

EMOTIONAL RESPONSES OF PARENTS

Having a premature or sick baby is one of the most stressful experiences a parent can have. Most parents find it very difficult to go through the experience of having their baby in a NICU (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit) without needing emotional support. It is normal for parents to feel overwhelmed by stress and confused by their feelings.

The doctors, nurses, and social workers on the unit can be wonderful sources of support. We also have a psychologist available to our families who can help you deal with all of the stresses of having a baby who is ill.

Some common feelings of parents of premature babies follow:

I feel guilty that I did something to cause my baby to be premature or sick.

This is a common reaction for many parents. It is important to realize that many parents of premature or ill infants feel some guilt, even if they took excellent care of themselves during pregnancy. Mothers who have had excellent prenatal care, who have watched their diet, and who have neither smoked nor drank alcohol may still have premature babies. It will be important to find out if the doctors know what caused your baby to be premature. In most cases, the cause will be something out of your control. Talking with your doctor or others may help these feelings of guilt go away.

I worry that I don't feel more love for my baby.

When premature babies are born, almost all parents have some fear that their baby will die. Because of this fear, parents naturally have what is known as anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief is a way of preparing yourself emotionally, in case your baby would die. Anticipatory grief both helps parents and causes them problems. Anticipatory grief helps reduce the pain already felt by parents of premature infants. For example some parents of premature babies delay giving the baby a name. These parents believe that their baby's death would be easier to adjust to, if their baby had no name. This fear of death creates a temporary separation of the bond between premature babies and parents. This is the reason why many parents wonder why they don't love their baby more. When their baby starts to get healthy, almost all parents of premature babies re-establish their bonds of love with their baby. If you find that you continue to have problems loving your baby for a few weeks, it would be helpful to talk to someone on the medical staff. They are very familiar with this very common situation.

I am grieving.

Having a premature baby involves many losses. It is natural to grieve. During pregnancy and even before, parents create many hopes and dreams for their expected baby. You may have had hopes for a boy or girl, blue eyes or brown, dark hair or blond. You also had hopes for a healthy, full term baby, and these hopes were shattered. You are coping with shattered dreams now, and that involves grieving. Many women also feel inadequate that they did not carry their pregnancy to full term. Often mothers of premature infants feel that they are not complete women or mothers. You want to do so much for your baby, but there is little you actually can do while your baby is sick. It is normal for you to grieve the loss of the pregnancy and healthy baby, just as you would feel sorry if someone you loved moved away from you or died. Support from others can help you in your grief.

I am worried that my baby will not know that I am his/her parent.

It is normal to have this worry, but it is very likely that your baby already knows that you are its parent. Babies learn to recognize their mothers and fathers voices while they are in the womb. So a premature baby can already tell the differences between its mother and father's voice and the voices of nurses and doctors. It has been shown that the oxygen saturation of premature babies improves when their parents are close by. Unfortunately, the treatment of premature babies requires some painful procedures that are done by doctors and nurses. But this gives babies the opportunity to learn that their parents do not cause pain. So when you gently stroke your baby, talk softly. Your baby will then learn that you have the voice that is special; the voice that gives comfort. The voice your baby will want to go home with.

I am worried that the treatment in the NICU will have long-lasting emotional effects on my baby.

Research indicates that there are no long-term emotional effects of the painful procedures used in the NICU. Premature babies grow up to be just as emotionally normal as babies that are born healthy at full term.

I am afraid to ask questions of the doctors and nurses.

Having a baby in the NICU often makes parents feel intellectually inadequate. There are so many medical terms and situations, that no parent can understand them all. Consequently, many are afraid to ask questions. But it is very important for you to understand what is going on with your baby. Most of the time, getting an answer to your question will help reduce your worries. Remember there are no dumb questions. If you feel confused by what is going on, try to have someone else with you (your spouse, your own parent, or a friend) when you ask questions. This may help to clarify your understanding.

Why am I having problems communicating with my spouse, especially about how we feel?

Mothers and fathers tend to cope well together during the early days of having a premature baby. This togetherness comes from the realization that there may be a danger threatening the family. Later on, many mothers and fathers have different ways of coping with a premature baby. This difference is usually easy to understand. For example, many mothers take longer to grieve over not delivering a healthy baby, and fathers may not understand this. Fathers also can become frightened over the mother's health and become more over-protective. Both mothers and fathers become frustrated over the roller coaster of emotions they feel when their baby has setbacks. This frustration may lead to anger. Another source of frustration comes when parents feel that they are often powerless to help their baby's recovery. But parents are not powerless. They can learn to accept that it is OK for each other to have different ways of coping with a premature baby.

Why am I afraid even though my premature baby is getting healthy?

Unfortunately, many parents find that fearing for their baby's life does not go away as rapidly as they would like. Even when a premature baby comes home, some (perhaps many) parents have flashbacks of fear about their baby's birth or hospitalization. These are normal reactions to the stress of having a premature baby. Sometimes parents feel like they are not normal because they are still afraid, even though they "know in their mind" that their baby is healthy. Realizing that these flashbacks are common helps parents to cope. Over time, the flashbacks decrease and later go away.

Why do I feel sad and depressed and have so little energy?

Sadness and depression are common reactions to having a premature baby. Everyone dreams of giving birth to a healthy, full-term baby. Not having this dream come true is a natural cause of sadness. No one would want to experience the following sequence: mother on bed rest, an emergency C-section, fearing that mother and baby might die, visiting the NICU day after day after day, hearing bad news about the baby's health, worrying about the rest of your family and facing huge amounts of debt.

Even taking a healthy premature baby home is a source of stress. Parents who are sad because some of this has happened are having very normal feelings. If sadness and depression become excessive or troublesome, it would be wise to ask the medical staff for help.

Are my fears and feelings excessive? Am I going crazy?

The majority of parents of premature infants feel this way, so these feelings are very normal. Having feelings of distress is a normal coping pattern for parents of high-risk babies. Here are some common fears and feelings of parents of premature babies.

- "When the telephone rings at home I panic because it might be a call from the hospital with bad news.
- "I am afraid to walk into the hospital because something bad may have just happened."
- "I am afraid that I won't find my baby in the isolette."
- "This experience has been so terrible that I sometimes wish that my baby would just die, so that the whole thing would be over. I feel like an awful person for thinking this."

Many times parents are afraid to talk about these feelings because they are concerned that someone will think that they are coping poorly. Experienced members of the medical staff and other parents of premature infants have come to learn that feelings like these are common. It can be comforting to talk about these feelings with someone who can understand them.

Why am I angry with the medical staff about my baby's treatment?

The causes of anger are pain, suffering, and frustration. Parents of premature babies are caught in frustrating situations that may produce pain and suffering for their child. Often parents are afraid to express anger to the medical staff, but this fear should not stop parents from expressing their concerns. A recent emphasis in perinatal care and neonatal care is called "Family-Centered Care". This means that the medical staff is concerned with the well-being of families, in addition to the well-being of babies. In order for "Family-Centered Care" to work well, parents are encouraged to express their concerns, even if they are angry concerns.