What works?

Dealing with ethical dilemmas and moral harm in a crisis*

Research into the psychological impact of crisis situations suggests that some people might experience what has been described as *moral harm,* arising from decisions or actions they take which they feel are at odds with their personal moral code. Moral harm can lead to difficult thoughts and feelings such as shame and guilt which in turn may contribute to longer-term mental health problems. What seems to make a real difference to whether or not there is longer-term harm is how people are able to make sense of the decisions they have to make, and how individuals are supported before, during and after a crisis. **There are different things we can do to help our staff deal with the day-to-day dilemmas and potential harms they face in times of crisis**

1 **Be clear and honest about the fact that people will have to make difficult choices and help them start thinking about these ahead of time.** Help staff to identify some of the tough choices or situations they might have to face *ahead of time* and agree on how to deal with those. These might include:

- Having to choose between our desire to protect our families and loved ones and our sense of duty to our colleagues and people in our care
- Having to choose who should receive a limited resource.
- Feeling let down by management/the organisation as a result of staffing or resource choices

2 **Communicate using the principles of** [Procedural Justice](#), to help ensure people understand the reasons for decisions they're being asked to enact. Be transparent about why decision are made, making sure staff are informed of the benefits. Demonstrate understanding of how hard the situation is for people, show humanity and care. Give people an opportunity to ask questions or provide feedback.

3 **Encourage people to use support** available to them, both formal and informal, to talk about the ethical dilemmas or difficult choices that they're faced with.

Want to find out more?
Contact the Evidence-Based practice team at:
Evidence@justice.gov.uk

4 **Focus on creating cohesive teams and let staff know it's OK not to be OK**, by recognising that even the most resilient people can become overwhelmed in an ongoing crisis, and that colleagues need to pull together and be there for each other.

5 **Make sure managers and leaders also have the opportunity to discuss issues and access support, too**. A good line manager or supervisor can be an effective buffer against mental health problems, but they need support to maintain resilience in this role.

6 **Pay attention to those who avoid discussing the difficult decisions they're faced with**. Reach out to them, encourage them to engage in discussion with colleagues, line managers or support teams. Do not offer single session psychological debriefing, as this can make things worse.

7 **Help people to make meaning out of their experiences**. Provide opportunities for people to reflect on and learn from their actions, and from the situation, both in the short and longer-term.

8 **Actively monitor staff well-being after the crisis is over**. Encourage people who show signs of mental health problems to use the support available and to use that support to talk about any feelings of shame or guilt linked to the crisis.

*Using the best available evidence to inform our practice. References available from Evidence@justice.gov.uk