

Moral Injury

Moral injury refers to the psychological, emotional, or spiritual distress that occurs when a person perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent actions that violate their deeply held moral beliefs or professional values.

□ In healthcare (especially surgery and residency training):

Moral injury happens when clinicians are forced to act against their conscience—often due to systemic pressures, institutional policies, or conflicting demands—leading to feelings of:

Guilt

Shame

Anger

Powerlessness

Loss of professional identity

△ Common scenarios of moral injury in medicine:

Being unable to provide appropriate care due to administrative or financial constraints

Participating in unjust decisions (e.g., performing futile interventions under pressure)

Witnessing patient suffering without being allowed to intervene

Teaching practices residents believe are harmful, but which are enforced by the system

Feeling like a technician serving metrics, rather than a physician serving patients

□ In short:

Moral injury is not burnout.

Burnout is about exhaustion.

Moral injury is about betrayal—by the system, by leadership, or by one's own actions under coercion.

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Last update: **2025/06/21 06:17**

