

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 talk about being on “an emotional rollercoaster” because of all the 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. Sometimes you will feel many emotions at the same time. This emotional ride is not easy, but it is very normal.

It can feel overwhelming to have a baby in the NICU. Doing everyday tasks can take a lot of effort. You may feel lost or confused. The best way to manage your stay is different for each person. You can find your balance, but it will take time.

The number of hours you spend in the NICU may change from day to day and week to week. Please take time for yourself, even if it’s only a few minutes.

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”:

- **Know that all of your feelings are normal.** The strength of your feelings and reactions will slowly lessen over time. But, you can expect that the emotional impact of having a baby in the NICU will be profound and will last for a long time.
- Having a baby in the hospital is stressful for relationships. **We all react to trauma in different ways.** Your partner may respond to this situation in ways that are familiar to you or that surprise you. And, your responses may surprise your partner. Keep talking with your partner so you can each understand what the other is thinking and feeling. If you or your partner need more support, please tell your nurse. UWMC has resources that may help.



It is normal to feel overwhelmed. Please take time for yourself.

- **The “unknowns” of having a baby in the NICU can be emotionally tiring.** One way to lessen that uncertainty is to be as informed as you can. How well you understand what is going on will vary. 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.
- **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 problem may arise. This is normal for premature babies, but parents can feel discouraged and drained by these ups and downs. It is OK to feel disappointed or sad if it seems like your baby isn’t making progress. Each baby is on their own journey. Hopefully, 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*

“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*

Questions?

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

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