

# Addressing Guilt and Moral Distress as Healthcare Professional

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As Health Care Professionals taking care of others, we will often encounter clinical situations that induce difficult emotions. These emotions include:

- ▶ Anxiety
- ▶ Depression
- ▶ Guilt
- ▶ Shame
- ▶ Moral Distress

# How would you describe the feeling of guilt?

## How would you describe shame?

### Are they different?

- ▶ Guilt is what we feel about doing something that we perceive as being in contradiction to our moral compass/values
- ▶ Shame and guilt go hand-in-hand, but shame is what we experience in response to someone else's standard or opinion. Shame is different in that it is in relation to ourselves and our self-esteem/self-worth.
- ▶ Shame is: "I am a bad person" / Guilt is: "I did something that was bad"
- ▶ For some of us guilt is more easily experienced than others
- ▶ We do not always have to respond to guilt. Reality testing guilty feeling can be helpful. One way to reality test is to pretend that you are advising a friend in similar situation. Would you be so tough on your friend? Should your friend feel guilty?

# What is Moral Distress?

- A mental state that is characterized by feelings of guilt and worry and that result from living through traumatic or highly stressful events that violate one's deeply held morals and values
- Can be transient but can lead to moral injury
- Among healthcare workers, moral distress has been associated with concurrent feelings of burnout, low job satisfaction, sleep problems and intent to resign from one's job



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# Moral Distress in HCW's at Mount Sinai

- ▶ Mount Sinai Hospital Health Care Workers were surveyed during the peak of pandemic in spring of 2020. (Norman et al. *Depression and Anxiety 2021*)
- ▶ The majority of the sample (52.7%-87.8%) endorsed moral distress
- ▶ Factor analyses revealed three dimensions of COVID-19 moral distress: negative impact on family, fear of infecting others, and work-related concerns
- ▶ All three factors were significantly associated with severity and positive screen for COVID-19-related PTSD symptoms, burnout, and work and interpersonal difficulties

# What are some ways that I can cope with feelings of guilt?

- ▶ Become more self aware and be aware of when these feelings arise
- ▶ Sometimes, it is ok to distract ourselves when not feeling well
- ▶ Develop a coping skill plan
- ▶ Practice self-forgiveness. We all deserve to be forgiven. Remember that you are not perfect
- ▶ Differentiate between normal and excessive worrying/feelings of guilt/sadness
- ▶ Stay in the moment and remain mindful
- ▶ know when you may benefit from more support

# Emotional Self- Awareness

- ▶ Emotional Self- Awareness allows us to become more aware of our emotional reactions and emotional states allowing for the processing of emotions and develop effective responses.
- ▶ As clinicians, it will be important for you to be aware of the kind of emotional responses your patients elicit in you and, in turn, help your patients more effectively.
- ▶ It is important that when you feel such emotions that you not judge them, but rather accept your response and works towards understanding what led to that response

# How do I become more aware of how I am feeling?

STOP and ask yourself:

- ▶ 1. “What am I feeling in this moment? If it is an emotion such as anxiety or sadness, ask yourself, what is making me anxious or sad?”
- ▶ 2. Is the anxiety or sadness masking another emotion that is more difficult for me to acknowledge such as guilt or shame?
  - ▶ Sometimes anxiety/sadness is not the primary emotion, but rather a secondary emotion that when felt, brings on anxiety or sadness.
  - ▶ Whatever it is that you are feeling, remember to not judge the emotion, but rather be kind to yourself and say, “of course I’m anxious, this is ...”

# Distract yourself for a limited amount of time. Remember: We can only think about one thing a time

- ▶ Go for a walk in the park
- ▶ Carry out a task-oriented activity such as cleaning your room, doing a puzzle, or shopping
- ▶ Exercise
- ▶ Take a nap
- ▶ Get lost in a good book
- ▶ Call a friend that will make you laugh

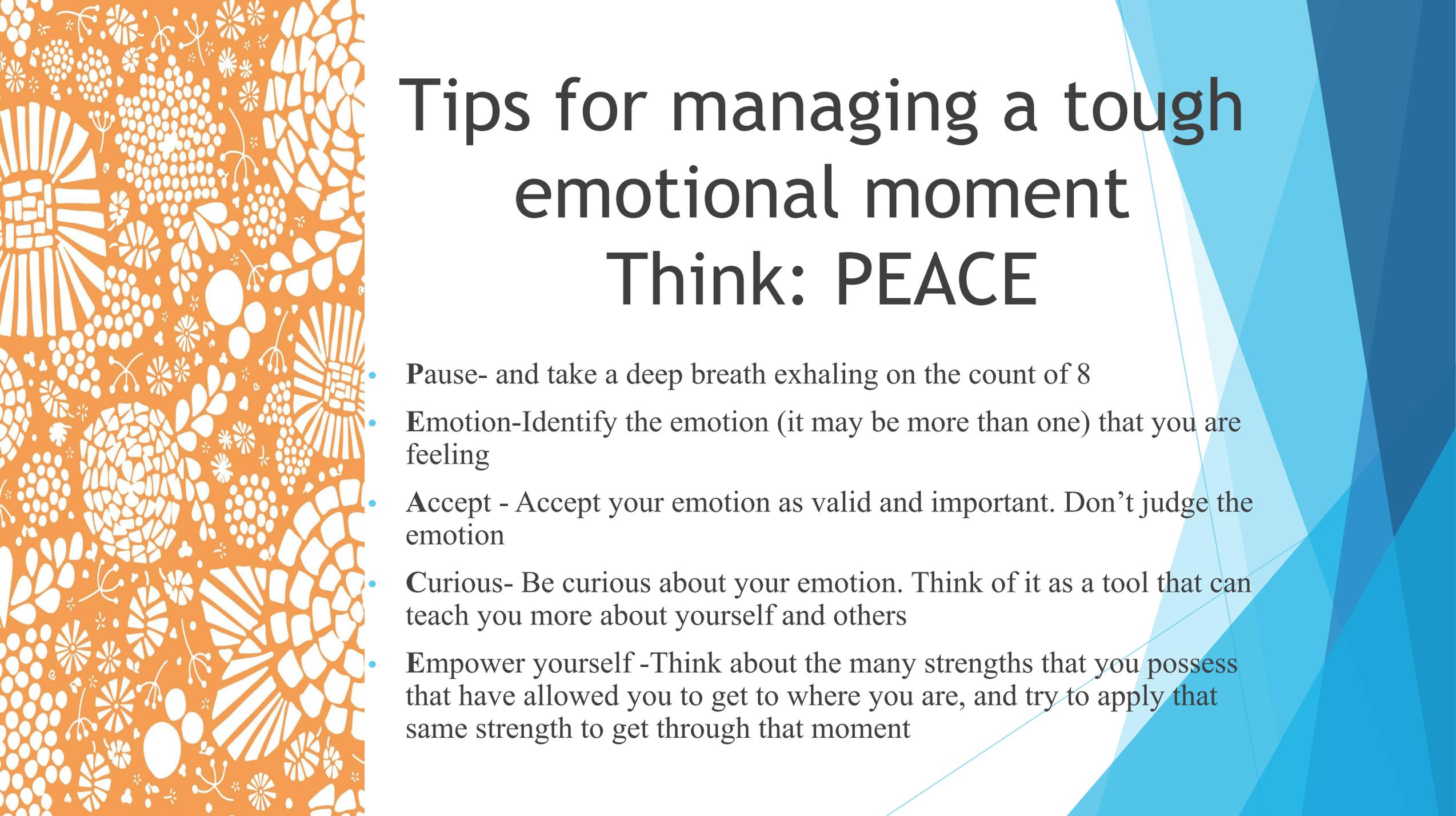
# Practice mindfulness and staying present in the moment

- ▶ Mindfulness is the concept of bringing your thoughts into the present moment
- ▶ There is ample clinical evidence about the benefits of mindfulness in reducing anxiety/depression
- ▶ This must be practiced as it is our mind's instinct to wander

# Know when you may benefit from more support

Emotions that may benefit from mental health support:

- ▶ Guilty feelings that gnaw at you and will not let you relax
- ▶ Anxiety that prevents you from carrying out activities such as avoiding a test
- ▶ Difficulty sleeping or staying asleep
- ▶ Loss of appetite or experiencing excessive thirst
- ▶ Racing heart, shortness of breath that comes on suddenly
- ▶ Worrying that leaves you demoralized or exhausted



# Tips for managing a tough emotional moment

## Think: PEACE

- **Pause-** and take a deep breath exhaling on the count of 8
- **Emotion-**Identify the emotion (it may be more than one) that you are feeling
- **Accept -** Accept your emotion as valid and important. Don't judge the emotion
- **Curious-** Be curious about your emotion. Think of it as a tool that can teach you more about yourself and others
- **Empower yourself -**Think about the many strengths that you possess that have allowed you to get to where you are, and try to apply that same strength to get through that moment