

Mind–Body Approaches for Managing Distress in Cancer Care

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Symptoms of distress are common in people living with cancer. Evidence-based interventions for distress management in patients with cancer include mind–body approaches. Deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and mindfulness are three interventions patients can use for self-management of distress.

AT A GLANCE

- The National Comprehensive Cancer Network Distress Thermometer is recommended to screen for distress.
- Distress responses may include feelings of vulnerability, grief, and fear about potentially disabling problems such as depression, anxiety, and panic.
- Mind–body approaches can enhance the mind’s connection with the body to promote relaxation, calmness, and well-being.

KEYWORDS

mindfulness; mind–body approaches; distress; breathing exercises; relaxation

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Individuals living with cancer commonly report symptoms of distress. Cancer-related distress may occur at any point in the disease trajectory and may be related to the cancer diagnosis and to the effects of the disease and its treatment (Mitchell, 2021). Distress in cancer is characterized as a complex, unpleasant experience of a psychological, social, spiritual, and/or physical nature that can interfere with one’s ability to cope well with cancer, its physical symptoms, and therapy. Distress responses can range from typical feelings of vulnerability, grief, and fear to potentially disabling problems such as depression, anxiety, and panic. In addition, one may experience social isolation, as well as existential and spiritual crises (National Comprehensive Cancer Network [NCCN], 2023). Thus, assessment of distress is recommended as a priority for all clinicians caring for individuals with cancer (Mitchell, 2021; NCCN, 2023; Pirl et al., 2014).

Biopsychosocial models of stress and distress provide a strong conceptual foundation for biobehavioral interventions to manage distress. These interventions build cognitive and behavioral skills, including relaxation training as a strategy to interrupt the negative impact of distress by targeting physiological stress pathways (e.g., the sympathetic–adrenal–medullary system, the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis) (Hoyt & Penedo, 2021). The relaxation response slows the heart rate, lowers blood pressure, and decreases oxygen consumption and stress hormone levels (McClafferty, 2018). Because mind–body approaches can enhance the mind’s connection with the body to promote relaxation, calmness, and well-being, they are applicable to managing distress. This article focuses on the mind–body approaches of relaxation and mindfulness-based interventions for managing distress in people living with cancer.

Mind–Body Approaches

Many mind–body approaches originated in ancient cultures. These interventions affect the mind and body by connecting the individual’s thoughts, emotions, and physiologic functioning (McClafferty, 2018). Individuals can learn how to use mind–body interventions in individual or group settings or be guided in the intervention through recordings or mobile applications (apps). Individuals living with cancer who use mind–body approaches experience positive health outcomes and improved physical and psychological well-being (Deleemans et al., 2023; Mishra et al., 2022). NCCN (2023) recommends relaxation and mindfulness-based interventions.