

Finding Your Emotional Balance

Adjusting to the NICU rollercoaster

A new baby is a source of joy and hope. But, when a baby needs care in the NICU, many other emotions mix with those happy feelings.

Many parents of babies in the NICU describe their experience as “an emotional rollercoaster” because of the wide range of emotions they feel during this time. In the first few days to weeks, you will likely feel shock, panic, love, anxiety, delight, anger, frustration, amazement, numbness, hope, sadness, relief, confusion, and more.

Many parents find it hard, or even impossible, to focus. Doing everyday tasks can take great effort, and parents may feel confused or lost. Some want to live at their baby’s bedside. Others distract themselves by keeping busy outside the hospital. It takes time to find the right balance.

How you and your partner react to the stress of having your baby in the NICU will be unique to you. But, here are some things to keep in mind that may help you cope with the “rollercoaster”:

- **All of your feelings are normal.** The strength of your feelings and reactions will slowly decrease over time. But, you can expect that the emotional impact of having a baby in the NICU will be long-lasting and profound.
- **Your partner’s reactions will most likely differ from yours.** Keep talking with your partner so you can each understand what the other is thinking and feeling.
- **How well you understand what is going on will vary from one moment to the next.** Keep asking questions, especially if you do not understand something. Ask your care team to find other words to explain something that is confusing. Some parents find it helpful to write down questions and concerns as they think of them, so that they can ask the care team later.



Keep asking questions if you do not understand something.

- **NICU staff realize how hard this situation is. We sympathize with your emotions.** We have seen all kinds of reactions from NICU parents. We will not think less of you or care any less for your baby if you let your emotions show.
- **You will have both good and bad days in the NICU.** One day your baby will be showing progress, and the next day a complication may arise. This is normal for premature babies, but parents can feel discouraged and drained by these ups and downs. We hope that over time, you and your baby will have more and more good days.

Resource: *The Premie Parents Companion: The Essential Guide for Your Premature Baby in the Hospital, at Home and Through the First Year* by Susan L. Madden, MS

Quotes from NICU Alumni Parents

“Everyone at UWMC was awesome, but it didn't help the emotional roller coaster. Will she survive? That's what I needed to know.”

– *Frankie's Mom*

“I wish someone had told me that setbacks happen, and not to let them discourage me.”

– *Austin's Mom*

“Nobody prepared me for what it would be like to grieve no longer being pregnant, or how lonely it would feel to pump milk for my baby who was too little to feed, or how stressful it would be for care for my baby in the NICU, while also caring for myself and my marriage.”

– *Kylie's Mom*

“At first, I struggled with a lot of guilt. It took a long time to understand that this wasn't my fault. I grieved the loss of being pregnant, having a baby shower, packing a bag for the hospital, and leaving the hospital with our baby.”

– *Lucy's Mom*

“Layne went through so much the first month of his life – central lines, needing the ventilator, belly infections, heart surgery, blood transfusions. There were days when he would do well, and days when we thought we would lose him.”

– *Layne's Mom*

Questions?

Your questions are important. Talk with a member of your baby's healthcare team if you have questions or concerns.

Neonatal Intensive Care Unit:
206.598.4606

“I wish I could say our stay in the NICU was uneventful, but it was filled with many traumatic moments for our family. I wish I would have been more prepared for when my son became very sick and almost didn't make it, more than any other moment in our whole NICU stay.”

– *Timmie and Tessie's Mom*

“The hardest thing is eating and resting to take care of yourself. Those things need to be done even though you don't want to leave the NICU.”

– *Wyatt's Mom*