

Emotional Wellness of NICU Parents

Every expectant parent has hopes and dreams about what life will be like once their baby is born.

When the birth of your baby is followed by a stay in the neonatal intensive care unit, or NICU, life can be very different than what you imagined.

Feelings such as guilt, fear and disappointment are normal responses which almost all NICU parents share.

Later on in the pregnancy, when we realized that most likely they were going to be early, and the fact that they were twins and that there could be some other complications, even at that point we understood that, you know, we might need to spend a couple of days in the NICU.

But still at that point we didn't realize, you know, the longevity of how long we'd be actually staying there, the severity of the babies how, you know, their health would be at that point I didn't have as much anxiety as later came.

When a parent finds out their baby's going to the NICU, the Intensive Care Unit, they're terrified. It's unexpected. They don't know what's going to happen. It's the unknown, that any parent feels when their child's in danger and they don't know what's happening.

Looking at the babies in the isolettes all hooked up with the wires, I think the most... most anxiety-ridden, difficult part as a mother was going and seeing your babies for the first time and not being able to hold them. So, it just looked, you know, from an external perspective, that they were just not comfortable.

You're instinctively wanting to pick them up and swaddle them close. You've been carrying them for, you know, X amount of months and then all of a sudden to not even be able to hold your baby.

One out of three parents of infants born sooner than 30 weeks gestation struggles with depression and anxiety.

And it's not just the mothers who are affected. Nearly as many fathers of preterm infants struggle with depression and anxiety.

It was a long walk over there, seeing them then being hooked up to all the wires, all the equipment; it was just a very... like I really didn't know what to do with myself. If I was in the way, I definitely felt in the way and I couldn't do anything. I wanted to be able to... just to help, but I knew that I wasn't able to do anything to help.

Parents with babies in the intensive care unit are really more at risk of depression, anxiety disorders that are common even with normal deliveries. Concern for their baby's safety really can increase this normal depression and anxiety, and exacerbate it, make it worse with a baby in the intensive care unit.

The anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder experienced by parents of babies born prematurely or with health complications can last for months or even years.

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I think the question every parent asks themselves in this circumstance is, “Is what I’m feeling normal?” They’ve just been through this terrible time of a surprise, a lot of anxiety, fear, and some of these feelings are very normal. “Is this outside of the normal feeling? Is my depression and anxiety too deep? Has it gone on too long? Are the resources I’m using not helping?”

I think asking and talking to certainly your partner, other people, healthcare providers would be very helpful in trying to gauge that.

Here are four important things you can do to lessen your chances of depression or PTSD:

One: Be in skin-to-skin contact with your baby as often as possible for as long as possible. It can stabilize premature babies and set the stage for optimal brain development.

Two: Learn as much as you can about your baby’s cues, so that you feel confident and competent handling him or her. Take any classes your NICU offers.

Three: Ask if you can be matched with a peer mentor who can help support and guide you through your NICU experience.

And four: Stay informed. Advocate for your baby to help you feel more connected and empowered. Talk with your baby’s nurses and doctors daily and attend rounds in the NICU when you can.

One of the major factors that really helped lessen the anxiety during the entire process was really working with and getting to know the nurses and the doctors and just becoming more comfortable asking questions.

I think it’s important that parents reach out and get support and treatment during this very difficult time. Support should start right at the bedside. The doctors and nurses in the NICU are going to be very open with you, communicate with you, and that’s the first step; keep you informed.

It’s really easy to sort of let yourself take a backseat mentally, physically, so it was great to have someone come and just look me in the eyes and say... and ask if, you know, if I was doing OK, if I was starting to feel depressed.

Talk with your spouse, talk with your partner about how you’re feeling. Friends, co-workers are ready to help and listen. Beyond that therapists are helpful. There are times when we need people beyond our circle of friends. We need that neutral third party to listen to us, to help us work things out. A therapist is great for that, and there are therapists available.

And sometimes you might find you need more treatment than that. Medication has a role in the treatment of depression and anxiety.

Your baby’s stay in the NICU can have a very real and lasting impact on you, so it’s important to understand the complex emotions surrounding birth and parenthood, especially when your baby is small or sick.

If you are suffering, you have less energy to bond with your baby, and your baby needs you.

Your NICU social worker can be a valuable resource.

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Learning more about how having a baby in the NICU affects you as a parent is important to helping you cope with feelings of sadness and depression.

The advice that I would give to new parents or parents in the intensive care unit is to really, to trust the system... to really respect and know that they have your child's best interest and medical interest at heart.

Try to focus on how your baby's doing overall, what the long-term outcomes will be, and maybe not the day to day ups and downs that can leave you whipsawed and emotionally spent. Look at the long term and take joy in that.