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Moral outrage: Promise or peril?

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Moral outrage—it's everywhere you turn these days: angry protests over injustices or infringement of liberties, the lack of healthcare resources or directives to remain silent about safety concerns. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the inequitable fractures in our health care system that place already vulnerable people of color at greater risk. Simultaneously, we share collective outrage over the death of another black man, George Floyd, using unjustifiable force by police as he pleaded “I can't breathe.”

Moral outrage is justifiable anger, disgust, or frustration directed toward others who violate ethical values or standards (Goodenough, 1997). It surges when our moral identity and integrity have been compromised. Clinicians are morally outraged when the pandemic induces systemic shortages and inequities that threaten their ability provide care that aligns with their professional integrity and values. Moral outrage may explode in written or spoken protests, statements that blame or shame wrongdoers, accusations about the motives of the perpetrators, aggressive behaviors, or actions that spark violence (Lodewijkx, Kersten, &

van Zomeren, 2008). When moral outrage is activated, our nervous systems can become stuck in hyperarousal, stimulating a cascade of stress hormones that leave us overwhelmed, depleted, apathetic or persistently anxious or reactive (Rushton, 2013). However justifiable or honorable our moral outrage might be, it can erode our capacity for empathy, collaboration, or clear thinking to fuel destruction rather than solutions. We are all susceptible to moral outrage, but far fewer of us are skilled at harnessing its power constructively.

Moral outrage is an important signal of moral threat that can motivate clinicians to address urgent transgressions or injustices. It may be grounded in altruistic concern for the wellbeing of others and expressed on behalf of others to address an injustice (Goodenough, 1997). Mired in systemic failures, we may express our anger or disgust toward leaders whose failure to plan proactively for a large-scale pandemic threatened lives and livelihoods with inadequate supplies of basic equipment, medicines, and protective gear. We may justify our anger toward others by giving our emotions moral sanction or in self-serving posturing to elevate our personal standing or preserve our moral identity (Monin & Jordan, 2009). Our feelings of moral outrage may be heightened by our inability to mend systemic healthcare fissures or protect ourselves from the ravages of COVID-19 infection. We may feel guilty about our own complicity in failing to defend our ideals, in passively contributing to systemic causes of the crisis, or in failing to speak up about injustices streaming relentlessly in the media (Rothschild & Keefer, 2017). We may be tempted to assume the mantle of self-righteous indignation against wrongdoers by expressing our moral outrage

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in ways that divert attention from our own responsibility (Rothschild, et al, 2015). The accompanying buildup of negative emotions can intensify and erupt in a social stew of moral contagion, spreading to others, reflecting back, and confirming our generalized threat response. Collective moral outrage can “become the glue that holds a group together in a sense of solidarity against those who threaten their personal or professional identities, values, beliefs or integrity” (Rushton, 2013, p. 84). When unexamined and ungrounded, it can fuel divisions, exacerbate differences, and undermine our prosocial relational capacities. Moral outrage may be used reactively as strategy for change and reforms but it’s only the beginning.

There is another side to moral outrage; its emotional urgency can be a source of insight and inspiration for principled discernment and wise, compassionate action. The energy of our moral outrage focuses our attention on what is fundamentally at stake. Our bodies alert us to threats to our safety, integrity and well-being and our emotions help us locate and name the source of our outrage, motivating us to persevere in examining the precise moral contours of responsible action in the situation, and engendering the courage to act despite resistance or fear (Thomas, McGarty, Mavor, 2009). Rather than reacting on “autopilot”, we can choose deliberate, respectful, impactful ways to express principled moral outrage aligned with our values and commitments.

Principled moral outrage requires that we re-balance our nervous systems to calm fear and reactivity so that we can focus our attention on the actual source of our outrage without projection or rationalization (Rushton, 2013). When we notice what is happening in our bodies, minds and hearts we self-regulate within a potentially overwhelming flood of emotions; we perceive the situation more clearly and can attune ourselves to understand the subjective experience of the person, groups, or incidents that provoked our response (Rushton, 2018). Calmly anchored in our moral core, we are more able to resist disruptive external pressures that reinforce disorienting biases, assumptions, and anger; from this centered stance of wisdom and compassion, we are more likely to discover a path of integrity and beneficence to self and others. Pausing before taking action creates the space to modulate our reactions, engaging creativity and insight to discern and implement a justifiable response that accounts for countervailing values and unintended consequences. A reflective pause creates space for connection that softens barriers of separation and judgmental mistrust.

The volatile intensity of the pandemic and pervasive disparities and racism challenges us all to find the path of self-regulation and awareness necessary for principled moral outrage. Consider the moral outrage many clinicians feel about the deepening inequities in all aspects of American life that have surfaced in discussions about how to allocate scarce medical resources in the COVID pandemic. They are confronted with

the stark realities that the majority of their patients are there because of structural and cultural injustices that result in their disproportionate infection and death. The grip of negative emotions is an opportunity to recognize and name them without allowing them to uproot us from the wisdom of our core values and principled intentions (Rushton, 2018). Voicing why these inequities violate basic norms of dignity, respect, and justice helps to clarify their urgency and importance. Monitoring the tone and content of our conversations and speech invites morally salient dimensions of a situation to emerge. Instead of using moral outrage as a dominant strategy, engaging in a principled ethical analysis expands the range of potential alternative actions and consequences aligned with our values and commitments, such as speaking out, conscientious objection, negotiation, silent witness, or refusal to act (Rushton, 2013). When we modulate and channel our moral outrage, we can trust ourselves to act with courageous wisdom in the face of uncertainty and risk. At this time in our history, we must examine the impact of turning away from these realities and to challenge ourselves to go beyond an intellectual analysis to action that leads to sustainable reforms. Exercising principled moral outrage, we are able to uphold integrity in ourselves and others whatever the outcomes of our actions.

Leaning into the confusion and suffering of the coronavirus pandemic with principled moral outrage establishes a new pathway of response to other pressing global challenges such as climate change, inequality, social disparities, and biodiversity collapse that threaten the future of humanity and the planet. Principled moral outrage is a survival skill that is necessary to restore integrity in response to the ever-present moral adversity in our lives. We can leverage the urgency of COVID-19 as a catalyst for change that prepares us as individuals, communities, nations with strength and moral resilience for an uncertain future. By building communities of conscience that lean in courageously with principled moral outrage, we can build a more just, peaceful, and lifegiving world.

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