Health care workers in all disciplines and venues of care are facing unprecedented challenges as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many report intense feelings of powerlessness or lack of control, and describe a sense of moral distress as they navigate issues that may conflict with their professional values. These feelings can last long beyond the event(s) that originally caused distress.

Ira Bedzow, PhD, director of the Biomedical Ethics and Humanities Program at New York Medical College and Senior Scholar at the Aspen Center for Social Values, offers this framework for examining and reducing moral distress.

## Definitions

Different words are often used to describe moral challenges. It is helpful to understand distinctions between moral distress, moral anxiety, and moral tension as a first step in addressing a challenging situation.

**Moral distress** is the state of anguish or exhaustion caused by a decision that you have made. It involves *looking back* on previous actions.
- Decisions may be active or passive. For instance, *not* making a decision is, in and of itself, a decision that can cause distress.
- Distress that comes from witnessing something (i.e., an event or behavior) usually results from the perception that you could have acted and/or changed the outcome, but decided not to. This perception may be untrue, but can carry moral weight that causes suffering.

**Moral anxiety** is the state of being worried or afraid over a decision that you may have to make *in the future*.
- Anxiety comes from wondering if a future situation will require you to make a decision, and whether that decision will reflect your values – particularly if the anticipated context limits available options.

**Moral tension** is the state of being stretched between multiple options and feeling unsure about which option to pursue. Moral tension occurs in *the present moment.*
- Tension comes from feeling insecure about the available options and the degree to which you are able to make a decision based on your values.

**Tips:**
- Use the language of moral "challenge" rather than "dilemma." A dilemma is defined as a situation with no satisfactory solution, whereas a challenge can be overcome (even if only partially).
- When considering the cause of moral anguish, identify whether the impact exists in the past (causing distress), present (causing tension), or future (causing anxiety). While the tools to alleviate the anguish may be similar, the posture you take may be different.
- When facing a moral challenge that seems foreign or unprecedented, look to other situations or experiences in your life that you have successfully navigated, and try to identify similarities. These situations need not be limited to health care.
  - Recognizing similarities between your current situation and previous experiences prevents compartmentalization and mental discomfort.
  - This technique also allows you to apply strategies that worked in prior situations and find solutions that you may not have otherwise considered.

## The Three-Questions Framework

When facing a moral challenge, exploring these three questions can provide clarity:

| What am I experiencing? | What do I want to do with it? | How do I approach it? |
|---|---|---|
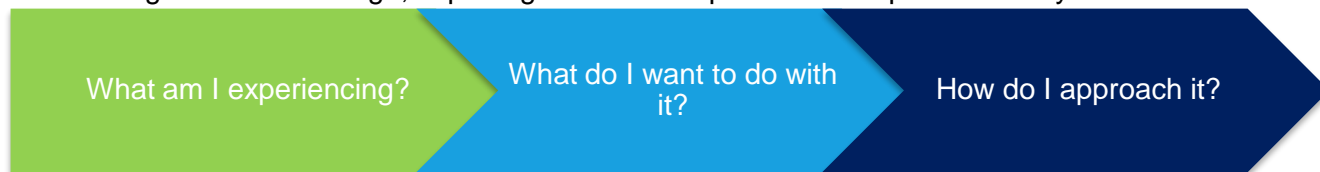
**Ask yourself: What am I experiencing?**
- Giving something a name allows you to categorize it in a familiar way. This can provide a sense of control and remove some fear of the unknown.
- Taking big experiences and examining their component parts makes it easier to comprehend and manage.
- Finding what aspects of the experience are similar to and different than others will allow for familiarity.

*"It may feel as if the COVID-19 pandemic is wholly new and different from anything you have experienced. But breaking it down and identifying how the different components relate to previous challenges can anchor your experience to something more familiar. An analogy is the color green. It is not the same as the colors that form it – blue and yellow – but one can understand where green fits on the color spectrum by considering how it relates to blue and yellow."*

**Ask yourself: What do I want to do with it?**
- This is a personal question, rather than an abstract one. Values entail choices. Instead of framing your response to the situation as an obligation based on social or environmental norms, examine how your values intersect with those norms. Inserting your perspective provides a choice to act based on what you *want* to do, rather than what you *should* do.
- This is an empowering question: It's actionable; the choice you make will be one you can and want to do.
- This is an individualized question: Your plan will need to account for your own strengths and limitations.

*"Throwing yourself into the question allows you to put yourself into the answer. Your response to the challenge will come out of who you are, instead of being imposed on who you are."*

**Ask yourself: How do I approach it?**
- This is a question based on where you are and what you can accomplish. Exploring how to approach the moral challenge helps you understand how best to implement your choices.
- Your approach should reflect the idea that each experience or situation will demand specific skills, tools, or frames of reference based on what it is and what you want to do with it (questions 1 and 2 in the three-question framework). For example, your approach will differ if the distressing situation demands one major decision or a series of decisions over time.

*"Make sure your approach to addressing the moral challenge aligns with the "what I want to do with it" question, and that you have tools in your toolbox that are appropriate to your strategy."*

This three-question approach relieves moral distress by:

- Making you aware of realistic expectations: What you are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic differs from prior situations; therefore, previous expectations about behaviors and outcomes may be unrealistic for now. Recognizing this can reduce distress by allowing you to focus on more achievable decisions and/or outcomes – preventing the feeling that you are falling short.
- Making you aware of more and better options: You are no longer stuck in a dilemma of choosing two bad choices or an "all or nothing" approach. You can identify many different options for what might be possible. This provides hope and an opportunity to act on your values, rather than feeling locked in an untenable situation.

*"Before COVID-19, health care providers had certain expectations about the quality and outcomes of the care they provided. COVID-19 has changed the environment. If clinicians and administrators do not change their expectations to match the realities of the current environment, they will automatically feel as if they have failed. This feeling of failure will stick with them longer than any sense of success that they have had."*

### Avoid Rationalizations

When faced with a moral challenge that causes tension, it may seem easier to ask, "What should be done?" rather than "What do I want to do?". However, avoiding the question that probes what you *want to do* risks allowing you to rationalize (i.e., creating reasons for not acting or justifying conclusions that you have already made about your role). Common rationalizations include, "Nothing can be done about this," "This is too big an issue for me to impact," or "It is not my job to do this." By jumping to these foregone conclusions, you lose the opportunity to name the issue, break it down to its smaller components, and determine what you might be able to do – and what you *choose* to do. Challenging yourself to recognize and confront these rationalizations will empower you to act on your values.

Use the worksheet on the following pages to think through your own source of moral distress.

## Step 1: Tell your story: Describe the moral challenge

Briefly describe the presenting problem – without analysis, simply lay out the issue in a few sentences.

## Step 2: Determine the temporal aspect of your challenge: past, future, or present

→ Moral Distress: a state of anguish or exhaustion brought on by a decision *already made* (passive or active decision)

→ Moral Anxiety: a state of being worried or afraid of a decision that you may have to make *in the future*

→ Moral Tension: a state of being conflicted by different options *in the present* and not knowing which to pursue

## Step 3: Use the three-questions framework: address the challenge

1. What am I experiencing?

2. What do I want to do with it?

Depending on whether the experience is tied to the past, present, or future, consider if you want to change is a) your actions, b) the results of previous actions, or c) how you think or feel your actions/options.

3. How can I approach it?

It can be helpful to consider all the options available, starting with extremes and then working towards more balanced approaches. Then assess how these options fit with your personal and professional capabilities and limitations, as well as organizational or environmental factors.

## For More Information

Learn more about resiliency and coping with the stress of COVID-19:
→ Visit CAPC's COVID-19 Rapid Response Resources Toolkit https://www.capc.org/toolkits/covid-19-response-resources/
→ Listen to Dr. Ira Bedzow discuss his practical framework for addressing moral challenges experienced by the healthcare workforce during the pandemic https://www.capc.org/events/recorded-webinars/how-am-i-supposed-to-feel-about-this-addressing-moral-distress-caused-by-covid-19/

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