

Moral Injury - What is it? How to talk about it, and What the Hell Does It Have To Do With PNHP?

Burnout is a constellation of symptoms that includes exhaustion, cynicism, and decreased productivity. The term has been overused, implies individual frailty, and doesn't resonate with physicians' experience. Few find lasting relief from the standard treatment recommendations - get more sleep, exercise, meditate, do yoga. And when 50% of physicians endorse symptoms, it can't be chalked up to personal frailty or vulnerability.

Rather, burnout is, itself, a symptom of something larger: **our broken health care system AND the choices we make.**

Moral Injury, in the context of health care, includes symptoms of burnout, along with anger and frustration. These emotions and symptoms are a normal response to an abnormal situation. In other words, our symptoms are indicative of a systemic problem and the solutions must be systemic solutions. We need to own our part in the problem, acknowledge the choices we've made and hold others to account for the choices they have made.

LANGUAGE MATTERS. How we talk about our lived experiences of Moral Injury matters. We're the canary in the coal mine. Our symptoms are due to a health care system that puts physicians in a harmful moral dilemma of having to weigh profits over doing what we know is best for our patients. **FULL STOP.** Any attempt to attribute our symptoms to "burnout" derails the focus from the culprit (our broken health care system) to us (broken individuals).

THE STORIES WE TELL OURSELVES MATTER. Our stories can justify our passive, victim role or they can catapult us into active participants in the solutions to our broken system. We must reclaim the narrative.

ACTIVISM HEALS! We suggest active participation in PNHP as the pathway to **Moral Healing.**

HOMEWORK:

1. How can I use my own lived experience of Moral Injury to help a colleague see their own? Practice telling your own story.
2. How can I engage with PNHP activism in a way that is joyful, satisfying and inspirational to others?

Resources

<https://www.statnews.com/2018/07/26/physicians-not-burning-out-they-are-suffering-moral-injury/>

www.fixmoralinjury.org

If I Betray These Words: Moral Injury in Medicine and Why It's So Hard For Clinicians To Put Patients First, by Wendy Dean, MD with Simon Talbott, MD, 2023

Moral Matters Podcast: Moral Injury of Healthcare