

## Protection from moral distress: “The knot in your stomach”

### After this huddle, staff should be able to:

- **Identify** how moral distress feels in their daily work.
- **Recognize** that these feelings often come from system barriers (like staffing) rather than personal choice.
- **Discuss** the importance of talking to peers or supervisors after a distressing situation to prevent burnout.

- Before the huddle, review the huddle content and huddle leader notes.
- Have resources ready, such as policies, employee assistance programs, or SafeCare BC resources.
- Choose a scenario that fits your workplace and read it aloud.
- Use the guiding questions to lead the discussion.
- Use huddle leader notes as support while leading the discussion.
- Keep the discussion short to about 5-10 minutes.

### How to run the safety huddle

As the huddle leader, do the following:



### Definitions

Moral distress is the “knot in your stomach” or the guilt you feel when you know the right thing to do for a resident or client, but cannot do it because of obstacles like short staffing, tight schedules, policies, or procedures. It is a common reaction to workplace pressures, not a sign of personal failure. Protecting ourselves from this distress means sharing the burden as a team rather than carrying it alone.

### Scenario for long-term care

Maria is a care aide at a busy care home. Today, her unit is short-staffed. While she is rushing to get residents ready for breakfast, Mrs. Kowalski—who is grieving—grabs her hand and asks, “Can you just sit with me? I’m so lonely.”

Maria knows the right thing to do is stay, but she has five other residents waiting for care. Heartbroken, Maria gives a quick pat on the shoulder and rushes out.

She spends the rest of her shift feeling like a “bad caregiver” and wondering if she should have stayed despite the pressure.

### Guiding questions for long-term care

- In Maria’s position, what could she have said or done that might have helped both her and Mrs. Kowalski in that moment?
- If you saw a colleague looking upset after a similar interaction, what would you say to help them realize it wasn’t their fault?
- How can we support each other during a chaotic shift to remind ourselves we are doing our best with the resources we have?

**Facilitation tip:** Watch for staff who try to act “tough” or dismiss their feelings. Encourage them to admit when a shift is emotionally hard, as “stuffing down” these feelings can lead to burnout.

### Scenario for home care

David is a home health worker with a packed schedule. When he arrives at Mr. Singh’s

home, he finds that Mr. Singh has soiled himself. Cleaning and changing him properly will take far longer than the 30 minutes David has, and his next client is waiting on time-sensitive medication. David rushes through the cleanup. Mr. Singh goes quiet and looks embarrassed. Driving away, David feels angry — like he let someone down because the schedule left him no real choice.



### Guiding questions for home care

- How did the tight schedule force David to make a “least-worst” choice?
- When you are caught between a client’s needs and a scheduling policy, who is the best person to talk to?
- What support do you need from leadership to ensure you don’t carry this anger home with you?

**Facilitation tip:** Listen for specific barriers like “communication” or “scheduling”. If the team identifies a recurring stressor, commit to looking into that workflow after the huddle.

## Huddle leader notes

### 1. Create a safe space:

- Listen, respect all views, and be mindful of others' challenges.
- Guide the discussion to focus on what participants can control.
- Move the conversation from complaints to solutions, strengths, and helpful actions.
- Invite anyone with specific concerns to talk with you after the huddle.

### 2. Key discussion points: Use the objectives and key discussion points below to guide the huddle if needed.

- **It's not just you:** Feeling distressed shows you are a caring professional.
- **Don't suffer in silence:** Talking to a supportive team is the best way to protect your mental health.
- **Leaders have your back:** Management is there to help guide you when resources are tight.

## Additional resources

**SafeCare BC | *Wildfires and moral distress (safety huddle)***: This safety huddle help staff recognize what feelings they might experience during a wildfire crisis event.

**SafeCare BC | *Why people need to feel safe***: This page explores why safety matters and how workplaces can build a stronger foundation of trust, respect, and wellbeing.

**Workplace Strategies for Mental Health | *Respond to those who are emotionally distressed***: Our own emotions, including frustration, guilt or pity can impact our ability to respond to someone in distress. Learn to recognize and manage your reactions on this webpage.

**Alberta Health Services | *Let's Talk Moral Distress (resource guide)***: In this resource guide, you will find information and resources to help support your experience of moral distress, or help you support the moral distress of your colleagues and teams.

**Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment | *Moral Injury Guide***: This guide was designed help to safeguard the wellbeing of public safety personnel from the risk of exposure to potentially morally injurious events.

