



Trauma-Informed Group Therapy for Parents in the NICU

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INTRODUCTION

- Supporting parental mental health is critical for parents whose infants have experienced a NICU stay. The NICU experience can be isolating and distressing for new parents, complicating their transition to parenthood.
- Given high rates of isolation among parents in the NICU and the role of social connectedness in mitigating stress and supporting mental health, **group-based support is a powerful and cost-effective way to increase access to services and social support.**
- Peer-to-peer support has been shown to have positive psychosocial impacts on those who receive it (Hall et al., 2015).
- Group therapy can facilitate peer-to-peer support, serve a larger number of families, decrease therapy waitlist times, and help parents to develop long-term skills and support.

OBJECTIVE

Develop and implement a group therapy curriculum responsive to caregiver needs and preferences within the Family Development Program, an evidence-based model with over 30 years of data to support its use with new parents (Heinicke et al., 1999).

METHODS

- Families of infants who were experiencing or had recently experienced a NICU stay were invited to participate in a 6-week telehealth group therapy program.
- Two group cohorts completed the program: Fall 2023 - 7 participants completed; Winter 2024 - 6 participants completed.
- Curriculum was developed in collaboration with families by identifying most relevant and meaningful themes.
- Facilitators developed themes into specific topics and developed strategies for facilitating dialogue.
- Participants completed pre and post measures.

MEASURES

Coping Self-Efficacy Scale (CSES)

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)

Postpartum Bonding Questionnaire (PBQ)

SAMPLE GROUP CURRICULUM

Introductions

- Names, age of baby, anything you would like to share about NICU experience, what you are hoping to get out of this group
- Review of group guidelines
- Discuss themes

Tolerating Uncertainty

- What is it like for you when you don't know what the future will look like? Have you found anything helpful? How do you adapt to change?
➤ Grounding in Senses, Box breathing

Social Support

- What makes you feel supported by others? What makes you feel connected to others? Who can you ask for this? How can you ask for this?
➤ Types of Social Support (Emotional, Informational, Tangible)

Holding Grief and Joy

- How do you know what you are feeling? How do you manage two feelings at the same time?
➤ Soften Soothe Allow Guided Meditation

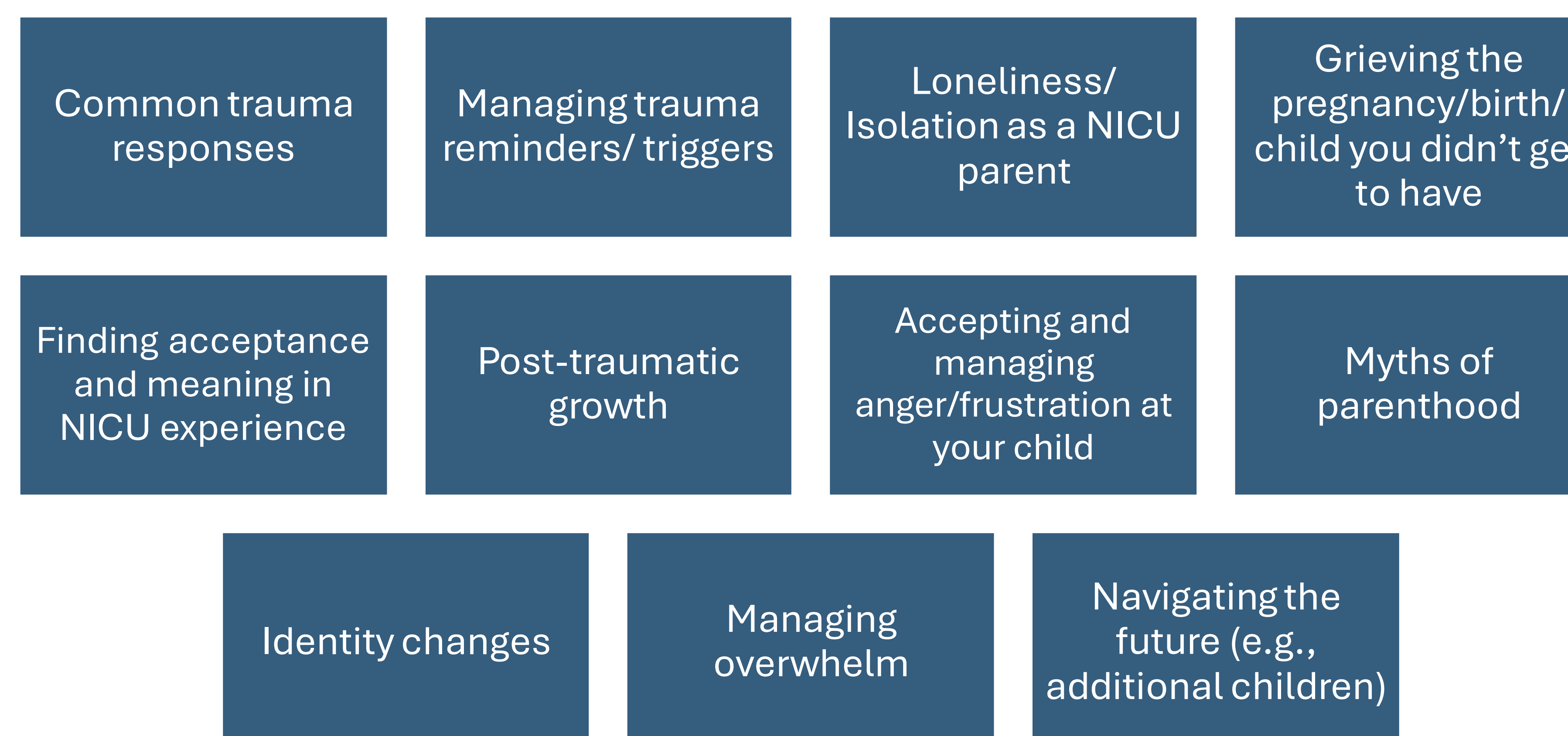
Guilt, shame, and self-blame

- Have these thoughts and feelings changed over the course of your NICU experience? How has your perspective shifted with time? Have you felt these things in the past?
➤ Cognitive Restructuring (Is it true and is it helpful?)

Family Communication & Division of Labor

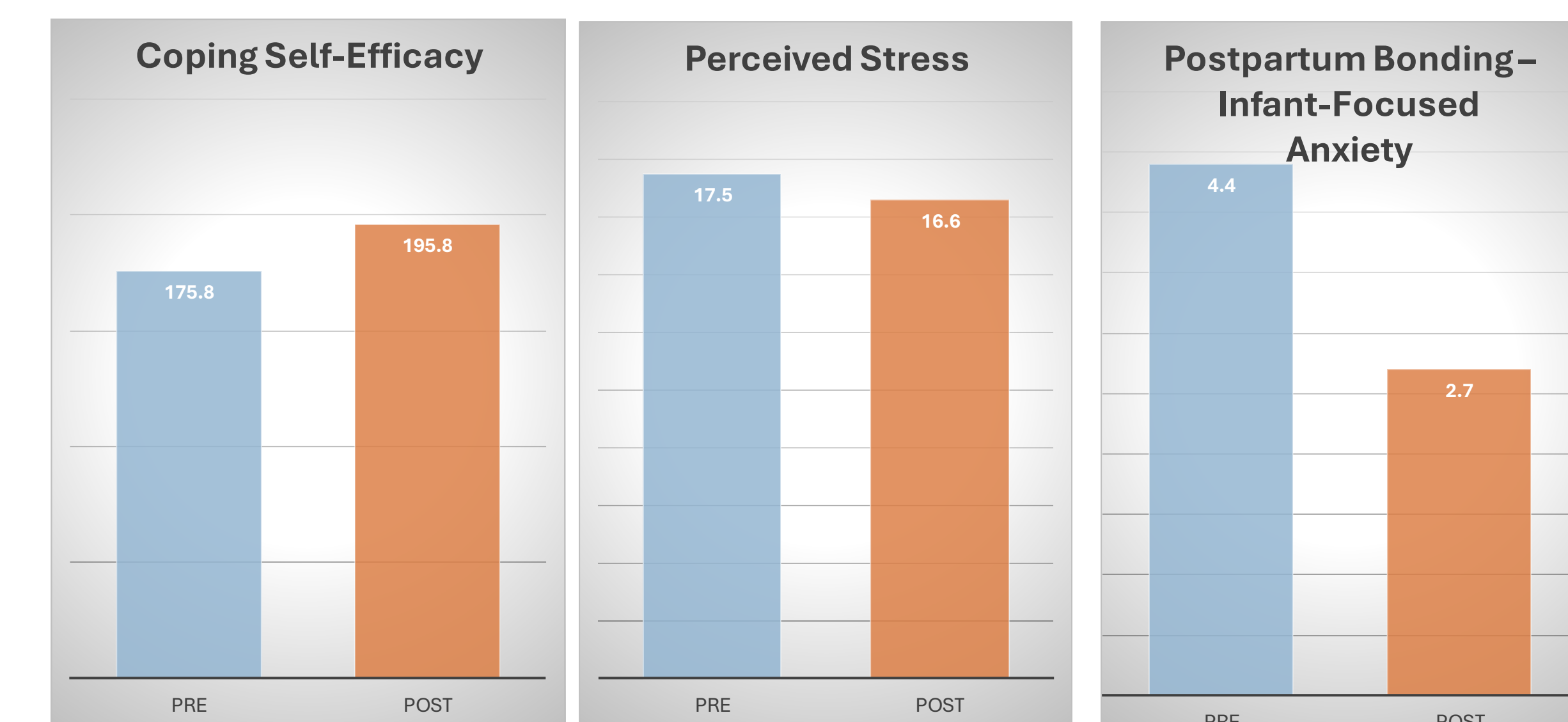
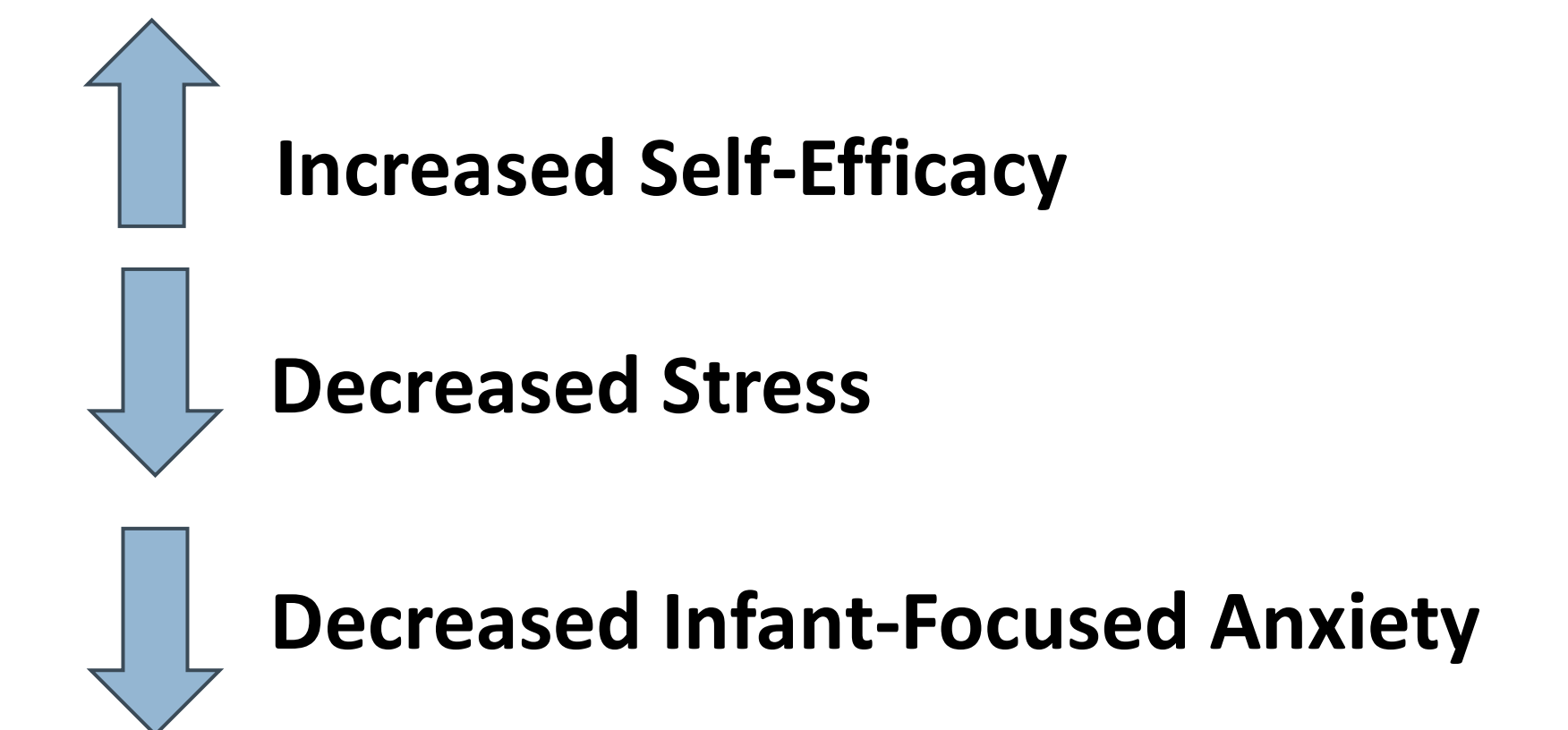
- How has communication changed since having a baby? Is it ever hard to let others help you? What makes it hard? What gets in the way of asking for help?
➤ Effective Communication Strategies

ADDITIONAL WEEKLY THEMES



RESULTS

Following treatment, participants reported:



While clinically significant, results were not statistically significant (likely due to small sample size).

DISCUSSION

- Telehealth group therapy is a **feasible and accessible** form of support for NICU parents.
- Caregivers described **increased connectedness and lower infant-driven anxiety.**
- Our format promotes **trauma-informed principles of care:**

Safety: Group guidelines and facilitation promote safety and respect for differences among participants.

Choice & Collaboration: Members collaboratively develop curriculum and provide weekly feedback, informing future sessions.

Trust: Facilitation ensures that there is space for all voices to be heard, supports participants who are more hesitant to share, and moderates content.

Empowerment: Group promotes strength and post-traumatic growth by fostering feelings of inclusion and connectedness, normalizing vulnerable feelings, and decreasing isolation.