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Patient information service  
**Psychological health services**

# Psychological support for families in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU)



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# Introduction

Having a baby in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) can be a difficult and confusing time. This was probably not how you imagined things would be, whether this is your first experience of being parents, or whether you have other children to think about and care for. Supporting families is as important as caring for the babies in the NICU, and there are a number of professionals who can help you while your baby is here. The NICU family support team includes the family support sister, the Martha Care family support worker, the chaplaincy team and two clinical psychologists.

This leaflet provides some information about the work that the clinical psychologists do and when you might find it useful to see them, as well as some advice on looking after yourselves during this stressful time.

## How parents often tell us they feel

Parents have a whole range of reactions when their baby is taken to the NICU. All of these are usual, and there is no 'right' way of feeling or behaving. You might find that you feel numb and unemotional, or you might find that you cry much more than usual, and find it hard to think clearly or make everyday decisions. Some parents have described the NICU experience as an emotional rollercoaster, and you might find your emotions are up and down and unpredictable. All of this is really tiring and makes it harder to cope with everything that is happening. Try not to give yourself a hard time for feeling or behaving a particular way.

# Ways to look after yourself

It can be hard to make time to look after yourself while your baby is in the NICU, but it is really important to do this. Some simple tips that have helped other parents are:

- make sure you have something to eat and drink regularly, even if you're not very hungry
- try to get a bit of fresh air each day; spending all your time inside the NICU can feel exhausting
- it can be hard to ask for help, but try to use family and friends for support. Let them know what helps you to feel better (for example a funny text, a card, or practical things, like cooking a meal)
- some people find that keeping a diary helps them to get through the time in the NICU.

We know that having a baby admitted to the NICU is naturally a very stressful time for families, and not everyone will need or want to see a psychologist. Sometimes, however, individuals or couples find it helpful to meet with one of the psychologists directly for some extra psychological support or advice. People often worry about their families and friends, and want to protect them from their most difficult feelings. However, this can leave them having to manage their difficult feelings on their own. Having someone to talk to who is not a family member, and who understands the context of the NICU, can help.

The psychologist aims to reduce the stress that families may experience in NICU by giving emotional support, and supporting the bonding process between you and your baby through what is often a very challenging time.

# What does a clinical psychologist do?

A clinical psychologist uses a research-based understanding of how people think, feel and behave in order to help people who are distressed or experiencing difficulties in their lives. They have training in a variety of psychological approaches that can help when people are having difficult thoughts or feelings that are affecting their wellbeing and making it harder to do the things they need or want to do. Working with a clinical psychologist can help you to cope during the time your baby is in the NICU, and help you to develop ways of looking after yourself. The clinical psychologists are all registered with the Health Professions Council. Clinical psychologists do not prescribe medication (such as anti-depressants). They use 'talking therapies' to help with such things as:

- making sense of how you have been feeling
- finding ways to deal with feelings of anxiety, sadness, anger, guilt and loss
- coming to terms with change and living with uncertainty
- making difficult decisions relating to your baby's care
- finding ways to solve problems and make use of your own strengths and skills
- learning techniques, such as relaxation, that can make it easier to cope with uncertainty and worry.

# How do I arrange to see a clinical psychologist?

You can ask any of the NICU staff to refer you, or you can speak to one of the clinical psychologists directly. They are based in the family support office, just to the left past the reception.

## **What will happen when I meet with them?**

The clinical psychologist can see you individually or with your partner or other family members, depending on what you prefer. The psychologist will either meet you in the family support office, or by your baby's cot at a time that offers as much privacy as possible.

Every family's situation is different and is assessed individually. The first meeting is an opportunity for you to discuss with the clinical psychologist what might be helpful for you, and your family, in managing any emotional or personal difficulties you may be experiencing as a result of your baby being admitted to the NICU. This is likely to involve a detailed discussion about your present difficulties, including their effect on your daily life, how and when they arose, as well as considering aspects of your life before your baby was born.

The clinical psychologist will work with you to reach an understanding of your problems, and will discuss with you appropriate ways forward to reduce or resolve your difficulties.

## **What happens to the information I share with the clinical psychologist?**

The clinical psychologists are part of your baby's care team. This means that some information may be shared with other staff who are closely involved with your baby's care, if it is appropriate and helpful to do so. If there is something that you tell the psychologist that you do not want them to share with anyone in the team, please let them know. They will always try to make sure that information is then kept private, or confidential.

However, if there is reason to think that there is a risk of harm to you or others, this information may need to be passed on to

other people. The psychologist will talk to you about this first whenever possible.

The psychologist will keep their own notes about any conversations they have with you, which are kept securely and confidentially within psychological health services. These notes are to help the psychologist remember the details of the concerns you have discussed with them and the plans they have agreed with you. If you have any concerns, or want to know more about the information that is likely to be shared about your family, please talk to the psychologist.

## **I have been given this guide but I'm not sure why**

If a member of the NICU team has given you this leaflet, it does not mean that they think you are not coping or that you need help. It may be that they recognise that your situation is difficult, or that they simply wanted you to be aware that this service existed for future reference.

If it was suggested that you might want to meet with the psychologist, but you feel after reading this information that you do not want to have an appointment with them at this time, please tell the member of the team who gave you this leaflet. The decision to use psychological health services is entirely up to you, and if you decide not to, it will not affect your baby's care in any way.

## What if I am not satisfied with the service I receive?

If you have concerns about the service you receive from the psychologist, please discuss them first with them or another member of the NICU team.

If this does not address your concerns, please contact the head of psychological health services, Sue Dolby. You can contact her by telephone on **0117 342 8168**. Or, you can contact the patient support and complaints team on **0117 342 1050**.

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