



Distress in People With Cancer

Feelings of distress anxiety, sadness and grief are common for fire fighters who are facing cancer. Distress can be shown in different ways. When cancer is treated or as situations change, learning to cope can be difficult. It's important to know when and where to get help and support.

The word distress has many meanings. Distress is an unpleasant emotion, feeling, thought, condition or behavior. Distress can affect the way you think, feel or act, and can make it hard to cope with having cancer, along with dealing with symptoms, treatment and side effects.

Research shows that distress may affect how you make decisions and take action regarding your health, too. You may have trouble focusing on treatment decisions, making follow-up appointments or even taking medications that are important for your treatment. People might describe distress as feeling:

- Sad
- Fearful
- Angry
- Helpless
- Hopeless
- Out of control
- Unsure of their faith, purpose or meaning in life
- Like they want to pull away from people
- Concerned about illness
- Concerned about home or social role (as a father, mother, friend, caregiver, etc.)
- Depressed, anxious or panicked

A certain amount of distress is normal when you or a loved one has cancer. There are many things that suddenly seem uncertain. Certain times during the treatment or parts of the cancer experience may bring on distress more than others.

Sometimes distress can go from an expected level to one that interferes with treatment, makes it hard for you to function or [cope](#), and affects all parts of your life. In some cases, a person with distress may have trouble sleeping, eating or concentrating. Some might have frequent thoughts of illness and death.

The following self-screening tools assess distress, and the results can be shared with a healthcare provider or with a person's cancer care team.

Click the links below to access the following resources:

The NCCN Distress Thermometer (DT)

Established by the National Comprehensive Cancer Support Network (NCCN), the NCCN Distress Thermometer (DT) is a one-item, 11-point Likert scale designed for cancer patients to indicate their level of distress and identify specific stressors in their life¹. A person who rates their distress at a 4 or higher should seek further behavioral health screening or support through their cancer care team.

Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9)

The Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) is a self-screening tool that is used to screen for symptoms of clinical depression. This tool can be used by anyone, including people with cancer to help identify symptoms of depression and to help find out if additional behavioral health support might be needed. A total score of 10 indicates moderate clinical depression and warrants further evaluation by a mental health professional.

Your first line of defense in coping with distress is **having a cancer care team you feel safe with**. Even if you think your feelings and thoughts are minor, talk to them about how you feel. They can direct you to the help you need. Remember that they are treating YOU, not just the cancer, and they count on you to tell them how you're doing and what you're feeling. Remember, no one can do that except you.

If you are a loved one or caregiver who is feeling distressed, it's okay to let the cancer care team know that you need help. Even though most of the information here may seem like it's for the person with cancer, it can also be useful to their loved ones and caregivers. These people are a strong source of support, and their well-being is important, too.

Everyone with cancer can face distress at some point during their cancer experience. Learn more about managing distress when facing cancer in [Emotional, Mental Health, and Mood Changes: Distress](#).

If you ever have thoughts about hurting or killing yourself, contact help immediately:

- 24/7 Firefighter & Family Crisis Hotline: (844) 525-FIRE (3473)
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273-8255
- Crisis Service Canada: (833) 456-4566 (or text: 45645)/Quebec residents only: (866) 277-3553.

¹Referenced with permission from NCCN Clinical Practice guidelines in Oncology (NCCN Guidelines) for Distress Management V.2.2021. National Comprehensive Cancer Network 2021. All rights reserved [Accessed September 14, 2021]. To view the most recent version of the guideline, go online to NCCN.org. NCCN makes no warranties of any kind whatsoever regarding their content, use, or application or and disclaims any responsibility for their application or use in any way.