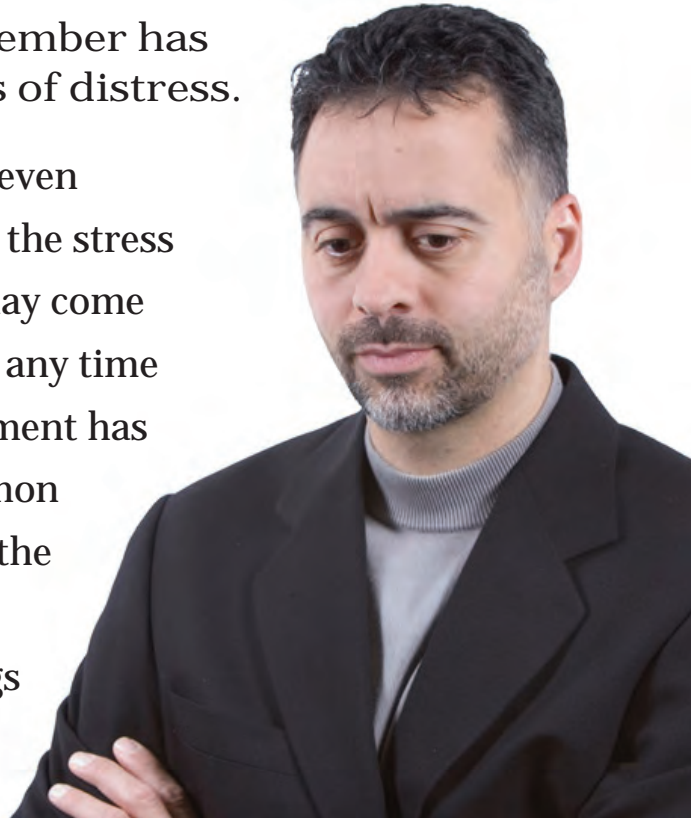


# Dealing With Strong Feelings About Cancer

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

Feelings of worry, fear, sadness, and even hopelessness are normal reactions to the stress that cancer can cause. The feelings may come when you first learn the diagnosis, at any time during treatment, or even after treatment has ended. While these feelings are common and entirely normal, they may get in the way of coping with cancer. 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 distress is getting too strong?

Watch for the signs of distress listed below. Different people have different signs. Be alert for the signs that your body and mind show as signals to take action.

### Common signs in the body

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

### Common signs in mind and feelings

- Not able to stop thinking about the cancer, trouble concentrating
- Concerned 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

## 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 help lower anxiety and increase a sense of control.

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

Use *active* coping. Don't just wait and hope 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 idea 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.

Use *active* relaxation, not alcohol or drugs.

- Find ways that relax your body and use them. Some use prayer or meditation, music or art to feel calmer.
- Practice muscle relaxation. You might find it helpful to listen to a relaxation tape to guide you. Here are the basic steps:
  - Close your eyes and 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.

# Dealing With Strong Feelings About Cancer

Use *active* talk for support.

- Talk to your loved ones. Don't be afraid of being "a burden." Your family and friends care about you and may be waiting to hear how they can support you. And, when you share your thoughts and feelings, you help others around you feel more comfortable and close to you. Learn more in the "Listening and Talking" sheet.

- Talk to other patients or family members who have been through cancer and cancer treatment. Cancer support groups offer the chance to connect with other patients. If one is offered at your treatment center, think about going. Some patients join groups "online." It helps when you realize you're not alone.

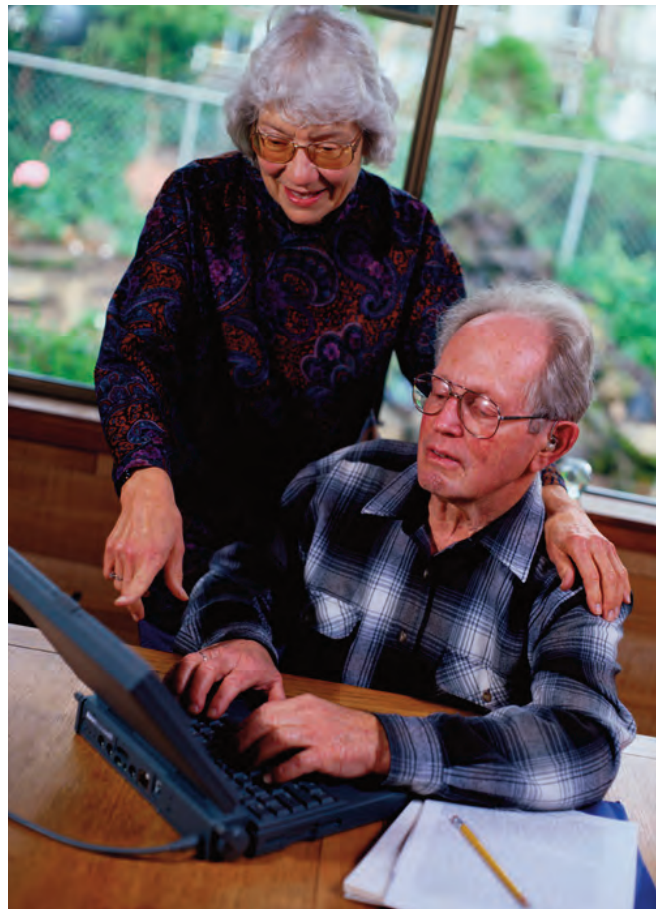
- Talk with a professional counselor when you need extra help. Seeing a counselor does not mean you're "crazy" or weak. It's wise to seek extra help if your feelings are more distressing than you can handle. Ask your health care team to recommend a counselor. They might suggest:

- Individual therapy
- Family therapy
- A support group

More tips about 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 or feeling the warm sunshine. Today is the only day you need to think about.

- Spend time with positive people. They can help you focus on pleasant things rather than problems.



- Expect that you'll have times of hard feelings — worry, anxiety, sadness. 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. You might feel better if you don't use them at all.

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

# Dealing With Strong Feelings About Cancer

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

If you notice these signs in yourself or a loved one, be sure to contact your health care 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 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 using alcohol or other drugs to help cope with feelings.
- You are thinking about hurting or killing yourself.
- You would like help from a counselor to cope with powerful feelings.



This information was developed in response to Michigan's Comprehensive Cancer Control Plan, under guidance of the Prostate Cancer Action Committee. Their efforts were supported in part by the University of Michigan School of Nursing and the Michigan Department of Community Health with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Cooperative Agreement 5U58DP000812. The contents of the publication do not necessarily represent the official views of the CDC.

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

Developed September 2009.