



Ready for Relationships

We come into the world ready for relationships. Our brains and bodies give us continuous clues about the safety of our environment. When we feel safe, we are calm and able to connect with and support those around us. When we feel we are in danger, our brains and bodies get us ready for fight or flight. When we feel our lives are threatened and we can no longer escape, we may disconnect.

Survival for a baby or infant depends upon the adults around them. Babies' brains and bodies tell them whether the world is safe, dangerous, or life-threatening. When babies feel safe, they sleep easily, they breathe regularly, and they feed well. When babies sense danger, their hearts pound, they may be difficult to soothe, and they often feed poorly. When their very lives seem to be at risk, they may disconnect by seeming listless, or unresponsive, or they will not eat at all.

Parents become experts in their own babies. They learn the subtle cues that show their babies feel safe and connected, and they feel calm and secure in their relationship with their babies. Together, parents' and babies' brains and bodies connect, creating a dance in which each knows the next step. When these connections are firm, parents can live the dream they had throughout their pregnancy — a loving and continuing secure connection with their baby.

Pregnancy is sometimes challenging in unexpected ways. Perhaps you had a physically difficult pregnancy or lacked the supports you needed. Or, you may have had a stressful delivery; your baby needed help after the delivery; or your baby was taken to an intensive care unit and was unable to remain with you.

In such situations, your brain and body may respond by moving you away from a sense of safety and into a sense that you and your baby are in danger. This shift may happen even though you trust your doctors and nurses to provide the best possible medical care. It is an instinctual survival response to a sudden change in your expectations. A few minutes earlier, your body was waiting for your baby to come to breast or chest, and your brain was anticipating your new family life together. Now, your body is sending signals of danger: your heart pounds, you shake, and your brain is rewriting the story. Or the emotions may seem so overwhelming that your body feels numb, and your mind is blank. One minute, you may feel safe and calm and even hopeful. The next minute, you get a piece of information that triggers a flood of anxiety or fear. Or the events are so terrifying or confusing that you feel alone and your brain shuts down. These are all normal adaptive responses to the stress you are feeling.

Here are some ways to help you navigate this experience:

1. Identify the range of your feelings and accept that they are all normal, and these are predictable ways we manage stress and uncertainty. What is your body saying you need to feel safer and more connected?
2. Look around and notice who makes you feel safe. It might be your partner, a family member, a friend, or a member of the staff. If there is someone with whom you feel safe, let that person know what you need and allow them to support you.
3. If there is no one to whom you can speak, please let the neonatal staff know how you are feeling.

Even if you cannot reach out today, please know that the neonatal staff are here. We will be checking in with you for ways we can help you and your baby feel safer and more connected to each other during this stressful time.