

Beth Sheffield, *Independent Personal Plan Facilitator*

As an Independent Facilitator, I've been honoured to come alongside people who use our services and their support network, checking in with how things are going through the COVID-19 pandemic and facilitating plans with people for the future, as best we're able.

In this process, I've heard your stories from the past two years; how you vicariously felt the pain and loneliness that this diabolical virus has brought into all of our lives, but particularly into the lives of the people whom you support.

- I've heard of your sadness as you've watched someone only able to communicate with their mother through a window, where she stood in the cold, waving and smiling.
- You've spoken of people who require more psychotropic medication because the other measures that are usually in place to help support good mental health are not available.
- You've shared your concerns about physical health and well-being: people who use wheelchairs for mobility who went from swimming 3 times a week to, overnight, having very little physical activity.

It hasn't been all bad, of course. I heard about the time you witnessed an ageing mother meeting her adult daughter. The visiting regimen at their nursing home and group home overlapped for a brief time, allowing them to hug and visit together for the first time in 18 months. You told me how you wept, watching their reunion from afar.

With the joy and sorrow of the past months has come what is known as "moral distress." First documented with nurses in 1984, Dr. Andrew Jameton described moral distress as, "the psychological distress of being in a situation in which one is constrained from acting on what one knows to be right."

Christian Horizons believes passionately in the dignity and worth of every person, regardless of ability. We demonstrate this value by working tirelessly to support people to experience belonging; whether at their neighbourhood coffee shop where people are known by name, supporting a person in pursuit of their employment goals, or helping someone connect to family members they did not know they had.

Human connection is essential to human well-being, yet this virus seems designed to separate us from each other! With our shared mission to support the rights of people to be included in society, the depth of grief of the past months is understandable. You are not alone in this sadness. Strangely, it might be only now, as things are beginning to open up and restrictions are lifting, that the weight of the last two years is catching up with you. Now that you have time to process what you've witnessed, you might feel overwhelmed.

While our feelings are important, it's also important to remember that *we are not our feelings*. When our feelings seem inescapable, we can mentally acknowledge, "I am having this emotion, thought or feeling." This reframing can help us refocus on the task or conversation at hand. You may find, with repeated practice, that you are able to 'unhook' from those unpleasant thoughts or memories and not feel captured by them.

Researchers at the Canadian Mental Health Association (CAMH) identify four steps in addressing moral distress:

- a.) Recognize when moral distress is present
- b.) Commit to address this distress
- c.) Make a self-care action plan
- d.) Act on this plan to preserve your ethical integrity and authenticity in your work.

We don't need to tackle this alone. Talk with your team as you begin to process your distress, and share the strategies you find helpful with your Program Manager.

Self-care and wellness are more important than ever. Christian Horizons provides professional support to employees through the Employee Assistance Plan, available to everyone. It is a free and confidential resource that will support you in your professional and personal life, including ways to practice self-care.

Sharing your experiences and the stories that have emerged from the pandemic and the accompanying social restrictions – stories of joy and stories of sorrow – are a way to bring light to a difficult time. By bearing witness to the experiences of others, learning how to care for yourself, and using strategies to process your thoughts and emotions, you will begin to find healing and help others to experience this growth and joy as well. The distress we feel when people who use our services are prevented from reaching their goals reveals our commitment to their ongoing growth and development. Let's hang on to this commitment and channel it into advocacy for real change and opportunities for people with disabilities in the days to come.

Making the Connection

- Have you heard of "moral distress" before, and do you feel like this is something you have experienced in the past couple of years?
- How might acknowledging and addressing moral distress help us find joy and work for change in the days and months ahead?

Resources

Christian Horizons LifeWorks information (VPN Required)

<https://portal.christian-horizons.org/topics/Pages/Life-Works.aspx>

Renew Podcast Training from Christian Horizons

<https://christianhorizons.org/renew>

Resources for Health-Care Workers from CAMH

<https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19/information-for-professionals>

“Name it to Tame it” Overview

<https://mentalhealthweek.ca/name-it-to-tame-it/>

“Doing what matters in times of stress” from the World Health Organization

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240003927>

COVID-19 and Mental Health support for people who use services (HCARD)D

<https://www.hcarddcovid.com/info>