

## Dealing with Feelings about Cancer

***Learning that you or a family member has cancer can cause feelings of anxiety or distress.***

Feelings of worry, fear, sadness, anger, anxiety, and even hopelessness are normal reactions to cancer. These feelings may come when you first learn the diagnosis, at any time during treatment, and even after treatment has ended. While these feelings are common, they may get in the way of coping with cancer in ways that will help you feel better. There are ways to deal with these strong feelings that have worked for others and can work for you too.



***How will I know when I am feeling distressed?***

People will have different signs of distress. Be alert for signs from your body and mind that it is time to take action:

**Signs in the body**

- Changes in appetite (not eating much or over-eating)
- Upset stomach
- Loose bowels (the “runs” or diarrhea)
- Trouble sleeping
- Low or no energy
- Headaches
- Racing heart
- Feeling short of breath

**Signs in the mind and feelings**

- You can't stop thinking about the cancer
- Trouble concentrating
- Concern about changes in your work or family life
- Feeling:
  - Worried about the future
  - Helpless or angry
  - Very sad or full of grief
  - Guilty or full of regret

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## ***What can I do?***

When feelings of distress get too strong, they can make it difficult to deal with your day to day life and to find pleasure in living. So, it's important to take action. Here are tips and tools to get started.

### **Learn about the cancer to lower your anxiety and feel more in control.**

- If your treatment center offers patient or family education programs, sign up!
- Ask your healthcare team questions about the cancer and treatment choices.
- Ask them about other ways to learn, such as booklets or websites they recommend.

### **Use active relaxation: take steps to relax and find calm.**

- Do activities that relax your mind and body. Some people use prayer, meditation, music, or art to feel calmer.
- Practice muscle relaxation. You might find it helpful to listen to a relaxation CD to guide you. Here are the basic steps:
  - Close your eyes. Breathe deeply.
  - Focus on tensing and then relaxing each body part.
  - Start with your toes and work your way up to your head.
  - Once relaxed, think of a pleasant place or experience.



### **Use active coping: take steps to feel better.**

- Make a list of the ways you have coped with troubles in the past and use the list to remind yourself of your strengths.
- Stay as active as you can. Exercise helps lower stress.
- Plan activities you enjoy every day. This might be reading, listening to music, talking with friends, walking outdoors, watching a funny TV program or movie — or something else. Schedule pleasure in your life.
- Try writing down your thoughts and worries. Don't worry about your spelling or grammar. No one will grade your paper! The purpose is to relieve your mind and give you a better sense of control.
- Ask for support from family and friends. This is not the time to withdraw from others. Think about people who have offered support in the past and get in touch with them.

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## Use active talk for support.

- Talk to your loved ones. Don't be afraid of being "a burden." Your family and friends may be waiting to hear how they can support you. And, when you share your thoughts and feelings, you can help others around you feel more comfortable and close to you. Learn more in the "Listening and Talking" guide.
- Talk to other patients or family members who have been through cancer and cancer treatment. Cancer support groups offer the chance to connect with others. If one is offered at your treatment center, think about going. There may be groups in your community as well. Some people join groups on the internet. It helps to realize you're not alone.
- Talk with a professional counselor. It's wise to seek help if your feelings are more distressing than you can handle. Ask your healthcare team to recommend a counselor. They might suggest:
  - Individual or family counseling
  - A support group

## ***More ways to cope:***

- Keep your focus on the present and try to pay attention to the small joys in your life. For example, enjoy eating a favorite food, feeling the warm sunshine, or the calm of a rainy day. Think about what you can do to feel better in this moment, on this day.



- Spend time with positive people. They can help you focus on pleasant things.
- Expect that you'll have times of hard feelings – worry, anxiety, sadness. These feelings can come no matter how positive you are or how great you are at coping. Try to let these feelings come and go, but not take over your life.
- If you take prescribed medicine for anxiety or depression, do not stop taking it suddenly. Be sure to talk to your doctor or nurse first.
- Be aware that alcohol and certain other drugs can increase feelings of depression. If you are concerned about your alcohol use or have problems controlling it, ask your doctor or nurse for help.

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## When should I see or call my doctor or nurse?

Remember that your health care team is there to help. Talk with your doctor or nurse for ways to deal with your concerns.

If you notice these signs in yourself or a loved one, be sure to contact your healthcare team:

- You are thinking about dropping out of cancer treatment.
- You have big mood swings that include periods of depression and periods of feeling “high” or full of energy.
- Your feelings are getting in the way of taking care of yourself.
- You are using alcohol or other drugs to help cope with feelings.
- Signs of distress in your body, mind or feelings that are getting worse.
- You have been or are now getting treated for depression or other mental health conditions, and the symptoms have come back or gotten worse.
- You are thinking about hurting or killing yourself.
- You would like help from a counselor to cope with your feelings.
- You feel unable to cope.

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This guide contains general information and is not meant to replace consultation with your doctor or nurse.

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