

LIMINAL PERSONHOOD

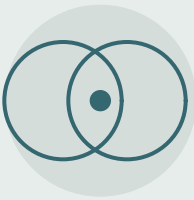
Continuity of Moral Identity in Clinical Care

What is Liminal Personhood?

Liminal personhood describes circumstances in which familiar ways of expressing or recognizing personhood become altered, uncertain, or diminished, while the person’s moral and relational identity persists.



SIX KEY MESSAGES



01 Personhood is more than capacity.

Agency, cognition, consciousness, communication, and decisional capacity may diminish through illness, injury, or proximity to death. Their loss should not be mistaken for the loss of the person.



02 Liminality means living with uncertainty.

Patients may exist “betwixt and between”—no longer as they once were, yet with an uncertain trajectory toward recovery, further decline, or death. Liminal personhood asks us to resist premature conclusions about who remains.



03 When individuals cannot hold their identity alone, others can hold it with them.

Family, friends, and caregivers sustain personhood through knowledge of the individual’s history, values, relationships, and significance to others. Personhood is profoundly relational.



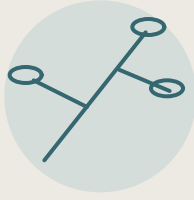
04 Ordinary acts of care become acts of moral recognition.

Gentle touch, careful positioning, attention to privacy, speaking to an unresponsive patient, keeping vigil, and attending respectfully to the body communicate: You are still here. You still matter.



05 Recognition of personhood protects clinicians as well as patients.

When institutional pressures and a culture of efficiency lead clinicians to treat people as diagnoses, bodies, or tasks rather than persons, clinicians’ own moral integrity can be compromised. Recognizing liminal personhood even when it is difficult to discern may help protect against moral distress, moral injury, and burnout.



06 Our moral relationship with a person does not necessarily end with death.

Respectful post-mortem care and bereavement practices recognize that while biological life has ended, the deceased remains relationally present and morally significant to those who survive them.

Personhood is continuous at the edges of being, and dignity is the moral acknowledgment of that continuity.