Getting Help for Distress

Distress is pain and suffering of the body and mind. Here we use the word distress to cover the many emotions you may have as you deal with cancer and its treatment. Distress is also common in the loved ones of people with cancer.

A certain amount of distress is normal. People are scared about what may happen to their bodies. They worry how they will cope with the cancer. And they have fears about the future. People often wonder, "Am I going to die?" and "Why is this happening to me?"

Learning how to talk about and cope with distress can help you and your loved ones.

Talking about your distress

The first step toward coping with distress is talking to your cancer care team about how you feel. Then, they can get you help if you need it. They are treating YOU, not just your cancer. They count on you to tell them how you are doing and what you are feeling. No one can do that except you.

Saying that you are distressed can mean that you feel:

- Sad
- Hopeless
- Powerless
- Afraid
- Guilty
- Anxious
- Angry
- Panic

The stress of dealing with cancer may affect areas of your life other than your feelings. It can affect how you think, what you do, and how you interact with others.

Is distress normal?

Some distress is normal with cancer. But certain signs can warn you that your distress level is too high and is getting serious. Some of these are:

- Feeling overwhelmed to the point of panic
- Being overcome by a sense of dread
- Feeling so sad that you think you can't go on with treatment
- Being more grouchy or irritable than usual
- Feeling unable to cope with pain, tiredness, and nausea
- Trouble getting to sleep or early waking (less than 4 hours of sleep a night)
- "Fuzzy thinking" and memory problems
- Having a very hard time making decisions, even little ones
- Feeling hopeless – wondering if there is any point in going on
- Thinking about cancer and/or death all the time
- Questioning faith and religious beliefs that once gave you comfort
- Feeling worthless and useless

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Tips to help with distress

Do –

- ✓ Use coping styles that have worked for you in the past.
- ✓ Find someone you can talk to about your illness.
- ✓ Deal with cancer "one day at a time." It's hard to do, but try not to worry about the future.
- ✓ Use support and self-help groups if they make you feel better.
- ✓ Find a doctor who lets you ask all your questions. Know what to expect.
- ✓ Explore spiritual and religious beliefs and practices that have helped you in the past. Look at new practices if you think they might offer you comfort.
- ✓ Keep a personal journal as a way to express yourself without holding back.

Don't –

- ✓ Believe that "cancer equals death." There are nearly 14 million Americans alive today who have had cancer.
- ✓ Blame yourself for causing your cancer.
- ✓ Feel bad if you can't act "positive" and upbeat. Your attitude doesn't help the cancer or make it worse. Low times will come, no matter how good you are at coping.
- ✓ Suffer in silence. Don't try to go it alone – get help with what you need.
- ✓ Be embarrassed to get help from a mental health professional.

Remember: There is no one way to diagnose or treat distress. Let your doctor or nurse know how you are feeling so you can get the help you may need.

No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support to help you get well. Call us at 1-800-227-2345, or visit www.cancer.org.

Thanks to the generous donations from corporate supporters and individuals like you, **we save lives** by helping people stay well and get well, by finding cures, and by fighting back.

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