

# AN HONEST CONVERSATION ABOUT MORAL DISTRESS SUMMARY

## Contents

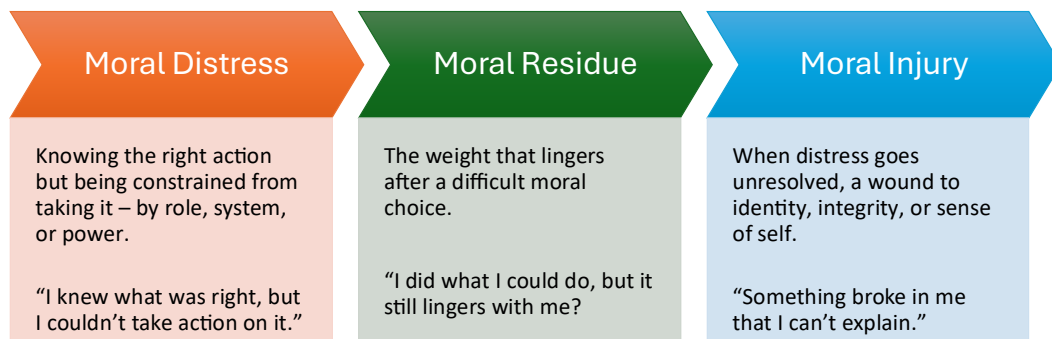
Definitions .....	2
What is moral trauma? .....	2
What makes moral distress different from stress, burnout, or compassion fatigue? .....	2
The bottom line:.....	3
Signs, Symptoms and Risk Factors .....	3
How does someone recognize that they are experiencing moral distress – not just having a hard day or case? .....	3
Are there signs of moving from moral distress to moral injury? .....	3
Individual Tools and Strategies .....	3
What are realistic first steps when you recognize you are in moral distress? .....	4
How do you stay grounded in the midst of a morally distressing case? .....	4
What supports recovery after a particularly distressing case or decision? .....	5
What can you do when you feel powerless to change an outcome?.....	5
Collective (Organizational) Strategies .....	6
The Big Picture .....	6
What does a sustainable legal career look like? What is often overlooked or underrated?.....	6
How do you decide when to stay and work within a system versus when to leave? .....	7
Closing .....	8
If someone is currently struggling, what would you want them to know? .....	8
Resources: .....	9

# Definitions

## What is moral trauma?

It is a spectrum of experience that unfolds following a potentially morally injurious event\* (PMIE), a situation in which a person witnesses, participates in, or is prevented from responding to something that conflicts with their deeply held values or expectations about how they, or others in positions of responsibility, should act. \*[Levinstein, et al.](#)

For attorneys who routinely navigate ethical tensions such as conflicts of interest, organizational directives that feel harmful, or systemic injustices they are powerless to remedy this accumulation can be significant and should not be ignored.



Subtypes (PMIEs)		
<b><u>Self-Directed</u></b>	<b><u>Betrayal-based</u></b>	<b><u>Witnessing-based</u></b>
Acting against one’s own values under pressure	Harm caused by trusted authority figures	Observing harm with no power to intervene

## What makes moral distress different from stress, burnout, or compassion fatigue?

- **Stress** arises when demand exceeds available resources. It is about "too much" -- too many cases, too little time, too few supports.
- **Burnout** is depletion over time from chronic, unrelieved stress. It manifests as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of professional efficacy.
- **Compassion fatigue** (empathic strain) is profound physical and emotional exhaustion caused by prolonged exposure to the suffering of others. It occurs when helpers cannot replenish their emotional reserves, leading to diminished empathy, cynicism, and burnout.

**The bottom line:** When the structures of legal practice- client demands, court constraints, economic pressures, or organizational culture -consistently prevent attorneys from acting on their professional values, the result is not simply exhaustion. It is a specific wound to their sense of self.

## Signs, Symptoms and Risk Factors

How does someone recognize that they are experiencing moral distress – not just having a hard day or case?

Key symptoms to watch for:

**Emotional:** Persistent feelings of betrayal, shame, or guilt; deep cynicism about institutions or systems; spiritual or existential conflict; a profound sense of powerlessness; emotional numbness or dissociation.

**Physical:** Chronic headaches, insomnia, digestive issues, unexplained pain, heart palpitations, and sleep disruption.

**Cognitive shifts:** Difficulty trusting institutions; questioning your professional identity; intrusive thoughts about client suffering or systemic failures; loss of meaning in work that once felt purposeful; loss of self-worth or a sense of identity.

## Are there signs of moving from moral distress to moral injury?

The transition is often not a single moment, but a gradual shift driven by accumulated moral residue. It is important to explore how long you have been feeling this way, whether it is getting worse or more intrusive, and how it is affecting your daily life. Ask yourself: is what I am experiencing persistent, or situational?

Explore the gap between your professional identity and the daily realities of practice. The distress is not just about what happened in a given case, it is about what your interpretation of what that experience implies about who you are.

Notice whether you are experiencing an increasing reluctance to take certain cases, a growing sense of complicity, difficulty separating your professional actions from your personal identity, or an erosion of your belief in the law.

## Individual Tools and Strategies

To be clear, moral distress is not a personal failure. The strategies below are not substitutes for organizational and systemic change. They are meant to help you survive, function, and preserve your sense of self.

## What are realistic first steps when you recognize you are in moral distress?

The essential first step is to name it explicitly: *"This is moral distress, not weakness."* Notice and acknowledge the experience without immediately trying to fix it. Do not dismiss it as "just part of the job." Stating that the situation conflicts with your values, and that it matters, interrupts the accumulation of residue.

Locate the specific source of distress. Identifying where the distress is arising from whether perpetration, betrayal, or witnessing, can help clarify what support is needed and prevents the experience from becoming an internalized, self-directed shortcoming.

Identify one person you can be honest with. It is natural to default to privacy and self-sufficiency, but isolation is one of the primary ways moral distress deepens into injury. Even a brief, honest conversation with a trusted colleague can help process the experience and lighten the load.

Seek professional support. The earlier you reach out, the easier it is to address acute symptoms before they accumulate into something harder to address.

## How do you stay grounded in the midst of a morally distressing case?

**Daily values clarification.** When a situation cannot be changed, returning deliberately to why you are doing this work, not the case outcome (that you cannot control) but the underlying mission, can provide a continuous reference point and help you reconnect to your identity.

- Conduct a values inventory if you are feeling stuck. Write down three values you brought into this work and notice where those values are still present. If they are not visible in the workplace, consider whether there are ways to act on them outside of work.
- You can also ask: *"What is the most ethical thing I can do within the constraints I actually have?"*

**Micro-boundaries.** You cannot always control the distressing experience, but you can work to keep it from defining your entire existence. Build small, deliberate actions into your day, such as creating transitions between work and the rest of your life—a walk before returning home, or a consistent end-of-day ritual that signals to your nervous system that you are shifting mental states. Intentionally take your lunch away from your workspace to decompress, using that time to sit in nature or walk to quiet your stress response.

**Structured reflection.** Without an outlet, reflection tends to spiral into rumination. Journaling, supervision, peer consultation, and therapy all provide containers for intentional reflection. Structured reflection helps process the experience (lightening its weight), restore a sense of agency, and identify what you can still control.

**Regulating the body.** Moral distress is not only cognitive, it is also experienced physiologically. Grounding and somatic practices that engage the parasympathetic nervous system (rest,

digest, recover) can interrupt the stress response. Examples include extended exhale breathing (inhale for four counts, exhale for six), cold water on the face or wrists, or a walk in nature. If you want to come up with your own grounding practice, consider what soothes one of your 5 senses and ritualize it.

## What supports recovery after a particularly distressing case or decision?

**Name what happened** and process it with trusted others.

**Distinguish what was within your control from what was not.** What feels like a personal failing may have been determined by factors beyond your control such as institutional policies, a client's choice, or the law itself. Honest, accurate assignment of responsibility matters.

**Seek formal debriefing where available.** A structured case debrief that includes the ethical and emotional aspects of the work, not just the legal analysis, can significantly reduce moral residue.

- Explore whether there were moments within the case where your values and your work aligned, even if the ultimate outcome did not reflect them.
- Ask yourself whether there is anything you can do now to address what occurred, or anything you would do differently in the future.

**Identify actions that align with your values** such as mentoring, advocacy, community engagement that can help restore a sense of agency and affirm that your values can still exist in the world, even when a specific situation did not reflect them.

## What can you do when you feel powerless to change an outcome?

**Distinguish between influence and control.** The absence of control over an outcome does not mean the absence of influence. Locating the smallest available degree of agency; the question asked on the record, the argument preserved for appeal, the way a client is treated in a difficult moment does not solve the structural problem, but it interrupts the experience of complete powerlessness.

**Name the constraint explicitly.** The ability to say, *"I believe this outcome is wrong, and I was not able to prevent it because of X"* clarifies for yourself the difference between *I could not* versus *I did not care*.

**Accept what cannot be changed.** Allowing space for grief rather than moving quickly on to the next matter is not weakness. It is an honest emotional response to a real loss, and it is part of what prevents residue from progressing into injury.

**Identify ways to act on your values.** Chronic powerlessness in one area of your life can be partially mitigated by meaningful action in another area such as a pro bono matter, a mentoring relationship, engagement with structural reform efforts. It can also be something

simpler (keep your own capacity in mind) like volunteering at your place of worship or at a local food kitchen.

## Collective (Organizational) Strategies

**Structured peer support** programs and open team discussions can break the isolation of moral distress and normalize the experience without minimizing it.

**Reflective supervision**, entailing regular, structured conversation explicitly separate from performance evaluation focuses on the question: *"What did this case require of you, and how are you doing with that?"*

**Ethics consultation**, whether through [bar ethics hotlines](#), internal committees, or peer structures, creates space to explore the tensions inherent in ethically complex decisions and acknowledges the moral challenges within the profession.

**Organizational recognition** that attorneys are morally and emotionally affected by their work that is built into day-to-day conversations and regular trainings reduce stigma and normalize seeking support early, before distress has accumulated into injury.

**Psychological safety** is built through consistent leadership behavior. Environments where attorneys can raise concerns without fear of retaliation are one of the most powerful protective structures available.

**Values alignment** between an organization's stated mission and its actual practices reduces the frequency and intensity of betrayal-based PMIEs.

**Workload management** treated as an ethical and competency concern. Chronic overload increases moral distress risk because it makes it structurally impossible for attorneys to serve their clients and their own professional values with the time and care that both deserve.

## The Big Picture

What does a sustainable legal career look like? What is often overlooked or underrated?

**Know your non-negotiables.** Knowing them in advance does not prevent moral distress, but it creates a framework for recognizing it more quickly, communicating it more clearly, and making decisions about it more deliberately rather than reactively. It also provides the foundation for values-based career navigation.

**Identify a sustainable pace and protect it.** The cumulative cost of chronic overextension is underappreciated. An attorney who is chronically depleted has less capacity for careful, nuanced ethical reasoning. Sustainable pace is not just a well-being concern it is a competence and professional responsibility concern.

Sustainable pace looks different in different contexts. It may mean protecting certain hours from professional demands, limiting the number of particularly morally fraught matters carried simultaneously, or building in regular periods of genuine recovery, real disengagement that allows the nervous system to restore.

**Separate professional meaning from case outcomes.** When you can find meaning in what you can control, the client who felt genuinely heard, the colleague mentored through a difficult matter, the argument made with zealous advocacy, it creates a foundation of a values-based legal career.

**Build professional community intentionally.** Community is necessary for any sustainable legal career, but it is essential for developing moral resilience. When you can have honest conversations with peers about what the work costs, without judgment, it is one of the most powerful protective factors available. Building this community is not networking. It may require intentional outreach to colleagues in similar practice areas, lawyer assistance programs, or peer support structures, and it requires a genuine willingness to be known. If you are a solo practitioner, this can be more challenging yet even more imperative. Identify [voluntary bar associations](#) or connect via the D.C. Bar's [Communities](#).

## How do you decide when to stay and work within a system versus when to leave?

**This isn't about having the right answer. It's about making the choice consciously and intentionally, with your values visible to yourself.**

Start by honestly acknowledging practical realities: financial needs, career trajectory, family obligations. These are significant factors to the decision.

Then explore whether the moral distress is specific to:

- **The supervisor, culture, or organization:** If I leave, will the distress follow me?
- **The practice area or type of law:** Is it specific to the population served, the nature of the cases, or the structure of the judicial system?
- **The profession itself:** Is moral distress a signal that legal practice, as I am currently experiencing it, is not sustainable for who I am and what I need?

An honest assessment of both costs and benefits is required. An intentional choice, one that names the reasons clearly and identifies strategies for support, is more sustainable than one made by default or avoidance.

**Staying is often the more feasible choice:** when the moral distress is specific rather than systemic, when there is a realistic possibility of change, and when you retain meaningful agency within the organization. Staying is also supported when leaving carries genuinely prohibitive costs. Even then, identifying supports and protective strategies is not optional; it is essential.

**Leaving is often indicated:** when the source of moral distress is systemic within the organization or institution; when you have genuinely attempted to address the conditions and found them unresponsive; or when you can no longer identify a version of staying that allows for ethical practice.

**If you want to leave but cannot yet:** work toward a longer-term strategy for change. Identify actionable steps that move you closer to your goals, even small ones, as a way of restoring agency. Find other sources of meaning in the meantime: pro bono work, mentoring, community engagement.

**If leaving feels like a betrayal of your clients:** work on reframing what leaving actually means. A depleted attorney is not the most effective advocate. Recognizing your own limits is not abandonment, it is being human. Prioritizing your sustainability allows you to continue contributing to the causes that matter to you, whether now or in a different form later.

## Closing

### If someone is currently struggling, what would you want them to know?

**You are not alone.** The legal profession's culture of perfection and self-sufficiency does not mean suffering is absent. It means suffering is hidden and moral distress grows in the dark.

**You deserve support.** Not because you are failing, but because the work is genuinely hard.

**Recovery is possible.** You may not return to who you were before. But with the right support, you can develop something more durable: [moral resilience](#).

#### Sources:

[PTSD: National Center for PTSD](#)

[Moral trauma, moral distress, moral injury, and moral injury disorder: definitions and assessments, March 2025. Frontiers in Psychology.](#)

[Moral Resilience: Managing and Preventing Moral Distress and Moral Residue](#)

## Resources:

[D.C. Bar Lawyer Assistance Program](#)

[ABA Directory of Lawyer Assistance Programs](#)

Crisis Support: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988. Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741

### **Books Worth Reading:**

[The Age of Overwhelm: Strategies for the Long Haul](#)

[The Body Keeps the Score](#)

[The Moral Injury Workbook: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Skills for Moving Beyond Shame, Anger, and Trauma to Reclaim Your Values](#)

### **Articles:**

[Moral Injury: When Doing Your Job Feels Wrong](#), State Bar of Wisconsin.

[The Pain of Moral Lawyering](#), Florida Bar Journal.

[Moral Suffering in the Legal Profession: A Necessary Reflection](#)

***This material was developed by the D.C. Bar Lawyer Assistance Program. Reprinted with permission.***