



COMPASSION IN ACTION WEBINAR EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: REFRAMING DISTRESS: WHY MORAL INJURY MATTERS WITH DR. WENDY DEAN

WHAT IS MORAL INJURY?

In this webinar, Dr. Wendy Dean, CEO and co-founder of The Moral Injury of Healthcare, explains that healthcare is at a crisis point:

- 145,000+ healthcare workers left practice between 2021-2022
- Many remaining healthcare workers are over the age of 65 and will soon retire
- The U.S. population is aging and will have growing care needs
- We will be 125k+ physicians short to care for this aging population
- Burnout numbers were high even pre-COVID, with ~40% of the healthcare workforce consistently reporting burnout symptoms, and peaking at 53% in 2023.

Yet burnout alone does not account for healthcare workers' decisions to leave their fields. In her research, Dr. Dean consistently heard: "I knew what I was signing up for - but I had no idea how hard it would be to get patients the care they need." She identified this as moral injury, a term previously used to describe some military members' experiences.

Moral injury is perpetrating, bearing witness to, or failing to prevent acts that violate deeply held values and beliefs. Betrayal by a legitimate authority in a high-stakes situation that transgresses one's deeply held moral beliefs is a particularly painful type of moral injury.

WHAT CAN HEALTH LEADERS DO ABOUT MORAL INJURY?

Financial pressures to prioritize shareholder profit have led to a destabilization of the workforce - and healthcare is not exempt from this. There is less choice for both patients and employees as hospitals consolidate and vertically integrate.

Administrators and clinical caregivers face different challenges but share many of the same goals. Leaders know about the frontline's challenges - but there is no one solution. They've tried many well-intentioned interventions from the corporate sector, like wellness programs, but the healthcare workforce is already resilient. As Dr. Dean notes, we need to fix the roads, not the vehicles.

Leaders need:

- Recognition of their moral and ethical values
- Education and training about moral challenges
- Transparency for their goals
- Recognition of resources and support for their well-being needs
- Opportunities to acknowledge and discuss conflicts in their own values and practice



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Workers need leaders who:

- Embody moral leadership
- Act faithful to their word
- Acknowledge, challenge, address, and resolve moral transgressions
- Consider the moral impact of their behaviors and decisions
- Challenge sources and incidents of moral transgressions

Looking to the future, leaders must work to build a morally-centered organization.

What is a morally centered organization?

Dr. Dean identifies a morally centered organization as one that is:

- Wise, human, and value-based
- Trustworthy
- Mentors the next generation
- Just and courageous enough to stand up to outside forces and to accept feedback without retaliation

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