

Supporting Couples in the NICU: Interventions for Couples Therapy

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Background

- Emotional distress in parents of infants in the NICU is a well-documented phenomenon with some studies indicating that 30% of NICU parents experience a diagnosable mental health disorder in the first-year postpartum (Hynan, Mounts, & Vanderbilt, 2013)
- There can be a notable decline in couples' relationship satisfaction during this stressful experience (Roque et al., 2017)
- Couples therapy focused on navigating the shared traumatic or adverse event of their child's NICU stay provides containment and crisis intervention during an acutely stressful period of the relationship
- We describe our adaptation of Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS), a family resilience-building model that has been used for nearly two decades with families navigating difficult situations (i.e., military deployment, parental mental health, pediatric illness) (Lester et al., 2015)
- FOCUS teaches core skills such as communication, emotion regulation, and managing trauma and stress reminders while also incorporating a narrative timeline to help parents make sense of their NICU experience and prepare for future challenges
- Couples interventions that are tailored for the NICU setting and consider this context are crucial to delivering optimal care and culturally responsive treatment



Sample Handouts



Effective Communication Strategies

- Provides couples with concrete skills aiming to enhance understanding of one another's experience

Handouts: Copycat activity, Mapping Communication Hot Spots, Effective Communication including active listening, paraphrasing, clarifying, curiosity stance, and I statements

Emotion Regulation Tools

- Assists couples in understanding their own and each other's emotional states, behaviors, and self-regulation skills

Handouts: Feelings Thermometer, Think-Feel-Do Triangle, Emotion Regulation Plan including relaxation techniques, physical activities, cognitive strategies, self-care strategies, reaching out for support

Narrative Timeline

- Supports couples in jointly processing a traumatic birth experience, challenging medical experiences, and/or difficult diagnosis/prognosis for their child
- Prompts each person to identify major milestones and their associated emotions
- Highlights common cognitive distortions (all-or-nothing thinking, catastrophizing, personalization)

Problem Solving Skills and Managing Reminders

- Helps couples articulate problems and find solution – SNAP Model
- Provides psychoeducation about stressors and stress reminders
- Explores a plan for managing reminders and identifies coping strategies

