



sikunye

## CARING FOR PARENTS OF PREMIES

### BORN TOO SOON

Prematurity is defined as any baby born before 37 weeks gestation. These tiny babies are born too soon. Every year, over 15 million babies worldwide are born prematurely – one out of every nine births. One million of these tiny humans will die due to complications of prematurity – that is nearly 3000 per day: 2 every second. And most of these are in developing countries like South Africa.

A tiny baby, weighing 800g, no bigger than a margarine container, becomes increasingly distressed as his lung spaces start to collapse. His scrawny body does not have the fat or muscle to keep him warm or maintain his blood sugar. He is too immature to latch or suck on his mother's breast. Even if he somehow survives all this, the spectre of serious infection is always close.

For the parents of very premature infants it is one of the most stressful times they will every experience. Their baby, so fragile and vulnerable is left in the care of others. Often, they cannot even hold or feed their child. There are flashing monitors and machines and drips. The nature of these tiny infants is that they can be doing well in the morning but be severely ill a few hours later. It is the often quoted 'roller-coaster.' Some babies, even if they survive, may face a lifetime of disability.

Parents and families must simultaneously mourn the loss of the perfect or normal pregnancy and fight the waves of anxiety due to present and future challenges. Mothers experience a higher risk of post-partum depression. Covid-19 has made everything worse – visiting is often restricted to mother only, and sometimes for limited hours.



**“Prematurity gave me pause. It allowed me to grow in my faith and take time to be in the moment, appreciating the little things.”**

**Tasmin Bota, mom of preemie born at 28 weeks**

## PRACTICAL IDEAS OF HOW TO SUPPORT

Medical providers say it is noticeable which parents have a good support network and which are carrying the burden alone. Parents who have well-developed support networks, be it communities or faith-based, have more energy and space to focus on their newborn infants knowing some of their family's other needs are being taken care of.

### THINGS NOT TO SAY / DO:

- Do not say “*When will baby come home?*” Parents do not know, and chances are they will not know until a few days before the baby gets discharged. This question is very overwhelming and gets asked repeatedly by multiple people.
- Do not say “*At least you didn't have to carry till the last day and be uncomfortable.*” All preemie parents wish they could carry their babies to term. We do not wish anyone to have to go through what we have.
- Do not call all the time. Parents have a million and one things going on and having to answer the same questions over and over becomes too much.
- Do not ask too many questions. Rather ask how parents are coping more than how the baby is doing. Some days even the parents are not too sure about how baby is doing.
- Do not provide excessive hope or uninformed medical advice.

### THINGS TO DO:

- Send a message saying “thinking of you and praying for you”
- Offer to babysit or childcare for older siblings at home
- Help with transport or a bus ticket to get to the hospital daily
- Sometimes (and only if permitted) visit the parents, even if it is just for an hour to distract them a bit. This really helps and talk about other things instead of the baby.
- Buy tiny baby clothes. It is likely that parents were not ready for the baby to make an early appearance and they would not have bought anything so small.
- Make a gift basket filled with snacks, water, sanitizer, hand cream, lip-ice, and a notebook where the parents can journal about what is happening.
- Pray! Pray for them and pray with them.
- Be a listening ear, a shoulder to cry on or someone to celebrate the victories.

**“I found prayer was my saving grace as I went through this journey”**

**Tasmin Bota**

**IMPORTANTLY:** If you feel out of your depth or overwhelmed by the problem that mom or dad are facing; or you are worried about their or baby's safety; or you are worried about their wellbeing – **ASK FOR HELP!** Speak to your church pastor, ministry leader or Sikunye for guidance of what to do. Remember to care for yourself first before helping others; to keep your boundaries; and that you are not the professional – **REFER** to a professional for help.

### **Special thanks and acknowledgments:**

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