


THE WEIGHT WE CARRY—
NAVIGATING MORAL DISTRESS AND
RECLAIMING OUR PURPOSE

From Silent Suffering to Shared Strength

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LEARNING INTENTIONS

- Identify the root causes of moral distress in neonatal care, including workload, staffing shortages, and ethical dilemmas, and recognize its emotional and professional toll.
- Apply the BUFFER framework and other practical strategies to process and mitigate moral distress in real-time, preventing burnout and disengagement.
- Develop confidence in using ethical decision-making tools, advocacy language, and support networks to uphold personal and professional values in challenging situations.

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OPENING REFLECTION

What is one moment in your career that left you feeling morally distressed?

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DEFINING MORAL DISTRESS



Barr, 2022; Salari et al., 2022

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COMMON TRIGGERS IN NEONATAL PRACTICE

- Inadequate staffing
- Prolonged suffering without clear benefit
- Conflicting team opinions
- Parents feeling excluded or unheard
- Institutional policies vs. bedside wisdom

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THE COST OF CARRYING THE WEIGHT

Burnout, cynicism, emotional withdrawal


Physical symptoms: fatigue, insomnia, anxiety

Disconnection from purpose

SCAN ME



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WHEN EXPERIENCING OVERWHELM & TRAUMA

loneliness/isolation/strained relationships

feeling helpless, hopeless & that one can never do enough

hypervigilance & always serious

anger and cynicism

guilt/fear/complicated grieving

lack of awe

sense of persecution

fight/flight/immobility response

dissociative moments

inability to see options & diminished creativity

physical ailments, depression, anxiety, & other mental health considerations

chronic exhaustion & saturated nervous system

pulled toward confirmation bias & away from critical thinking

lack of presence/deliberate avoidance/cognitive overload

intense/rigid/controlling/unable to embrace complexity

disheartened & dispirited

grandiosity


negativity bias & not assuming well

difficulty empathizing/minimizing/numbing

sub-impeccable/toxic conduct & compromised impulse control

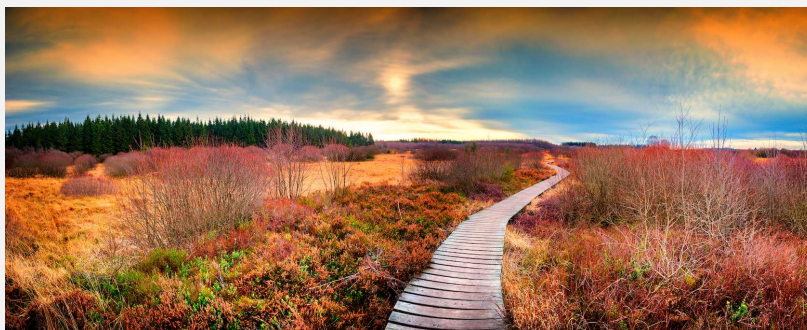
addictions

Ayed et al., 2024; Center for Victims of Torture, 2025; Van Dernoot Lipsky 2009, 2020;



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MORAL RESILIENCE: A NEW PATH FORWARD



Rushton, 2017;Varasteh et al., 2025

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ANCHORS FOR MORAL RESILIENCE

- **Self-awareness:** Naming your values and pain
- **Connection:** Seeking support, not isolation
- **Reflection:** Meaning-making through journaling or dialogue
- **Advocacy:** Naming the harm, proposing change



Varasteh et al., 2025

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REAL-WORLD SCENARIO
(SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY)


Scenario:

- You are asked to continue a treatment plan you believe is causing undue suffering. The family is divided. The team is split. You feel trapped.

Discuss:

- What makes this distressing?
- How do you usually respond?
- What support or structure would help?

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THE BUFFER FRAMEWORK

- Belonging:** No one should carry this weight alone
- Understanding:** Name the pain and the pattern
- Forgiveness:** Let go of guilt and perfectionism
- Frameworks:** Use guiding values in complex situations
- Equanimity:** Stay centered in the chaos
- Respect:** For self, team, family, and the system

Coughlin, In Press



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TOOLS FOR NAVIGATING DISTRESS

- Brief grounding practice (pause, breathe, name what matters)
- Debrief circles with team
- Moral distress check-ins
- Advocate with evidence and empathy
- Reflect through the BUFFER lens

SCAN ME




Center for Victims of Torture, 2025

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RECLAIMING PURPOSE



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CLOSING REFLECTION

Prompt: What is one way I will protect my moral integrity this week?


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THANK YOU!

“Your purpose is not just what you do.
It’s how you stay true to who you are
while doing it.”



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