



Getting Help for Distress

The word distress has many meanings. Distress is an unpleasant emotion, feeling, or thought. Distress is common in people with cancer and in their family members and loved ones.

A certain amount of distress is normal when you or a loved one has cancer. People are scared about what may happen. They worry about how they will cope with the cancer. 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 health 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
- Helpless
- Guilty
- Angry
- Hopeless
- Afraid
- Anxious or depressed
- Out of control

When is distress normal?

Some distress is normal with cancer. But some signs can warn you that your distress level is 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 getting less than 4 or 5 hours of sleep a night
- Having trouble eating for a few weeks
- “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, useless, and like a burden to others

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.
- Keep personal records of your doctors’ phone numbers, dates of treatments, lab values, x-rays, scans, symptoms, side effects, medicines, and general medical status.

Don’t

- Believe that “cancer always equals death.”
- 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 or ashamed to get help from a mental health professional.
- Keep your worries or symptoms (physical or psychological) secret from the person closest to you.
- Stop your regular treatment for an alternative therapy.



Tell your friends or loved ones what you’re going through and what they can do to help. Their support and understanding can help you cope better.

Talk to your healthcare team

Tell your healthcare team about the changes 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.

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 to help manage your distress

For cancer information, day-to-day help, and emotional support, call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345** or visit us online at **www.cancer.org**. We're here when you need us.

