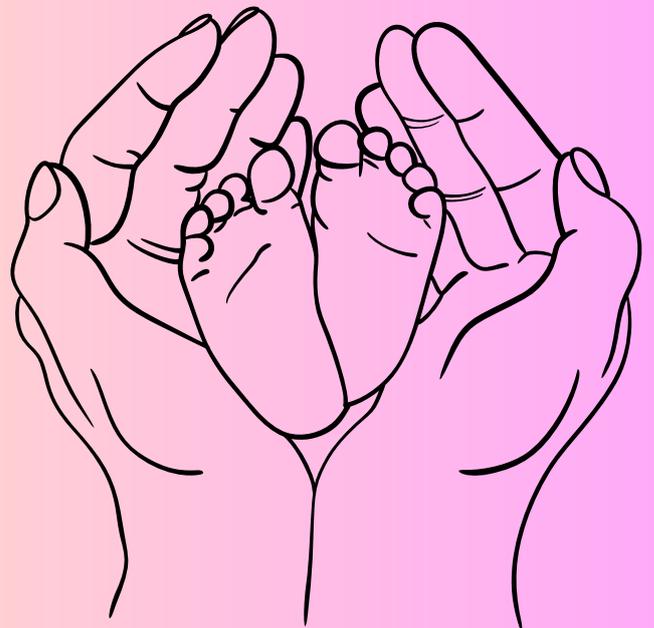


Your Wellbeing During and After the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

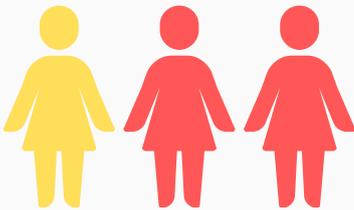


Wellbeing and the NICU

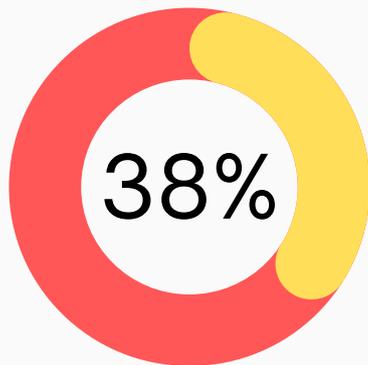
Each baby and family are different and there can be many reasons for a NICU admission. Likewise, parents can react to the NICU admission in various ways, but it is not uncommon to feel heightened stress, grief, anger, worry, sadness or isolation. Some parents may also re-experience previous trauma or loss. In fact, research shows us that having a baby admitted to the NICU increases risk for a mental health issue, or even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)¹



1 in 5 babies require a NICU admission²



1 in 3 birth parents experience the birth of their baby as traumatic³



38% of parents experience Traumatic Stress after the admission of their baby to a NICU⁴

Early signs of traumatic stress to look out for:

- Flashbacks or distressing memories of the birth or time spent in the NICU
- Trouble sleeping (when baby is asleep)
- Nightmares
- Feeling panicky/triggered by reminders of the birth/NICU stay
- Increases in anxiety/worry about your baby's health
- Changes in your mood, including rage, shame or guilt
- Feelings of detachment from your baby or partner
- Intrusive thoughts
- Negative self-talk
- Feelings of or actual isolation

We all have ways of coping, and sometimes stress might not be visible. If you experience any of the above, it is recommended you see your GP (other services are listed on page 4).

Strategies to help you cope

Recovering from a traumatic birth or experience in the NICU can take time, but there are ways to help you (and/or your partner) cope during the NICU stay and post-discharge.

1. Steer clear of blame or judgement

This may not be how you imagined the birth of your child to be, and experiencing grief or distress at the loss of your ideal birth experience is a very natural and common reaction to a NICU admission. You, your partner, or your baby may be dealing with medical complications during this time too. Try not to judge or blame the feelings that come up during and after your NICU stay.

2. Seek support and advocate

If possible, ask for help from friends or loved ones during your stay and when you get home. Your support network is vital for helping you with everyday tasks when you get home, especially if you are feeling overwhelmed, experienced physical trauma, or had a caesarean section. It is also important to seek nurturing and empathetic support.

3. Talk to someone

This may be a trusted loved one whom you know will listen, provide you with empathy, and make space for your emotions. It might also be another parent in the NICU. Talking about tough experiences can reduce the likelihood of traumatic stress. You might find it helpful to reach out to NICU staff about hospital-based or local supports.

4. Seek support for your relationship if needed

Sometimes having a baby can put strain on you and your partner's relationship, and even more so when the birth was traumatic or there was a NICU admission. This experience might also impact you and your partner differently. It is important for you and your partner to be on the same page, identify supports needed, and work together to communicate with others. Reach out for support if needed.

5. Be kind to yourself

Feelings of grief, guilt, sadness, anger or worries/difficulties with connecting to your baby are common after a traumatic birth and NICU stay. Many parents feel this way after having similar experiences, and often these feelings can change over time. As difficult as it may be in the first few months after discharge, all parents need to take time for themselves, having boundaries and focusing on your own wellbeing will improve your baby's wellbeing too. Activities like taking a bath, reading a book, or going for a walk in the sun can help. Try to be gentle on yourself.

Tips

People will ask you how it's going. Think about what you'd like to say to help you tell your story.

It might be helpful to have a loved one be your "communicator"

Ask for and accept help

Take the time you need to settle

Seeking Help

If you or your partner are feeling overwhelmed, then it is time to seek help (even if it is months down the track). It is important to see your child health nurse and/or GP if you feel that you or your partner is struggling to cope after the birth of your baby. It is never too early to seek help. You can seek professional support yourself, or your GP can link you in with:

- Psychologist
- Psychiatrist
- Counsellor
- Social worker

Additionally, there are supports available from the following organisations:



PANDA National Helpline (1300 726 306)



Australasian Birth Trauma Association offers a peer support service online



Tiny Sparks offer peer-to-peer support online and in person



Miracle Babies offer parent support sessions, support groups in person and online

If you are struggling and need emergency support, please dial 000 or lifeline 131114

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