

Distress

What Is Distress?

Distress is physical or mental strain or stress. Feeling distress is normal when you or a loved one has cancer. People facing cancer are often scared and worried about what may happen, how their loved ones will cope, and what the future will be like. People often wonder, “Am I going to die?” and “Why is this happening to me?”

Some feelings of distress are a normal part of dealing with a cancer diagnosis.

Feeling upset, worried, and afraid are normal parts of the process. Distress can also include feelings of anxiety and sadness. When you feel too much distress, it can interfere with your ability to cope as well as your treatment, recovery, and life.

Sometimes events or memories may put you or your loved one at greater risk of too much distress. Some triggers might include the following:

- Having a relative who died from cancer
- Having recently lost someone close to you
- Having depression or suicidal thoughts in the past

The social workers of Huntsman Cancer Institute’s Patient and Family Support team are a resource for people experiencing distress related to a cancer diagnosis.

Our team is available Monday–Friday from 8 a.m.–4:30 p.m.

To learn more or make an appointment, call 801-213-5699.

huntsmancancer.org/pfs

What Are Signs of Too Much Distress?

Here are some signs that you may be feeling too much distress:

Mental Signs

- Inability to cope with pain, fatigue, or nausea
- Trouble with concentration, memory, and thinking
- Trouble making decisions
- Thoughts about cancer or death all the time
- Questions about faith and religious beliefs that were once comforting
- Thoughts about a painful event from the past that seems unrelated to what is happening now
- Thoughts about harming yourself or others

Physical Signs

- Trouble sleeping (4 hours a night or less)
- Trouble eating (little or no appetite for weeks)

Emotional Signs

- Fear to the point of panic or a very strong sense of dread
- Doubt about getting through treatment
- Unusual irritability and anger
- Despair and hopelessness—wondering if there is any point in going on
- Feelings of worthlessness and uselessness

Social Signs

- Family conflicts that seem impossible to make better
- If you have any of these signs, talk to your health care team.

What Can I Do?

First, keep in mind that distress is not a sign of weakness. A cancer diagnosis is not easy. You can learn to handle your feelings in a positive way. Your next line of defense in coping with distress is having a cancer care team you feel comfortable with. Talk about how you feel so your team can help you. Remember, your team is there for **you**, not just your cancer.