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Could You Have PTSD?

By Sue L. Hall, M.D.

Can the smell of hand sanitizer instantly transport you back to a particularly challenging day you experienced in the NICU, bringing tears to your eyes? Is it difficult for you to even drive past the hospital where your baby was in the NICU? Do beeping noises or ambulance sirens make your heart race? Are you awakened by nightmares or troubled by recurring flashbacks to frightening days in the NICU? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you might be suffering from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

‘But wait,’ you say, ‘I’m not a combat veteran!’ Well, if you are a parent of a baby who was in the NICU—whether a mother or a father—you are sort of a combat veteran. And besides, PTSD is not limited to soldiers returning from war; it can occur in anyone who has seen or experienced a traumatic event that involved the threat of injury or death. Did the thought cross your mind at some point during your baby’s NICU stay that he or she might possibly die? Or even that you (if you’re a mom) or your wife (if you’re a dad) might die as a result of circumstances surrounding the birth of your child? Even though survival for most NICU babies is now very good, many—if not most—parents whose babies enter the NICU still find themselves confronting that most unimaginable fear, the fear of losing their child, even if there has been no direct threat to the baby’s life.

Whether you were able to “hold it together” or did find yourself experiencing symptoms of stress and anxiety during your baby’s hospitalization, you are still at risk of developing PTSD up until several years later. Its occurrence is well-documented in NICU parents. And it doesn’t even depend on how sick your baby was, although you are more prone to develop it if your baby had numerous medical complications. It depends more on your personal response to stress, and whether you’ve gone through other traumatic experiences in your lifetime.

Symptoms of PTSD fall into three main categories: 1- “Reliving” the event through flashbacks, nightmares, or other strong memories; 2-Avoidance, or feeling numb and detached; and 3-Arousal, or having trouble concentrating, startling easily, or being irritable. Sometimes your whole body reacts and you may feel dizzy, as though your heart is pounding, or you may even faint. If you have experienced any of these feelings over at least a thirty day period, your doctor could diagnose PTSD.

If sensations like those described are interfering with your daily life, it is probably time to seek help. A major danger is that as a result of PTSD, you may find yourself so constantly worried about your baby or child that you become overprotective and limit his or her opportunities for exploration and personal growth and development. If PTSD is altering your parenting, it is definitely time to seek help.

It may be that talking with other parents in a support group (whether in person or online) is all the help that you need, or it may be that seeking professional counseling is a better option for you. Some parents channel their feelings of anxiety into productive endeavors like volunteering to help a foundation or even starting their own, making hats or clothes for preemies in their local NICU, or visiting and supporting their NICU's staff.

But the first step to healing from the trauma of your birth or NICU experience is recognizing that you need help. If you are troubled by any of the symptoms outlined above, you owe it to yourself, your relationship with your significant other, and your baby or child to confront PTSD head-on and get help. You'll be happy you did.

References

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