MORAL DISTRESS AND INJURY
Information for Health and Care Workers Responding to COVID19

What is Moral Injury?
Moral injury (MI) is defined as the persistent and impairing psychological distress which results from actions, or the lack of them, which violate one's moral or ethical code. Moral injuries can affect anyone and during the current Covid-19 pandemic, healthcare staff may experience moral distress, which may progress to MI, when they perceive that they were unable to deliver high quality care because of lack of training, staff or resources which may in some cases lead to loss of life.

Potentially Morally Injurious Experiences (PMIEs)
During the covid-19 pandemic health care workers may be at increased risk of exposure to potentially morally injurious experiences. These include experiences that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. Workers could experience PMIEs in different ways, including:
Learning about such incidents
Bearing witness
Failing to prevent
Perpetrating
Or feeling betrayed by trusted authorities (e.g. one's employer)

Exposure to PMIEs can cause Moral Distress
Exposure to a PMIE can cause strong moral emotions, termed 'moral distress'. Moral distress can include feelings of: guilt, shame, anger and disgust. The experience of these emotions is unpleasant and can lead to further psychological difficulties.

Is there a link between Moral Injury and Mental Health Difficulties?
- Moral Injury is not a mental illness but can contribute to other mental health difficulties, such as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or depression.
- The experience of moral injury can lead to people having negative views of themselves which can have further impact on their mental wellbeing.
- Moral injury has been linked to increased difficulties in coping with stress at work and with managers.
- People who experience moral injury often withdraw from others, which can lead to relationship breakdown with spouses, children and others.
- Those experiencing moral Injury tend to have less positive feelings.

When are people more likely to develop Moral Injury?
- When there is increased risk of loss of life of a vulnerable person (e.g. child, elderly person or person with disability)
- When there is a perceived lack of support from a manager or family and friends after the incident
- When the individual is unaware or unprepared for emotional/psychological consequences of decisions that were taken

- Sometimes when people are less qualified and experienced in their work
- When the individual is exposed to further trauma

How can the risk of Moral Injury be reduced?

- People who are likely to be exposed to potentially morally injurious experiences should be prepared for the nature of the tasks they face and how they are likely to respond.
- Leaders should discuss potential moral challenges openly and honestly with the whole team.
- Empathetic support from manager, colleague, and family is important.
- Having an opportunity to discuss what has happened with colleagues and mangers can help with trying to make some sense of it.
- Those in a position of authority should appropriately take responsibility for decisions and outcomes.
- It may be helpful to view the situation which is often unexpected or unprecedented as the cause of difficulties rather than a person or organisation.
- These leaders will also need to be supported and organisations should recognise such leaders may be reluctant to seek help.
- If you continue to feel high level of distress about the incident you may benefit from psychological treatment to address it.

I think that I am experiencing Moral Injury, what can I do?

- Start by talking about it with someone you trust.
- Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which is a psychological treatment that is available in your local primary care service can help.