

Workplace Distress

Staff Wellbeing Access Program

Moral Stress in Healthcare Workers

COVID-19 is an extraordinary event, that the RACF workforce and health provider workforce have never experienced before. As such, we are being asked to do extraordinary things, over long periods of time and for how long, we do not know. We are a tired workforce who continue to show up for our residents, our colleagues, our families and our RACF community.

As providers of care to residents of Aged Care Facilities we have all been extremely challenged throughout the Pandemic. We have all experienced a vast array of emotions not just on ourselves, but also witnessing the impact on our residents, our colleagues, and our families.

We may experience an internal battle between providing care to our residents and then measuring that against keeping our families / loved ones safe from the COVID. We may be challenged on a deeply personal level such as with our morals which have shaped how we provide care. What is now being explored is the impact that occurs when our own morals are tested due to the impact of COVID-19 and the building stress.

Moral stress refers to a “a psychological state (both thoughts and emotions) presenting as anxiety and unrest due to an individual’s uncertainty about his or her ability to fulfill relevant moral obligations”.

A moral stress that may have been experienced for RACF workers could be the sudden change in how care can be provided. We are suddenly faced with limiting ways in how we provide human contact to our residents. We are suddenly asked to limit our human touch so to avoid increased risk of transmission of the virus. As health care providers, we see human touch as a vital part of how we provide care, whether it is showering a resident, helping a resident with a cup of tea or holding a resident’s hand when they are distressed.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions we are suddenly asked to stop the little touches that help define how we deliver care. We do this to protect our residents and our loved ones at home from the virus, but our decision to do this can create a moral stress or moral disharmony internally. How we manage our moral stress is important to ensure that this state of dilemma does not build and impact on our emotional wellbeing in the long term.

A moral stress may become larger over time and how we manage this is critically important. When facing new challenges there are now new ways of supporting you so that you are not alone. As workers we now have options to access support in new and novel ways so that we start our own recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Moral Stress



Signs of Moral Stress:

- Difficulty in getting to sleep, or regular waking through the night and intrusive thoughts.
- Brittleness, short tempered, agitated, and restless
- Increased intake of alcohol to help you cope.
- Increased isolation from family, friends, and social activity
- Feelings of internal disharmony because you have had to change how you provide care to your residents.
- Tired and exhausted

Things that may help with Moral Stress:

- Understanding and talking with your colleagues about moral stress may help make meaning of your experiences rather than dwell on moral emotions such as guilt or shame.
- Learn new strategies which help through traumatic events, such as: relaxation therapy, mindfulness, or meditation.
- Attend to self-care through eating well, exercising, maintaining social connections, and getting sufficient rest.
- Support each other, as colleagues who understand shared experiences.
- Seek professional support if you are feeling distressed or troubled by your experiences and things are not improving for you.
- Attend staff wellbeing activities with your colleagues and remain connected.
- Making it work through social distancing measures – develop a creative list of ways to remain connected, such as morning tea, staff message boards and staff chat forums.

Tips for self-love

- Eat balanced, healthy meals.
- Minimise alcohol intake
- Create a regular sleep routine.
- Increase exercise or walking.
- Reach out to those important to you
- Take time to breathe.
- Learn mindfulness.
- Hug yourself and know you are amazing.

Where to get help:

- Access your Employee Assistance Program: speak to HR or look at your Organisation's employee website or noticeboard.
- Contact HeadtoHealth on 1800 595 212 or <https://headtohealthvic.org.au/>
- Make an appointment to see your G.P. for an emotional wellbeing health check.
- Ask your G.P. to support you to access a counsellor.
- Have a look at the many web-based supports that are available such as Head to Health: <https://headtohealth.gov.au/>
- Reach out to your support network of work colleagues, friends, and family.
- Allow yourself to engage in self-care such as mindfulness, meditation, exercise
- If you are religious talk to your spiritual guide / leader

Website links & resources:

1. HeadtoHealth – <https://headtohealthvic.org.au/> and phone support: 1800 595 212
2. Phoenix Australia - www.phoenixaustralia.org/
3. Beyondblue – www.coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au/
4. Mind Spot – www.mindspot.org.au
5. MoodGym – www.moodgym.com.au
6. Smiling Mind – www.smilingmind.com.au/thrive-inside and smart phone app.