

Wellbeing for the Bush

MORAL INJURY

Healthcare workers in rural and remote Australia are committed and passionate about helping others. They often work in small teams with limited resources, far from support systems, while also carrying potential exposure to community trauma. As healthcare workers, most days your commitment and passion carry you through; but sometimes what you feel is right, and what your organisation requires do not align, and your moral code is challenged. This is known as moral injury.

What is moral injury?

Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay first explored moral injury and defined it as “a betrayal of what is right by someone who holds legitimate authority in a high-stakes situation” (Shay 2014), and usually develops through repeated exposure to ethically distressing situations. There are psychological, behavioural, social, and spiritual impacts because you were either perpetrating, failing to prevent, or witnessing acts that rock deeply held personal moral beliefs and expectations (Litz et al. 2009).

Signs you may be experiencing moral injury

Common signs and symptoms include:

Behavioural

Withdrawing, avoiding, increased irritability, overworking to try to compensate, considering leaving your role or profession.

Emotional

Guilt, shame, numbness, powerlessness, or anger after shifts, due to a clinical decision, resource constraints, or leadership decision.

Cognitive

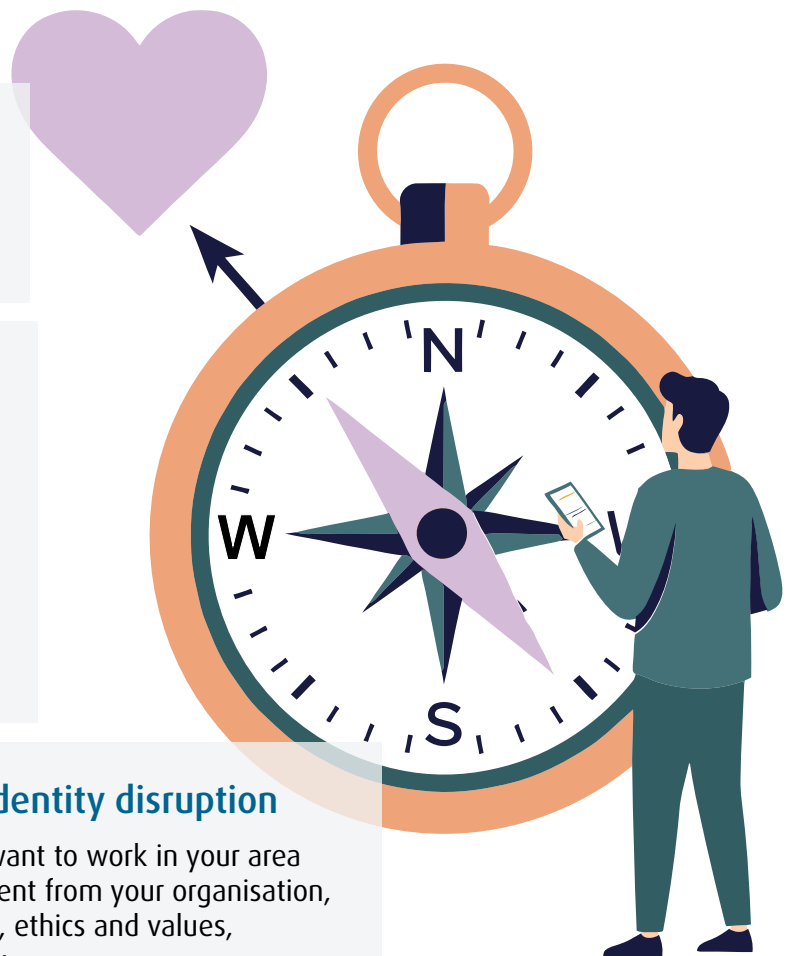
Rumination about “what I should have done”, losing trust in the workplace and processes, harsh self-criticism, confusion about professional identity.

Psychological and somatic

Trouble sleeping, somatic tension when thinking about events, difficulty staying calm when having to make decisions in stressful situations.

Professional and identity disruption

Questioning if you still want to work in your area of training, disengagement from your organisation, questioning your morals, ethics and values, losing pride in your work.



What can help?

Name and recognise it

Name the personal value(s) that were violated. Notice what emotions show up and where you feel them in your body. Saying “This feels like a moral injury,” can reduce self-blame and shift the narrative to systematic strain.

Professional connection

Supervision (especially culturally informed), peer support, and informal debriefs can support reflective practice and a healthy team culture. Ask yourself, “What other support do I need?” Moral injury grows in silence. Healing happens in connection with others.

Advocate in small ways

Document concerns (e.g. “support limited due to staffing/resources”) in your documentation, contribute to service reviews, support colleagues, and advocate for change where possible.

Reclaim meaning outside of work

You are more than your work. Connect with family and friends. Do things that ‘fill your cup’ such as art, sports, spending time with pets and adventures. Meaning, connection, and values outside of work can buffer against moral distress.



Moral injury is not just an individual issue. It is impacted by workplace culture, leadership, resources, and system issues. Creating access to supportive teams in a psychologically safe workplace that is appropriately resourced helps reduce harm.

Further support

- CRANApplus Bush Support Line is available 24/7 on 1800 805 391
- Your EAP provider
- Your GP can review if you are eligible for a Mental Health Care Plan
- Phoenix Australia: Moral injury guide for healthcare workers³

1. Shay, J. (2014). Moral Injury. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 31 (2), 182-191. (<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2014-14055-003>).

2. Litz, B.T., Stein, N., Delaney, E., Lebowitz, L., Nosh, W.P., Silva, C., & Maguen, S. (2009). Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29(8), 695-706. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272735809000920?via=ihub>)

3. Phoenix Australia. (2022). Moral stress among healthcare workers during COVID-19: A guide to moral injury. <https://www.phoenixaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Moral-Stress-Healthcare-Workers-COVID-19-Guide-to-Moral-Injury.pdf>