

Social Distress

What is social distress?

Social distress is a change in a person's social life (roles, relationships, sense of belonging, sexual function and appearance which causes a suffering of mind or body.

What are the signs and symptoms of social distress?

- Feelings of :
 - Being lonely and/or feeling alone.
 - Not being able to carry out personal roles, such as spouse/partner, parent, or friend.
 - Not being able to do your job.
 - Shame of failure regarding not being able to have sex or lacking an interest in sex. This could be due to illness and related issues.
 - Fear about financial concerns.
 - Fear about being a burden to those providing care.
- Not wanting to receive company or visitors. This may include even close friends or relatives. It could be due to the effects of your illness on your appearance.

What to report to the hospice/palliative care team?

- Any signs of behaviors listed above.
- Any thoughts about suicide.
- Prior history of social distress.
- No interest in self and life in general.
- *Unusual* anger or lashing out. The person may not understand the reason for the anger or how to cope.
- Any change that concerns you.

What can be done for social distress?

Social distress is common with terminal illnesses. Not everyone experiences it the same way.

Patients and Family

- Do not feel you are bothering the hospice and palliative care team by asking questions.

Patient

- It is very important to have at least one person with whom you trust to talk with and share your thoughts and feelings.
- Do not be hard on yourself for not feeling very social.
- Allow yourself to be angry. Tell others about your anger.
- Be sure to take your medications as prescribed.
- It is okay to want quiet time. Consider using this time to reflect, record memories and future messages for your family.

Family

- Provide calm, relaxing setting.
- Treat the patient with dignity and respect.
- Be willing to be present. Provide support.
- Be willing to listen and reminisce.
- Enjoy the time together, look for ways to make memories.
- Report any medication side effects or behavior that is out of character.
- Support any desire to stay in touch with friends and family.
- Encourage short periods of time for visitors during the day.
- Try not to let the patient become secluded.

Other HPNA Teaching Sheets on are available at www.HPNA.org.

References

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