

RECOGNIZING AND MANAGING ANXIETY, FEAR AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS



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Anxiety (a feeling of worry or unease), fear, uncertainty, anger, and sadness are common feelings that patients and families sometimes have when coping with cancer. They are normal responses to the stress of cancer, especially when the cancer is first diagnosed.

Changes in the ability to keep up family duties, loss of control over events in life, changes in the way you look, or simply the shock of a cancer diagnosis might lead to feelings of fear or anxiety. A person could feel uncertain about the future and concerned about suffering, pain, and the unknown. Some people mourn the changes in their bodies, and the loss of the healthy future they may have expected. Fears concerning loss of independence, changes in relationships with loved ones, and becoming a burden to others may overwhelm the patient and complicate family life.

Family members may have these feelings because they, too, are uncertain about the future or maybe even angry that their loved one has cancer. They may feel guilt and frustration at not being able to “do enough” as they care for the patient and family. On the other hand, they may feel overwhelmed by everything they now have to do. Many caregivers feel stressed trying to balance work, childcare, self-care, and other tasks, along with more responsibility at home. All of this is on top of having to worry about and take care of the person with cancer.

Sometimes, a person with cancer may become overly anxious, fearful, or depressed and may no longer cope well with day-to-day life. If this happens, it often helps the patient and family to get help from a professional therapist or counselor.

If you need help connecting to someone for support, talk to your Nurse Navigator or a member of your care team.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Feeling anxious and overwhelmed to the point of panic
- Trouble thinking, solving problems, or making decisions (even about little things)
- Being agitated, irritable or restless
- Feeling or looking tense
- Concern about “losing control”
- An uneasy sense that something bad is going to happen
- Trembling and shaking
- Headaches
- Being cranky or angry with others
- Feeling unable to cope with tiredness, pain, nausea, and other symptoms
- Trouble sleeping or restless sleep

WHAT PATIENTS CAN DO

- Talk about feelings and fears that you or family members may have – it is okay to feel sad and frustrated.
- Decide together with your family or caregiver what things you can do to support each other.

- Do not blame yourself or others when you feel anxious and afraid. Instead, look at your thoughts, concerns, and beliefs related to what has been going on in your life.
- Get help through in-person or online support groups.
- Think about asking your doctor or nurse for a referral to a counselor or mental health professional who can work with you and your family.
- Use prayer, meditation, or other types of spiritual support.
- Try deep breathing and relaxation exercises several times a day. (For example, close your eyes, breathe deeply, focus on each body part, and relax it, starting with your toes and working up to your head. When you are relaxed, imagine yourself in a pleasant place, such as a breezy beach or a sunny meadow.)
- Cut down on caffeine. It can worsen anxiety symptoms.
- Talk with your doctor about the possible use of medicine for anxiety.

WHAT CAREGIVERS CAN DO

- Gently invite the patient to talk about their fears and concerns.
- Do not try to force the patient to talk before they are ready.
- Listen carefully without judging the patient's feelings – or your own.
- Talk with the patient to decide what you can do to better support each other.
- For severe anxiety, logic and reason may not be what's needed. Instead, talk with a doctor about your concerns and how best to provide support.
- To reduce your own stress, try suggestions from the list for the patient, or use any other stress relievers that have worked for you in the past.
- Consider getting support for yourself through groups or one-on-one counseling.

