



Maternal psychiatric functioning and maternal-infant attachment among mothers of infants in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU)

Elizabeth Greco & Alexa Bonacquisti, PhD, PMH-C
Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine

Background

An infant's admission to a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) may adversely impact maternal psychiatric functioning, affecting quality of life, well-being, and patient outcomes.

Stressful reproductive events related to a NICU admission may even exacerbate pre-existing maternal psychiatric symptoms.

Objectives

We examined the relationships between maternal mental health symptoms, including depression, anxiety, and stress, and maternal-infant attachment among NICU mothers.

We evaluated the change in maternal stress and anxiety over time, comparing measures at the time of initial NICU admission and again 2-3 months later, and the relationship with maternal-infant attachment while in the NICU.

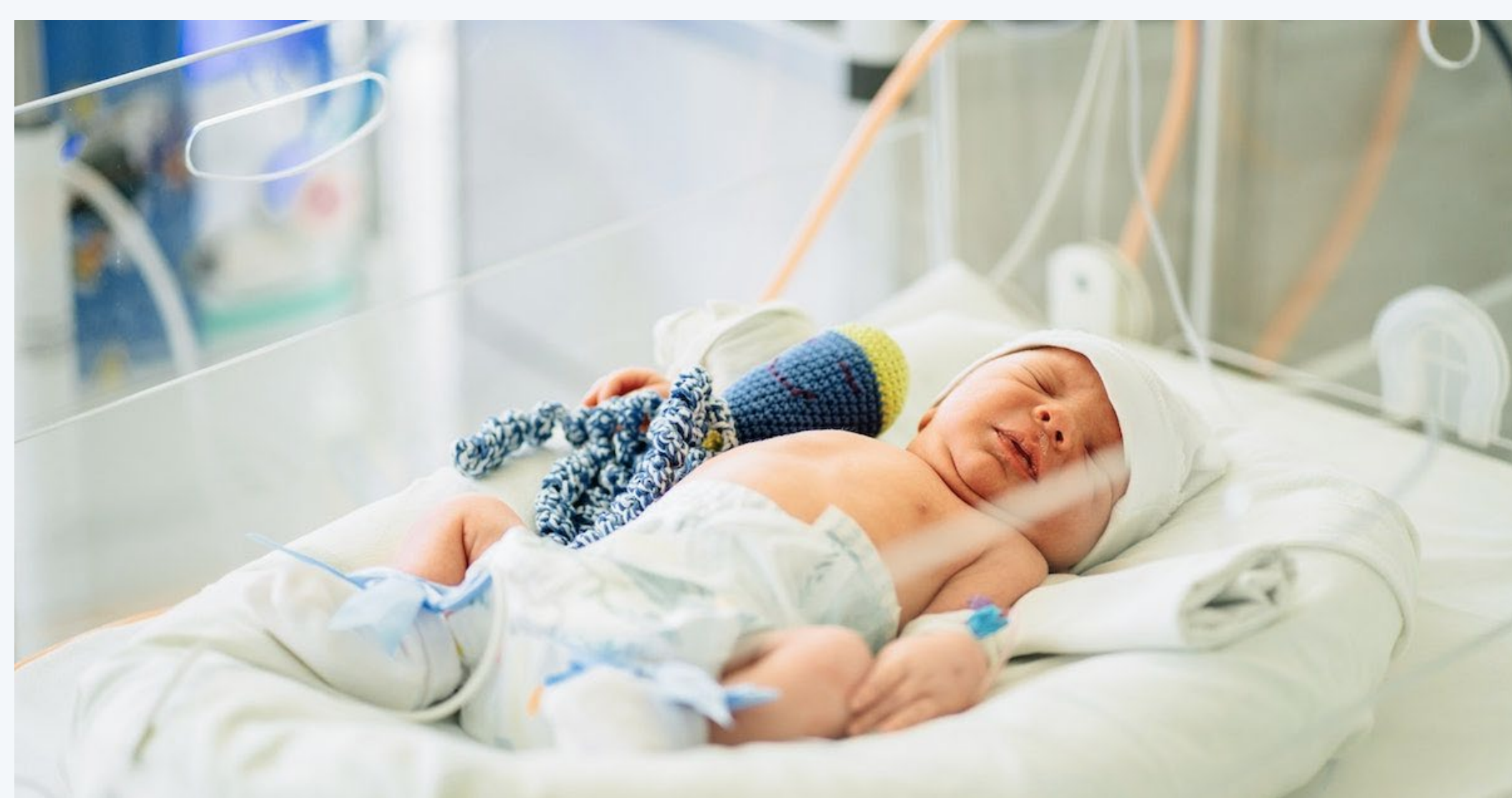


Photo by Jennifer Parris on Romper

Methods

Mothers were recruited from their infants' NICU bedside ($N = 127$) from 3 hospitals in the Philadelphia area and completed self-report measures of anxiety, stress, and maternal-infant attachment.

Measures

- Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1996)
- Maternal Attachment Inventory (MAI; Muller, 1994)

The mothers completed measures during NICU hospitalization and 2-3 months later.

Data was analyzed using bivariate correlations and paired sample t -tests.

Results

NICU mothers self-reported high levels of depressive, anxiety, and stress symptoms.

Maternal-infant attachment was negatively associated with anxiety and stress symptoms, but not depressive symptoms.

While both depressive and anxiety symptoms decreased 2-3 months after NICU hospitalization, stress symptoms remained consistent.

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that more research can be done to explore the different sources of stress and anxiety symptoms at time of initial NICU admission and post-discharge.

An increased understanding of the source of stress may inform possible screening protocols and interventions to address mothers' psychiatric symptoms while their infant is still in the NICU to better prepare them for the transition of bringing their infant home.



Photo by Aditya Romansa on Unsplash

References

- Bonacquisti, A., Geller, P.A. & Patterson, C.A. (2020). Maternal depression, anxiety, stress, and maternal-infant attachment in the neonatal intensive care unit. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 38(3), 297-310.
- Lovibond, S.H. & Lovibond, P.F. (1995). *Manual for the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales*. (2nd. Ed.) Sydney: Psychology Foundation
- Müller ME (1994). A questionnaire to measure mother-to-infant attachment. *Journal of Nursing Measurement*, 2(2):129-41.