

Addressing Guilt and Moral Distress as Healthcare Professional

Alicia Hurtado, MD
Associate Dean for Medical Student Wellbeing
and Student Affairs
Attending Psychiatrist



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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

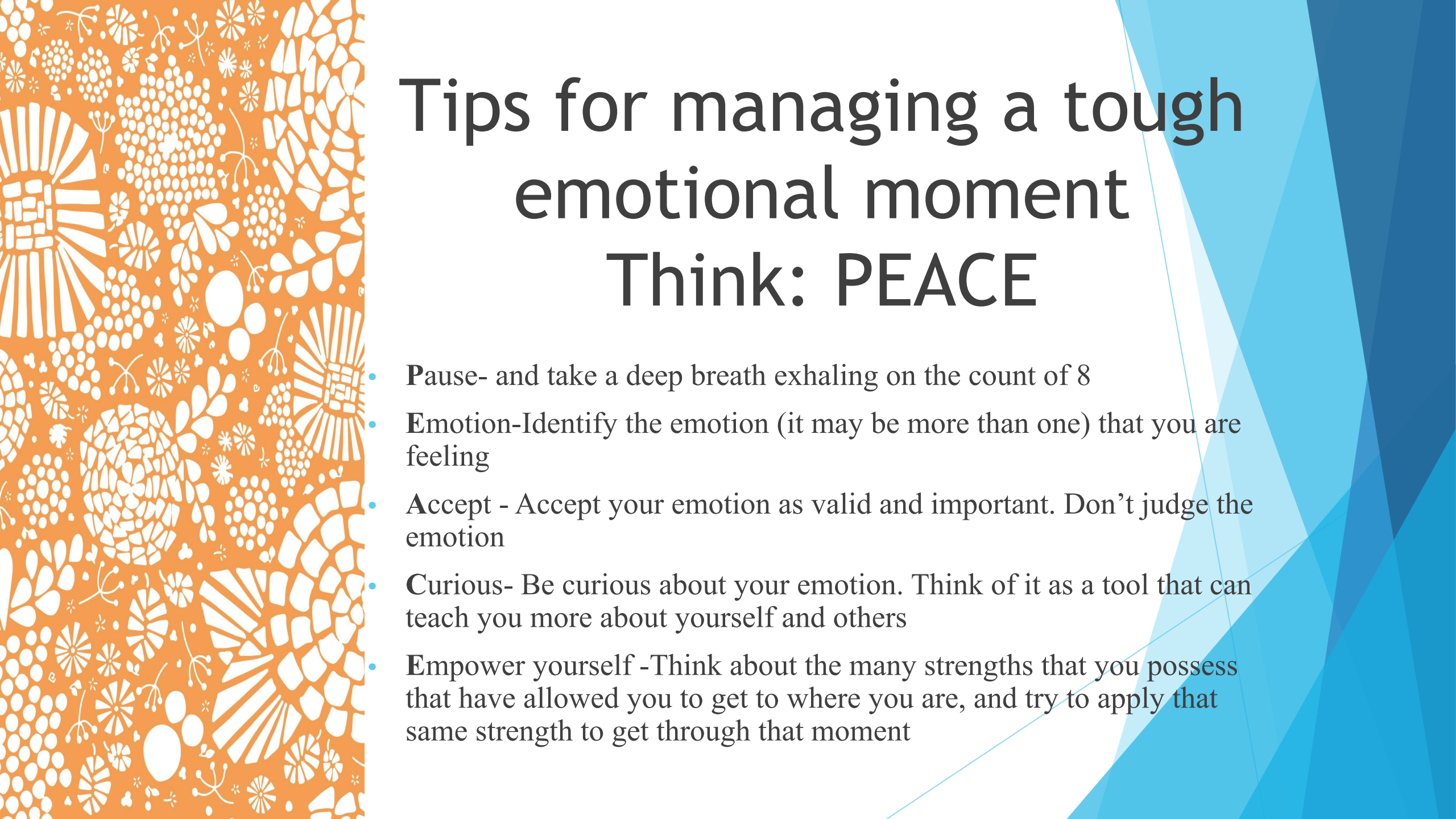
Practice mindfulness and staying present in the moment

- ▶ 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