

What to Do for Distress

Distress is an unpleasant emotion, feeling, or thought. 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.



What causes distress in people with cancer?

Distress is common in people with cancer and in their family members and other loved ones. There are many ways cancer can cause distress, including:

- Worries about the future
- Increased health needs (more appointments, doctors, and medicines)
- Late and long-term side effects
- Concerns about family and relationships
- Money or health insurance stress



What does distress feel like?

People describe distress in many ways. If you have distress, you might feel:

- Sad or depressed
- Anxious
- Angry
- Hopeless
- Alone or isolated
- Helpless, or like you have no control
- Unsure of your purpose or meaning in life
- Numb, or nothing at all
- Exhausted

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.



How is distress treated?

Treatment for distress may include talk therapy, medicines, mindfulness activities (like music therapy), or a combination of all three.



What can you do to help manage 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, 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.
- Find a doctor who lets you ask all your questions. This can help you prepare for what is likely to happen.
- Explore spiritual and religious beliefs and practices (such as prayer) that have helped you in the past. Look into other practices that might offer you comfort.
- Keep a journal as a way to express yourself.

- Keep records of your doctors' phone numbers, dates of treatment, lab values, x-rays, scans, symptoms, side effects, medicines, and general medical status.
- Talk with your cancer care team if you are thinking about stopping regular treatment. Tell them why you are thinking about this and what you would rather do instead.

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's important for healing to let yourself feel all your feelings, good and bad.
- 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.



When to talk with 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.

Having some distress is normal when you have cancer. But sometimes distress can keep you from doing what you need to do. Call your cancer care team right away if you are:

- 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
- Having 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 or death all the time
- Questioning faith and religious beliefs
- Feeling helpless, worthless, useless, and like a burden to others

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 need to help manage it. There are medicines and other services that might help you.



When to go to the ER or call 911

To get immediate help, go to the ER or call 911. You can also call or text 988 to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. This service provides free and confidential support 24/7 for people in distress and resources for you or your loved ones.



For more information and support, visit the American Cancer Society website at cancer.org/distress or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.

