

# Recognizing

Every teacher will respond to challenging situations differently. Faced with the same situation, some teachers may experience moral distress, while others might not. Several factors might influence how you experience moral distress, or how intensely the moral distress is felt. These factors include:

- Past experiences with similarly distressing events
- The value(s) being compromised
- The ability of protective practices to minimize feelings of distress (e.g., self-care, moral resilience, self-reflection, etc.)
- The ability to engage with others to navigate the morally distressing event collectively.

## Physical Symptoms

- Difficulty sleeping
- Fatigue or Lethargy
- Headaches
- Sudden weight gain or loss
- More susceptible to illness (e.g., colds, flu)
- Physical pain or tension
- Gastrointestinal disturbances or food sensitivities

## Emotional Symptoms

- Anger
- Fear
- Guilt
- Shame
- Resentment
- Cynical attitudes or outlook
- Emotionally overwhelmed or emotional outbursts
- Emotional shutdown or apathy

## Psychological Symptoms

- Brain fog
- Difficulty with cognitive tasks
- Forgetfulness
- Inflexible, black and white, or rigid thinking (e.g., the need to be "right")
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Loss of Self-worth

# What does moral distress look like?

## Social Symptoms

- Shaming others for their personal choices
- De-personalizing or dehumanizing thoughts or attitudes
- Avoidance or indifference to people or social gatherings
- Self-isolation, disconnecting from the important people in our lives (e.g., colleagues, friends, family, community) or not maintaining important relationships
- Violating boundaries of other people (e.g., over-involvement or disengagement)
- Increased aggressive attitudes or behaviours towards other people (e.g., "taking things out" on others, especially those who have less authority)

## Spiritual Symptoms

- Loss or reduced sense of meaning
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Feelings of grief
- Crisis of faith or loss of faith
- Less motivation to engage in spiritual practices (e.g., prayer, meditation, worship)

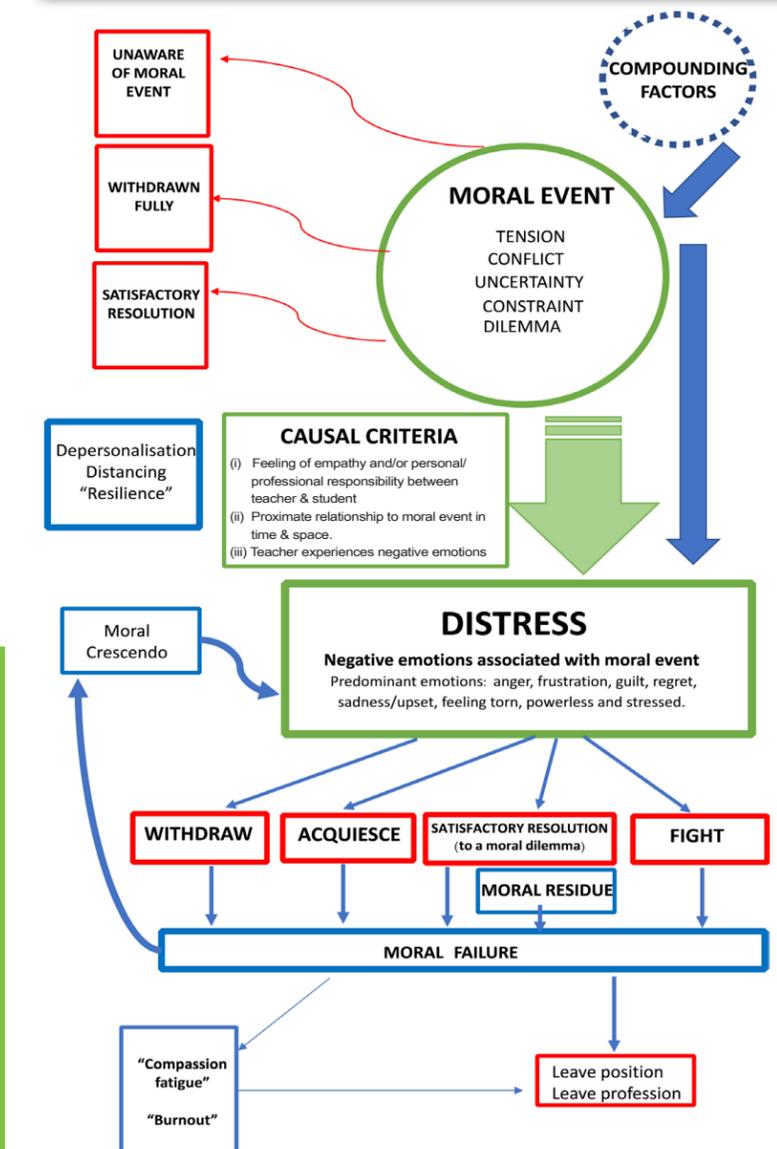
# Defining

Moral distress is an umbrella term for the stress responses (e.g., the physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, or social/relational symptoms) workers may experience in relation to an event, decision, or situation that challenges deeply held personal or professional values.<sup>1</sup>

It describes the various harms that result from feeling morally compromised: when people are unable to make decisions or act according to their core values, including avoiding wrongdoing or harm.<sup>2</sup>

In critical situations, moral distress might be felt more acutely or more often.<sup>2</sup>

**Experiencing moral distress is not an indicator of a person's suitability for the teaching profession, their moral character, or personal capabilities.**



\* Adapted from Morley, Bradbury-Jones & Ives (2022)

Note that these are only *indicators* of moral distress - this resource is not intended as a diagnostic tool. While exhibiting one or more of the above symptoms *may* indicate that someone is experiencing moral distress, it does *not* constitute a diagnosis. Any teacher experiencing severe physical or psychological symptoms is urged to seek support from a medical practitioner.

# Moral Distress

# Coping



Begin by trying to address the source of the moral distress. If the moral distress cannot be eliminated, ...

**1) Reflect on the experience**  
The first step in coping with moral distress is understanding where it originated in the first place. Teachers should reflect on what circumstances made them feel morally constrained and note the specific factors that are exacerbating the moral issue. Teachers should then clarify how the situation is presenting physical and emotional symptoms. Finally, the teacher should outline any past or current strategies they might have been or are using to cope with moral distress up to this point.

**2) Evaluate the situation**  
Teachers need to identify the important elements of the situation - what was the desired outcome? What elements of the situation are within and outside of the teacher's control? This evaluation helps to inform next steps and future strategies that can be implemented to cope with moral distress.

**3) Develop new strategies to regulate distress**  
Examining elements that are within the teacher's control allows for the development of coping strategies that can impact future circumstances. How can you amplify the impact of controlled variables? Are you able to let go of the factors you cannot change? Think about the desired outcome: can the factors you control be leveraged to move towards that outcome? Is it possible to remove any barriers that are in the way of you controlling other variables?

**4) Strengthen helpful relationships and other supports**  
Many teachers find it helpful to maintain a trusting relationship with someone on the school leadership team. It can also help to have a colleague who is experiencing similar circumstances. Consider how you are *giving* to these relationships and how you are *drawing* on the relational capital: maintaining a healthy, mutually-beneficial relationship helps to ensure longevity.  
Focus on maintaining other avenues of support such as family and friends, who can offer emotional and moral support even if they aren't directly involved in your workplace.

**Create Environments that Resist Moral Distress**  
**Create Ethical Work Environments** by encouraging school leaders to focus on developing an organizational culture, policies, and workload distribution that support teachers making moral decisions as much as possible. This also facilitates empowering teachers to work through moral dilemmas collaboratively.  
**Setting, communicating, and maintaining healthy personal boundaries** is an effective way to protect your well-being, physical space time, and energy.<sup>1</sup> These boundaries set teachers up with a strong foundation of mental health that makes one more resistant to the impacts of moral distress.  
**Cultivate Moral Resilience** by responding to ethical challenges through a lens of preserving integrity and minimizing suffering.

**Advocacy**  
Individuals can restore a sense of power (and therefore begin addressing moral distress) by:

- **Engaging in union activism**  
The Alberta Teachers' Association is committed to engaging with its members to advocate for improvements in classroom conditions. Teachers' involvement in those processes, through committees, ATA-sponsored events and other means, is vital in advancing these interests.
- **Forwarding political messaging**  
Providing government with consistent and targeted political messaging on these issues is helpful in changing the funding framework. Many of the issues causing moral distress in teachers stem from chronic underfunding of the system. Advocating to government leaders to change how schools are funded is the first step in alleviating pressure points in meeting student needs.

## Advice for Leaders

**Be Aware of Moral Distress In Your Building**  
Observe staff members for signs and symptoms of moral distress. Be attentive to these situations and don't ignore them when they arise! Consider "moral check-ups": would your staff benefit by having a time to meet in an informal setting and "vent"?

**Understand Moral Distress**  
Staff benefit from leaders who recognize and validate their moral distress. Using active listening techniques will help teachers feel heard and understood. Avoid rebutting or arguing - the nature of moral distress is that the teacher has encountered an ethical issue that cannot be resolved. Moral distress can't be "reasoned away".

**Engage in Reflective Assessment of Workplace Culture**  
Try to predict where moral distress might arise before it presents as symptoms in fellow staff members. Proactive assessments allow you to implement mitigation strategies or support systems before moral distress exacerbates.

**Promote Ethical Work Environments**  
Debriefing ethical issues as they arise, or setting up team-based discussions to address situations of moral distress, demonstrate your acknowledgement and comprehension of the challenges staff face. Encouraging respectful communication and active listening is also helpful.

**Create Opportunities for Conversation**  
Promote the idea of having a defined space for staff to engage in moral conversations, such as grade/team meetings or whole-staff meetings (where appropriate). Make a point of asking teachers how they're doing and proactively offer resources or supports that might be helpful for the situation they're experiencing.

## Citations

Alberta Health Services. (2022, August). *Responding to moral distress with reflective debriefing. Let's Talk Moral Distress Resource Guide*. <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/about/msd/ahs-msd-ahs-moral-distress-resource-guide.pdf>

BC Public Health Services Authority Ethics Service. (2023, June). *A Resource & Reflection Guide for Moral Distress Resource. Moral Distress Resource Guide*. <http://www.phsa.ca/our-services-site/Documents/Moral%20Distress%20Resource%20Guide%20FINAL%20%28June%202023%29%20%282%29.pdf>

Morley, G., Bradbury-Jones, C., & Ives, J. (2022). The moral distress model: An empirically informed guide for moral distress interventions. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 31, 1309–1326. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15988>

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