

# DISTRESS SCREENING FOR CANCER PATIENTS



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



Photo Credit: Chris Smead

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 life. A person who rates their distress at a 4 or higher should seek further behavioral health screening or support through their cancer care team.

# DISTRESS SCREENING FOR CANCER PATIENTS



## **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:**

Call or text "988" to reach the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline in the U.S. or Canada or visit [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org) in the U.S. or [988.ca](https://www.988.ca) in Canada.