

What to Do for Distress

Distress is an unpleasant emotion, feeling, or thought. It is common in people with cancer and in their family members and other loved ones.

Distress can affect the way you think, feel, or act. It can make it hard to cope with having cancer and deal with symptoms, treatment, and side effects. It can even make side effects worse, such as fatigue, nausea, sleep problems, and pain.

Distress can also make it harder to make decisions. You may have trouble deciding about treatment, making follow-up appointments, and even taking medicines you need to treat your cancer.

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



Tips to help with distress

There isn't one single fix. Find things that work for you. Something might even work one day but not the next. The more coping methods you have ready, the better prepared you'll be when you need them.

Do:

- Think about the ways you've coped in the past. If they helped, try them again.
- Try relaxation exercises, meditation, yoga, massage or pet therapy.
- Be active, such as walking, riding a bike, or working in your garden.
- Find someone you can talk to about your illness.
- Deal with cancer "one day at a time." Know that some days will be better than others.
- Know it's OK if you don't feel positive all the time.
- Use support and self-help groups if they make you feel better.

Don't:

- Assume that you will die because you have cancer. Talk with your cancer care team about what you can expect.
- Blame yourself for causing your cancer.
- Feel bad if you can't always be positive. It is normal to feel down some of the time.
- Try to deal with your distress all alone. Get help with what you need.
- Be embarrassed to get help from a mental health professional.
- Keep your worries or symptoms secret from the person closest to you. They can help you figure out what to do and remember what your cancer care team has told you.



Talking about your distress

The first step toward coping with distress is talking to your cancer care team about how you feel. They count on you to tell them how you are doing and what you are feeling.

People with cancer may describe distress as feeling:

- Sad
- Helpless
- Anxious or depressed
- Hopeless
- Afraid
- Angry



When is distress serious?

Having some distress is normal when you have cancer. But sometimes distress makes it hard to function or cope. If you are having any of the following signs, get in touch with your cancer care team as soon as possible:

- Feeling overwhelmed or overcome by a sense of dread
- Feeling so sad that you think you can't go on with treatment
- Feeling unable to cope with pain, tiredness, and nausea
- Trouble sleeping or eating
- Having trouble with your focus or memory
- Having a very hard time making decisions

- 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
- Feeling hopeless, worthless, useless, and like a burden to others



Talk to your cancer care team.

Tell your cancer care team about any changes in how you're feeling so you can get the help you need. Let them know when you notice the changes, what you have trouble with, or things that make the changes worse or better.

Sometimes distress can keep you from doing what you need to do. Call your cancer care team if you are:

- Feeling so sad that you don't think you can continue with treatment
- Having trouble sleeping, eating, or concentrating
- Feeling hopeless
- Thinking a lot about death

Remember: There is no one way to manage distress. Let your cancer care team know how you are feeling so you can get the help you may need to help manage it. There are medicines and other services that might help you.

For cancer information and answers, visit the American Cancer Society website at [cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org) or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.

