.

If one overlooks or rejects such opportunities to act individually and collectively, one may be inadvertently participating in acts that are morally unjustified and in so doing give legitimacy to the act and contribute to individual and collective harms. Similarly, an insidious apathy and powerlessness can ultimately undermine individual and collective agency, integrity, and trust.

A hallmark of principled moral outrage is an uncompromising commitment to uphold the highest ethical values and principles and to speak up about violations of these values and principles