

Nurturing Psychological Health: Understanding moral distress and embracing self-compassion in healthcare

By Orlana Bourgoïn, Workplace Mental Wellness Practitioner



As healthcare providers, being empathic and compassionate is the cornerstone of our profession, with most entering the profession to help others. However, as healthcare providers, we can face complex situations that tug at our moral fibers. These are the types of scenarios that conflict with our values, present ethical dilemmas, challenge us mentally, or prevent us from performing our jobs in alignment with our own professional values. This can lead to what we call “moral distress,” a topic that deserves our attention and understanding.

Understanding moral distress

Moral distress is not a sign of weakness; it reflects our strong commitment to the highest standards of care, even when external constraints prevent us from acting accordingly. This distress can, for example, occur when we face situations where our sense of the right course of action conflicts with what a patient wants (e.g., MAID, DNR, alternative medicine, or futile, life-prolonging efforts). Other causes of this distress can include:

- **Insufficient resources:** Lack of necessary staff, equipment, or time to provide optimal care.
- **Power imbalances:** Hierarchical dynamics that limit the ability to advocate for patients or influence decision-making.
- **Role ambiguity:** Unclear job responsibilities or conflicting expectations about one's role in patient care.
- **Unrealistic expectations:** Pressure to meet impractical standards or demands from patients, families, or the healthcare system.
- **Systemic issues:** Structural problems within the healthcare system, such as policies, regulations, and organizational culture, that hinder the provision of quality care.
- **Legal constraints:** Laws and regulations that restrict the types of care or interventions that can be provided.
- **Ethical dilemmas:** Situations that present conflicting ethical principles, making it challenging to decide on the best course of action.
- **Cultural and social factors:** Differences in cultural or social values between healthcare providers and patients that lead to conflicting expectations and decisions.

The impact of moral distress on healthcare professionals

Experiencing moral distress can have a significant impact on our psychological health and well-being and, over time, can lead to burnout, empathic strain (previously called compassion fatigue), and even contribute to mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression. Moreover, it can erode our sense of professional satisfaction and

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commitment to our roles, affecting not only ourselves, but the quality of care we are able to provide to our patients.

Signs of moral distress:

- Emotional exhaustion
- Feelings of frustration or anger
- Decreased job satisfaction
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased absenteeism
- Feelings of guilt or shame

Moral injury is a deep wound to one's conscience caused by witnessing or participating in actions that go against personal morals. Since empathy forms the basis for moral behaviour, empathy-related factors are likely to influence the development of moral injury. Moral injury can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and alienation. For instance, healthcare professionals might experience moral injury when they feel their care to patients is impacted due to a lack of resources (e.g. staffing shortages, medication/treatment options unavailable, etc.). Healthcare leaders are not immune and can also suffer moral injury for similar reasons as described above.

Moral outrage is a response of frustration, anger, disgust, and powerlessness when real or perceived moral/ethical principles are violated (e.g., fairness, respect, or beneficence). This can motivate individuals to advocate for change, but unchecked outrage can escalate into conflict. For example, healthcare professionals may feel outraged when they see a patient enduring extreme suffering, especially when treatments are failing. Yet, the family insists on continuing life-sustaining measures at all costs. Moral outrage isn't limited to healthcare and can occur in various aspects of our daily lives. For example, our constant exposure to news and media can lead to significant moral/ethical dilemmas that can create a sense of violation that escalates into uncontrolled moral outrage.

Moral apathy sets in when individuals become indifferent or purposely ignore the suffering of others. This might happen when a healthcare professional turns a blind eye to unsafe behaviours among colleagues.

Research from Steen et al. (2022) uncovered that beyond these reactions, there's a call for healthcare professionals to develop strong moral character and integrity, acting in line with ethical values. This involves training the mind and emotions to uphold these values and navigate ethical dilemmas with compassion, humility, and patience. While current bioethics models focus on principles like autonomy and justice, there's a need to cultivate ethics as a practice to uncover biases and promote moral sensitivity and relationality.

Origins and impact of self-compassion

Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT), introduced in the early 2000s, blends cognitive therapy, evolutionary science, attachment theory, neuroscience, and Buddhist philosophy. It helps individuals overcome shame and self-criticism by promoting a kind and supportive inner dialogue. CFT emphasizes self-compassion, rooted in natural

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caregiving instincts found in mammals, enhanced by human language and reasoning. Compassion Mind Training (CMT), often paired with CFT, uses techniques to build self-compassion and improve well-being, showing success in reducing psychological distress (Irons, Herriot-Maitland, 2020; Savari et al., 2021; Leboeuf et al., 2022).

While many providers show great compassion towards others, they often struggle with self-criticism. It's important to recognize that self-talk influences our interactions and workplace environment. Self-compassion is vital for resilience and well-being, involving treating ourselves with the same kindness and understanding we offer friends. Dr. Kristin Neff explains it as embracing oneself and imperfections to gain resilience (Neff & Germer, 2018, p.1).

Embracing self-compassion means acknowledging our humanity and recognizing our fallibility in a complex healthcare system. It involves being kind to ourselves during perceived failures and understanding we are doing our best with available resources. Cultivating mindfulness allows us to observe our thoughts and emotions without judgment, allowing for self-reflection and self-care and fostering emotional balance in adversity.

How to practice self-compassion

Some people misunderstand self-compassion as "hokey" or self-indulgent, but research shows it has significant psychological benefits. Studies have demonstrated that self-compassion can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression while improving overall well-being and resilience. It helps individuals recover from setbacks more quickly and maintain healthier relationships. Far from being a superficial practice, self-compassion is a practical and effective approach grounded in scientific evidence that fosters emotional strength and a balanced perspective on life's challenges.

Self-compassion consists of three essential components, each of which plays a crucial role in nurturing an empathetic attitude towards oneself and consciously acting to provide some comfort.

- 1. Self-kindness:** This involves treating oneself with warmth, understanding, and patience, especially in moments of difficulty or failure. Instead of harsh self-criticism or judgment, practicing self-kindness means offering oneself the same care and support one would extend to a close friend facing a similar situation. It's about embracing imperfection and recognizing that everyone makes mistakes or faces challenges at some point.
 - a. Positive self-talk:** Replace self-critical thoughts with gentle and encouraging self-talk. Speak to yourself as you would to a friend in need.
 - b. Self-care:** Engage in activities that nourish your physical, emotional, and mental well-being, such as taking breaks, exercising, getting enough sleep, or engaging in hobbies.
 - c. Self-compassion exercises:** Dedicate time to practices specifically designed to cultivate self-compassion, such as writing yourself a compassionate letter or creating a self-compassion mantra.
- 2. Common humanity:** This component emphasizes recognizing that personal struggles and suffering are part of the shared human experience. Rather than feeling

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isolated or alone in one's pain, acknowledging common humanity involves understanding that others also experience similar emotions and challenges. It fosters a sense of connection and solidarity with others, reducing feelings of isolation and shame.

- a. Connect with others:** Share your struggles and experiences with trusted friends, family members, or support groups. Recognize that you are not alone in facing challenges.
 - b. Practice empathy:** Extend empathy towards others who are going through difficult times, recognizing their humanity and inherent worth.
 - Reflect on shared experiences:** Remind yourself that setbacks and hardships are universal aspects of the human condition, and that experiencing them does not make you weak or inadequate.
- 3. Mindfulness:** Mindfulness is about being present in the moment without judgment, accepting one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences with openness and non-reactivity. It involves observing one's inner experiences without getting swept away by them or becoming overly identified with them. Mindfulness allows individuals to cultivate self-awareness, recognize their emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them, and respond to themselves with greater compassion and understanding.
 - a. Mindful awareness:** Practice observing your thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations without judgment or attachment. This can be done through mindfulness meditation, body scans, or simply paying attention to the present moment.
 - b. Self-compassion breaks:** When you notice self-critical thoughts or difficult emotions arising, pause and acknowledge them with kindness and understanding. Remind yourself that suffering is a part of life and offer yourself words of comfort.
 - c. Stay present:** Focus on the here and now, rather than dwelling on past mistakes or worrying about the future. Cultivate an attitude of acceptance towards whatever arises in the present moment.

New studies have shown that self-compassion correlates with decreased anxiety and stress levels, lowered risk of empathetic strain and burnout, and potentially acts as a protective factor (Hashem & Zeinoun, 2020). Consistent practice of these strategies can gradually cultivate greater self-compassion, leading to improved emotional resilience, self-esteem, and overall well-being.

Remember that self-compassion is a skill that develops over time with patience, persistence, and gentle self-care. Let's be honest for a moment—practicing self-compassion is often easier said than done, just like many other things, but, like any new skill, it requires intentional practice to develop. And yes, expect bumps in the road; view it as a journey toward self-discovery and growth.

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Food for thought

I'm excited to share two important questions with you to spark your curiosity and encourage your active participation. I'm genuinely eager to hear your thoughts and insights. Please take a moment to respond to these questions by [clicking here](#) or scan the QR Code below to join our collective effort:

- 1. Reflect on a recent situation where you experienced moral distress in your healthcare practice. What were the conflicting values or ethical dilemmas involved, and how did you navigate them? Consider how practicing self-compassion could have influenced your response and emotional well-being in that moment.*
- 2. Think about a time when you showed compassion towards a patient or colleague in need. Now, reflect on whether you extended the same level of kindness and understanding to yourself during challenging situations. How might prioritizing self-compassion in your daily interactions with yourself enhance your resilience and overall well-being in the healthcare setting?*



Join me in fostering a positive work environment by sharing your uplifting experiences and shining moments at KHSC. Whether it's a colleague's supportive gesture or a heartwarming encounter with a stranger, let's spread positivity by celebrating the good in our daily lives. Share your stories by [clicking here](#).

Prepare for daily doses of mental wellness inspiration with Actions for Happiness, weekly shout-outs to your colleagues, empowering quotes, and engaging discussions to start your day on a positive note! Let's celebrate every accomplishment, no matter how small, because it's often the little things that have the biggest impact. Look for daily inspiration on [KHSC Now Staff Central](#) and explore more content, tips, and resources on Mindful Moments.

Thank you for your commitment to cultivating a workplace that prioritizes the mental health and well-being of every staff member. Together, we can continue to make KHSC a place where everyone thrives.

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