



AACN Public Policy

Position Statement

MORAL DISTRESS

Issue

Moral distress is a serious problem in nursing. It results in significant physical and emotional stress, which contributes to nurses' feelings of loss of integrity and dissatisfaction with their work environment. Studies demonstrate that moral distress is a major contributor to nurses leaving the work setting and profession. It affects relationships with patients and others and can affect the quality, quantity, and cost of nursing care.

Definition

Moral distress occurs when:

- You know the ethically appropriate action to take, but are unable to act upon it.
- You act in a manner contrary to your personal and professional values, which undermines your integrity and authenticity.

Evidence

Compelling evidence indicates that moral distress has a negative impact on the healthcare work environment. In one study, 1 in 3 nurses experienced moral distress.¹ In another, nearly half the nurses studied left their units or nursing altogether because of moral distress.²

Additional studies have shown:

- Among 760 nurses, nearly 50% had acted against their consciences in providing care to terminally ill patients.³
- Nurses lose their capacity for caring, avoid patient contact, and fail to give good physical care as a result of moral distress.¹
- Nurses experience physical and psychological problems as a result of moral distress.⁴⁻¹⁰
- Nurses physically withdraw from the bedside, barely meeting the patient's basic physical needs, or they leave the profession altogether.^{1-2,4-5,11-12}

Summary

Moral distress is a key issue affecting the workplace environment. Research demonstrates that moral distress is a significant cause of emotional suffering among nurses and contributes to loss of nurses from the workforce. Further, it threatens the quality of patient care. In recognition of these harmful effects, the provision of education and tools to address and manage moral distress in the work environment is imperative and will lead to essential improvements in patient care and outcomes.

AACN Policy Position

Moral distress is a critical, frequently ignored, problem in healthcare work environments. Unaddressed, it restricts nurses' ability to provide optimal patient care and to find job satisfaction. AACN asserts that every nurse and every employer are responsible for implementing programs to address and mitigate the harmful effects of moral distress in the pursuit of creating a [healthy work environment](#).

AACN Calls to Action

For Nurses

Every nurse must:

- Recognize and name the experience of moral distress (moral sensitivity).
- Affirm the professional obligation to act and commit to addressing moral distress.
- Be knowledgeable about and use professional and institutional resources to address moral distress, such as:

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- [American Nurses Association Code of Ethics for Nurses](#)
 - [International Council of Nurses Code of Ethics for Nurses](#)
 - [AACN 4 A's to Rise Above Moral Distress Handbook](#)
 - [AACN 4 A's to Rise Above Moral Distress Facilitators Toolkit](#)
- Actively participate in professional activities to expand knowledge and understanding of the impact of moral distress.
 - Develop skill, through the use of mentoring and resources, to decrease moral distress.
 - Implement strategies to accomplish desired changes in the work environment while preserving personal integrity and authenticity.

For Employers

Every organization must:

- Implement interdisciplinary strategies to recognize and name the experience of moral distress.
- Establish mechanisms to monitor the clinical and organizational climate to identify recurring situations that result in moral distress.
- Develop a systematic process for reviewing and analyzing the system issues enabling situations that cause moral distress to occur and for taking corrective action.
- Create support systems that include:
 - Employee assistance programs
 - Protocols for end-of-life care
 - Ethics committees
 - Critical stress debriefings
 - Grief counseling
- Create interdisciplinary forums to discuss patient goals of care and divergent opinions in an open, respectful environment.
- Develop policies that support unobstructed access to resources such as the ethics committees.
- Ensure nurses' representation on institutional ethics committees with full participation in all decision making.
- Provide education and tools to manage and decrease moral distress in the work environment.

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