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### The Past, Present, and Future of Distress Screening: Launching a Robust Distress Screening Program at a Large Outpatient Medical Oncology Practice Serving Rural/Underserved Communities

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# The Past, Present, and Future of Distress Screening

## Launching a Robust Distress Screening Program at a Large Outpatient Medical Oncology Practice Serving Rural/Underserved Communities

Stein K, Litterini A, Warren-Vanhorn T, Robbins T, Curtis M, Sanyal A.

### Introduction

- The National Comprehensive Care Network (NCCN) defines distress as: “an emotionally unpleasant psychological (cognitive, behavioral, emotional), social, or spiritual experience that may interfere with a patient’s ability to effectively cope with cancer, its symptoms, and its treatment.”
- Poorly managed psychosocial distress results in lower QoL, poor treatment adherence, and worse clinical outcomes.
- Conversely early identification of at-risk patients via screening can avoid mental health crises and can improve outcomes.
- Unfortunately, distress is often not well assessed or addressed, leaving patients to suffer unnecessarily without supportive care.

### Methods

- Past distress screening was limited by single administration of the distress thermometer (DT) at a post-treatment survivorship visit, with a lack of integration with the EHR.
- After redesign, administration of the DT at initial chemotherapy teaching sessions and robust searchable databases integrated with EHR systems, allowing providers/researchers to create reports filtered by date ranges, encounter type, clinical site/facility, scores of  $\geq 4$ , domain (physical, emotional, practical), and outcome (referral to specialist).

### Distress Thermometer

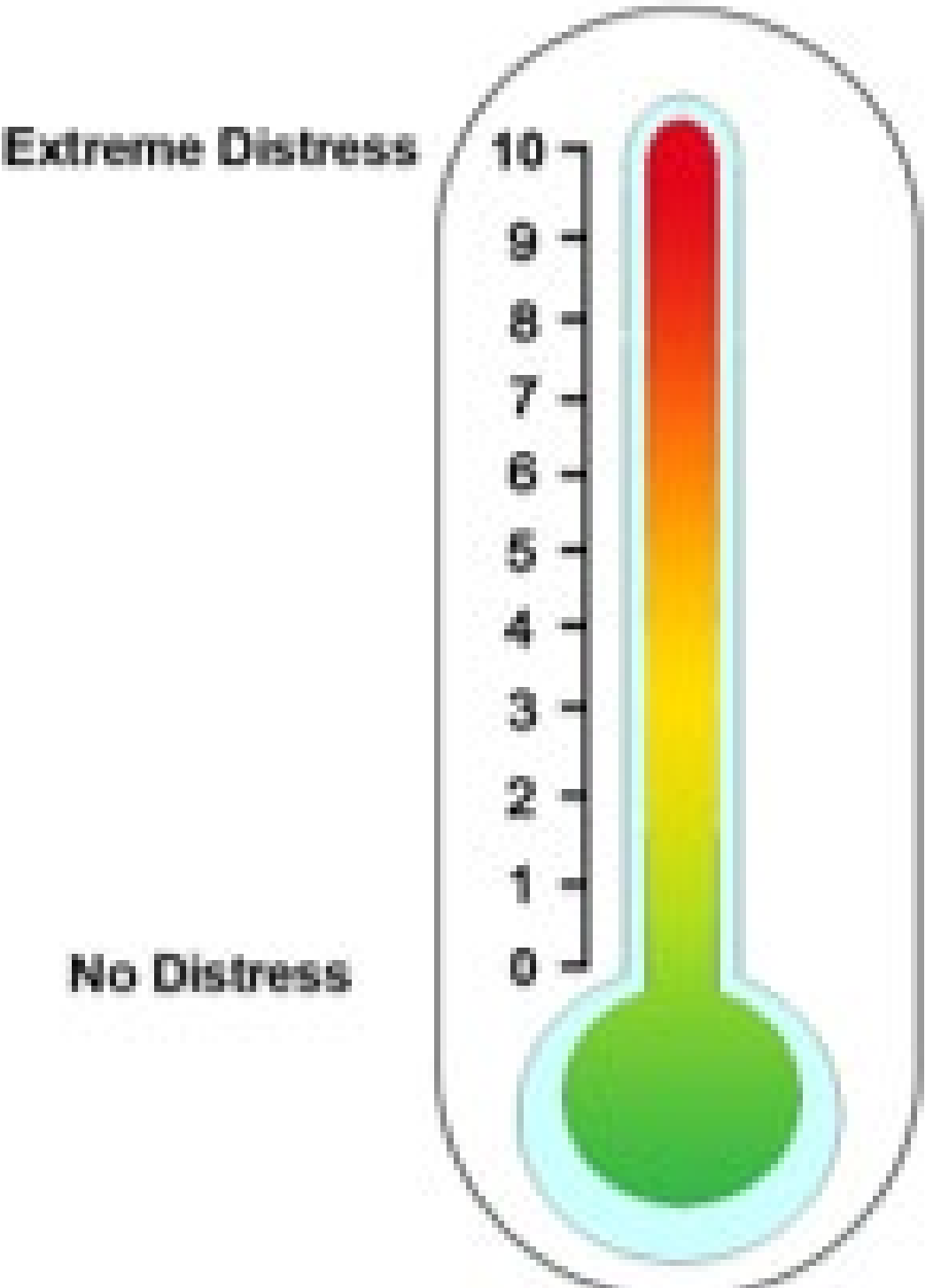
**SCREENING TOOL FOR MEASURING DISTRESS**

**Patient Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

At times, your illness and its treatment can cause distress for you and your family. This brief form will help you and your team identify any areas of concern that are important to you.

The first part of this form asks you to rate your level of distress. Distress refers to any experience – psychological, social, spiritual, physical, etc. that is of concern to you. Experiencing distress does not mean you have a problem; rather it is an expected reaction to a stressful situation.

Instructions: First, please circle the number (0-10) that best describe how much distress you have been experiencing in the past week including today.

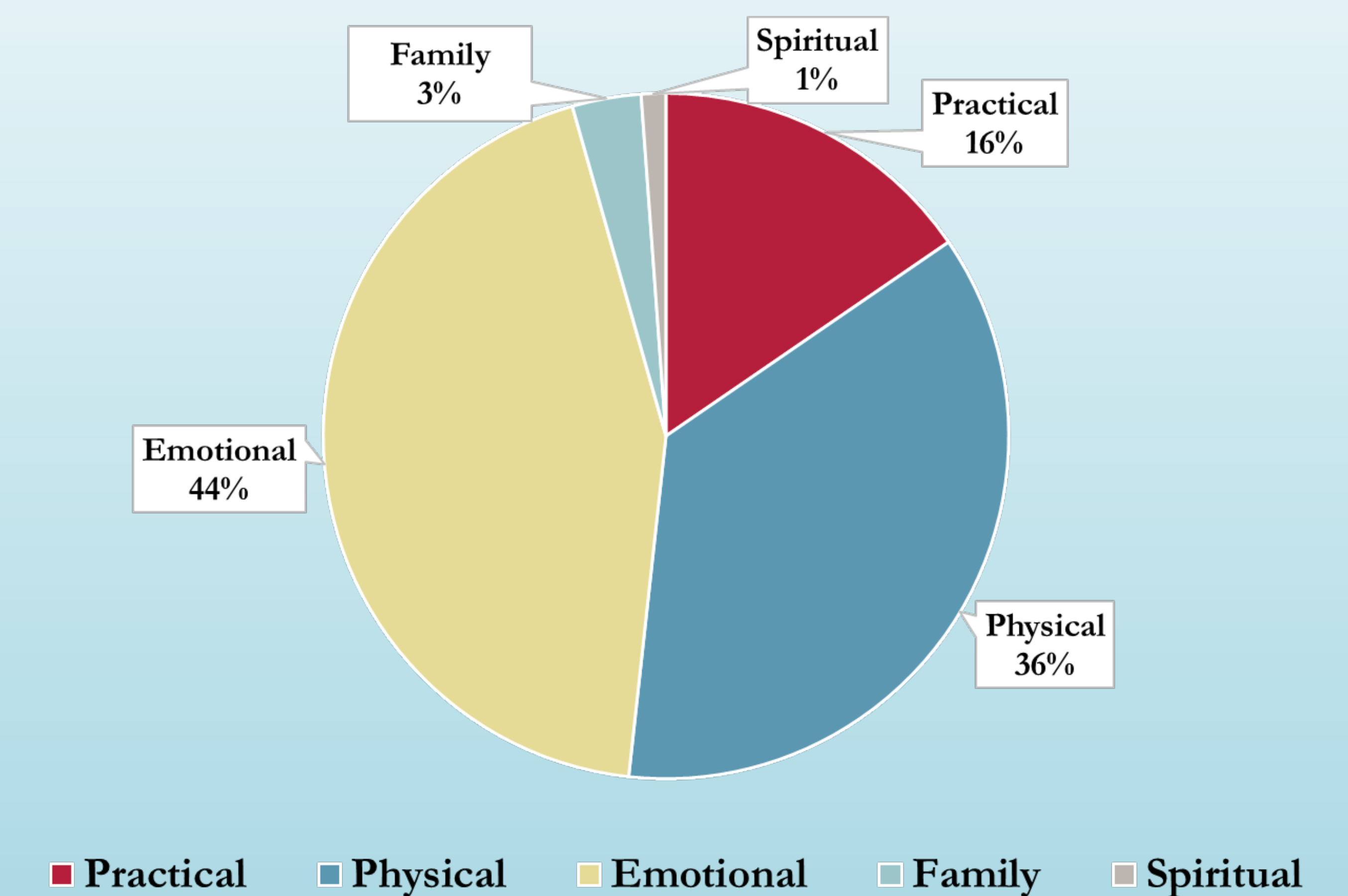


Second, please indicate if any of the following has been a problem for you in the past week including today.

Physical Concerns	Practical Concerns
<input type="checkbox"/> Pain	<input type="checkbox"/> Taking care of myself
<input type="checkbox"/> Sleep	<input type="checkbox"/> Taking Care of Others
<input type="checkbox"/> Fatigue	<input type="checkbox"/> Work
<input type="checkbox"/> Tobacco Use	<input type="checkbox"/> School
<input type="checkbox"/> Substance Abuse	<input type="checkbox"/> Housing
<input type="checkbox"/> Memory or Concentration	<input type="checkbox"/> Finances
<input type="checkbox"/> Sexual health	<input type="checkbox"/> Insurance
<input type="checkbox"/> Changes in eating	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation
<input type="checkbox"/> Loss of change in physical abilities	<input type="checkbox"/> Child care
	<input type="checkbox"/> Having enough food
	<input type="checkbox"/> Access to medicine
Emotional Concerns	Spiritual or Religious Concerns
<input type="checkbox"/> Worry or anxiety	<input type="checkbox"/> Sense of meaning or purpose
<input type="checkbox"/> Sadness or depression	<input type="checkbox"/> Changes in faith or belief
<input type="checkbox"/> Loss of Interest or enjoyment	<input type="checkbox"/> Death, dying or afterlife
<input type="checkbox"/> Grief or Loss	<input type="checkbox"/> Conflict between beliefs and cancer treatments
<input type="checkbox"/> Fear	<input type="checkbox"/> Relationship with the sacred
<input type="checkbox"/> Loneliness	<input type="checkbox"/> Ritual or dietary needs
<input type="checkbox"/> Anger	
<input type="checkbox"/> Change in appearance	
<input type="checkbox"/> Feelings of worthlessness or being a burden	
Social Concerns	Other Concerns:
<input type="checkbox"/> Relationship with spouse or partner	
<input type="checkbox"/> Relationship with children	
<input type="checkbox"/> Relationship with family members	
<input type="checkbox"/> Relationship with friends or coworkers	
<input type="checkbox"/> Communication with healthcare team	
<input type="checkbox"/> Ability to have children	

### Results

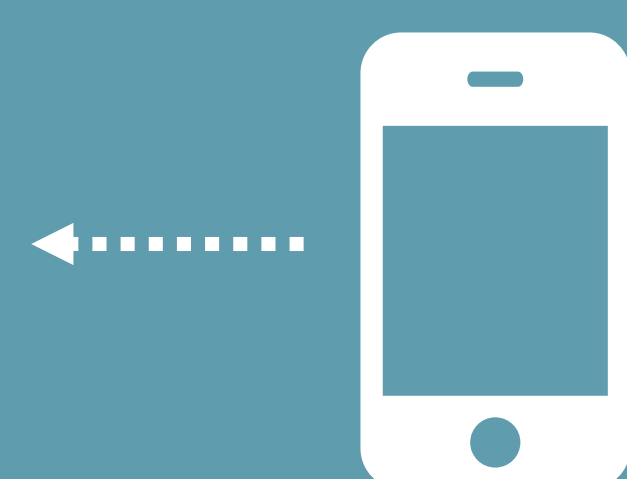
From Sept. 2022- Jan 2023, 1236 DT's were administered and analyzed. The largest group presented with mild distress (scores 1-3; n= 411; 33%), followed by 32% with moderate to severe distress (score  $\geq 4$ ; n=391). No distress was reported by 31% (n=388).



Distribution across Distress Domains

### Discussion

While much work remains, distress screening encounters have doubled at some facilities and referrals to specialists have increased significantly. Future plans include administering the DT “early and often” at periodic clinical encounters to allow tracking of distress over time and triaging referrals by domain to social work, behavioral health, cancer rehabilitation, palliative care, and survivorship care.



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