

Virtual Learning Together Series Huddle Recap

Addressing Moral Stressors and Moral Injury in Service Providers during COVID-19

Thursday October 7, 2021

Takeaways

When potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs), such as those prompted during the COVID-19 pandemic, lead to enduring psychological, social and spiritual harm, with adverse impacts on mental health, relationships and quality of life, a moral injury has been sustained.

Moral stressors are an innate part of living through COVID-19, as such, organizations need to maximize protective factors to PMIEs to minimize the risk of moral injury. This requires a holistic approach involving an individual, team, organizational, community and government level response.

Recap

MaryAnn Notarianni is the Vice President, Knowledge Mobilization at the recently established Centre of Excellence on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). MaryAnn oversees initiatives to support the application of research evidence and the implementation of evidence-based practices to improve supports and services for Veterans, and their families across Canada. She also provides leadership to the Centre's growing "Network of Networks" to ensure the expertise of lived and living experience, valued equally alongside technical expertise, is guiding the Centre's work.

Fardous Hosseiny is the Deputy CEO and Vice President of Research and Public Policy at the Centre of Excellence on PTSD and Related Mental Health Conditions (CoE), located at the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre in Ottawa. His research focuses on strategic policy issues related to mental health system transformation, parity legislation, Veterans and their Families mental health, substance use and addiction and mental health for newcomers and underrepresented groups.

Introduction to Moral Injury

- Moral injury (MI) was first identified and studied in the Military and Veteran context for those who exhibited similar symptoms to PTSD but did not meet diagnostic criteria. There has since been an evolving body of literature exploring MI amongst healthcare workers and frontline staff.

- Many definitions for MI exist and are evolving. Among the most cited are from Shay (1994) and Litz et al (2009) that describe moral injury as *the psychological, social and spiritual impact of events involving betrayal or transgression of one's own deeply held moral beliefs and values occurring in high stakes situations*, where moral transgressions are defined as:
 - Those that involve people (deliberately or unwillingly) doing or failing to do things themselves.
 - Being exposed directly or indirectly to transgressions on the part of someone else, or potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs).

A Continuum of Moral Stressors and Associated Harms

- The continuum of moral stressors and associated harms ranges from the more commonly experienced, moral challenges and stressors, to the more severe, PMIEs which can lead to moral injury.
- A distinction between MI and moral frustration or distress is that those with MI are more likely to see themselves as marked by the experience and define people in relation to the PMIE.
- PMIEs have a severe, distinct impact on mental wellbeing and can cause more severe psychosocial harms that can impact someone's daily activities, relationships and function.
- The pandemic has exposed us to a full range of moral stressors, which for some, could be considered PMIEs, including:
 - Less severe moral challenges of witnessing the behaviour of other people that we consider wrong (i.e., hoarding of food/toiletries, breaking physical distancing, etc.)
 - More severe moral stressors faced by healthcare workers include:
 - Putting oneself in harm's way
 - Shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE)
 - Inadvertently spreading the disease to friends and family
 - Witnessing the suffering of patients arising from delays in non-essential medical procedures

- The need to discontinue face-to-face psychotherapy for patients with mental health concerns
- Discharging clients earlier than recommended
- Not all morally challenging events or situations lead to moral distress or injury, some can lead to post-traumatic growth, which includes improved psychological resilience, increased self-esteem, compassion and engagement, because of the prompt for self-reflection and new insights

Addressing Moral Injury in Health and Social Service Settings

- Moral stressors are an innate part of living through COVID-19, as such, organizations need to maximize protective factors
- Managing PMIEs at work involves a whole-organization approach. At an organizational level, this can include protecting workers from chronic stress and having team leaders in place who provide strong leadership and establish cohesive teams with high morale. At the individual level, one can minimize the risk of MI in ways such as accessing psychoeducational material about moral stressors and moral injury, and attending to various forms of self-care.
- The community and government also play a role in mitigating MI. The pandemic has placed a spotlight on overburdened or inadequate systems and public policies (ex. worsening opioid crisis during pandemic) which can lead to MI.

Resources for Further Learning

- [A Guide to Moral Injury](#)
- [Racial Inequities and Moral Distress: A Supplement](#)

About the Virtual Learning Together Series Visit the Healthcare Excellence Canada [website](#).

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