



Controlling Moral Distress

Objective

Moral distress arises in situations where an employee is forced to act contrary to their own values or the rules of the workplace, or where they are not sure of the right course of action. The distress is more intense if challenging situations occur frequently and are not processed at the workplace.

Moral distress is a stress factor that can cause physical symptoms and increase the risk of poor work ability. In the longer term, its management and reduction may be manifested as reduced sickness absences and health risks as well as improved work ability.

The cornerstones of controlling moral distress are establishing an ethical operating culture, identifying ethically distressing situations, and continuous open discussion of challenging situations in the unit. Discussions are especially important, because a lack of dialogue exposes employees not only to distress but also to unethical actions.

Study the ways to control moral distress.

Most measures require dialogue at the organizational, unit, and team levels.

Steps

1. Discuss the values, rules, expectations and wishes of the workplace, as well as ethically distressing situations. It is a good idea to have discussions between the supervisor and the employees at the unit and team levels. Controlling moral distress is the responsibility of the entire work community.
 - After the steps, study the examples and discuss moral distress and how to control it.
 - Reserve a place and time for a discussion, such as in a joint meetings or at the end of a shift.
 - Ethically challenging situations and their solutions should be discussed on an ongoing basis.

2. Set clear objectives and procedures for ethically distressing situations. Discuss the different ways and means of achieving the goals. Agree on acceptable working practices.
3. Ensure an adequate number of employees and clear job descriptions. Discuss the qualitative goals of work, such as the quality of work performance, learning new things, or independent planning of personal tasks.
4. Allow employees the opportunity to influence the planning and implementation of their work, such as the structure of the working day or the order of work tasks. Opportunities to influence work give room for flexibility and improve the possibility of acting ethically and in accordance with personal values.
5. Develop ethical competence. Work experience strengthens the ability to act in ethically distressing situations, but it is good to include ethical competence not only in job orientation but also in personnel training. Situations that require ethical decisions provide an opportunity for learning, and ethical challenges can develop professional skills.
6. Utilize performance appraisals to identify the situations to which the moral distress is related within the work community, the methods available to the work community to manage it, and what kind of competence should be strengthened in the work community.
7. Discuss matters related to moral distress already at the recruitment and job orientation stage.
8. Monitor the effectiveness of controlling moral distress and its impacts.
 - To assess moral distress, you can use the questions in the Mitä kuuluu well-being at work survey related to moral distress and fair decision-making, for example.
 - In the work community, assess the progress made in the development of controlling moral distress and what kinds of impacts have been achieved through the development.

Perspectives on moral distress and discussing it

Examples of situations that cause moral distress

- conflicting expectations and disagreements related to treatment
 - between patients or relatives and care personnel
 - between employees
- inadequate resources, workload, hurry, organization of shifts
- unfair management and decision-making
- unclear work unit rules
- unclarity about the goals, responsibilities, and rights related to work

- insufficient competence or common rules in the work community to face ethically distressing situations
- co-occurrence of other stress factors and moral distress
 - Example: An employee can be heavily invested in their work, but they feel they gain little money or experiences of success in return. The job may provide low opportunities to influence work while placing high demands on the employee.

Example questions for discussing moral distress and its management

- Have ethical principles been formulated in your unit? Is everyone familiar with them?
- Which principles (e.g. professionalism, respect for human dignity, autonomy, responsibility, equality, co-operation) are most important to your unit?
- Does everyone operate according to common principles?
- Are the ethical principles discussed with new employees?
- Is it possible to talk about difficult things and feelings in your unit? Are differing opinions allowed?
- Have there been situations in your unit where the employees have felt that they have been forced to act against their own values? What were the situations like?
- Have the employees encountered situations that have seemed dubious or where they have not known what to do? What were the situations like?
- How often do ethically challenging and distressing situations occur?
- What kind of experiences do employees have of ethically challenging situation where the solution left them feeling good and the resolution felt right? What happened in the situation?