

A close-up photograph of a newborn baby lying in a hospital bed. The baby is wearing a nasal cannula and has several medical sensors attached to their chest and arm. The baby is wrapped in white blankets. The background is slightly blurred, showing the hospital bed and some medical equipment.

# POSSIBILITIES OF NICU CREATIVITY

Emi Lenes, PhD, LMHC  
Heather Mikes, DO, FAAHPM

# INTRODUCTION

There are as many ways to be creative as there are humans on earth!

## PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDEBOOK

- There are an infinite number of possibilities of how to engage with creativity! Within this guidebook are a selection of activities we recommend for you at the NICU.
- Who is this for:**
  - NICU babies (Music is valuable!)
  - Family members/loved ones
  - NICU Healthcare Providers
- Choose which creative option resonates with you in the moment, and feel free to adapt in any way for your particular situation. You may find these ideas are useful for self-care, connecting and/or for program development.

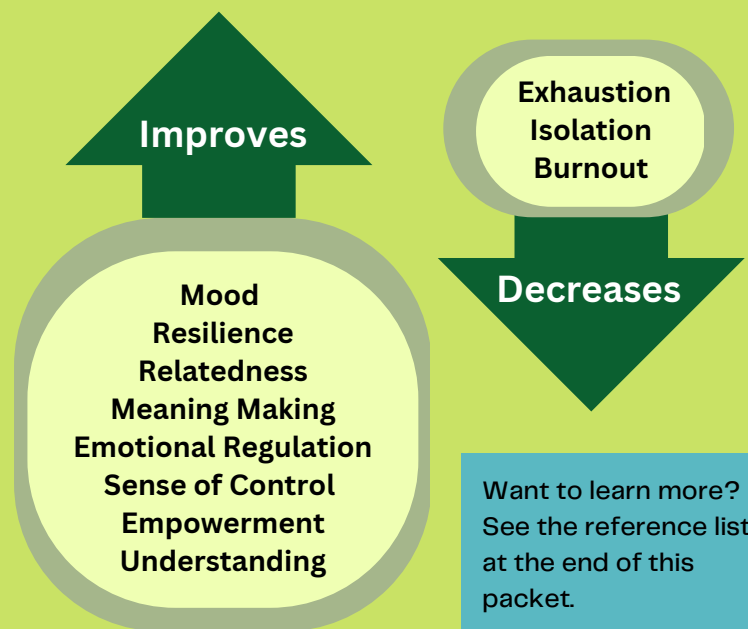
## WHEN MAY CREATIVITY BE HELPFUL?

- You are struggling to understand your experience or to communicate
- There is an infant you care about who is having significant medical complications
- A sibling of a neonate is acting out
- You are craving moments of peace or connection
- You are feeling difficult emotions
- To celebrate small successes and victories (e.g., you made it through a really hard day, you were a comfort to someone who was suffering)
- In countless circumstances.... **Right Now** may be a good time!

## SOME DIFFICULT EMOTIONS MAY ARISE ON THE NICU

- Stress/Exhaustion
- Fear/Scared
- Vulnerable/Tender
- Anxiety/Worry
- Guilt/Shame
- Loss of Control/Helplessness
- Grief/Loss
- Moral Injury/Vicarious Trauma
- Confusion/Uncertainty
- Overwhelm/Burnt out
- Overextended/Beyond Capacity

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BENEFITS?



# 5 CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

1

## Listen to Music (or Sing)

Create or access a playlist. Write or sing a nursery rhyme or lullaby



2

## Decorate a Quote

Illustrate a meaningful message with photography, drawings or digital images



## Write/Read Poetry

Write an acrostic poem or metaphoric sentences

3



4

## Paint

Distract yourself, or deepen your connection and understanding of what is happening



5

## Mindful Communication

Notice and name your experience in the moment. Talk with a loved one, counselor, or support group



# 1 MUSIC



**Improves**

Well-being  
Self-esteem  
Mother-infant bond  
Postpartum mother's lactation  
Preterm vital signs  
stabilization

Postnatal Depression  
Anxiety  
Stress  
Pain

**Decreases**



(Fancourt & Perkins, 2017; Kittithanesuan et al., 2017; Leivas et al., 2022; Mandel, Davis, & Secic, 2019)

## Ideas:

- Search for free music on Youtube.com (e.g. "premature babies" or "NICU playlist")
- Find or create playlists on your favorite music player (e.g. Spotify, Tidal, Pandora)
- Sing lullabies, soothing songs, or hum to yourself or baby



# 2

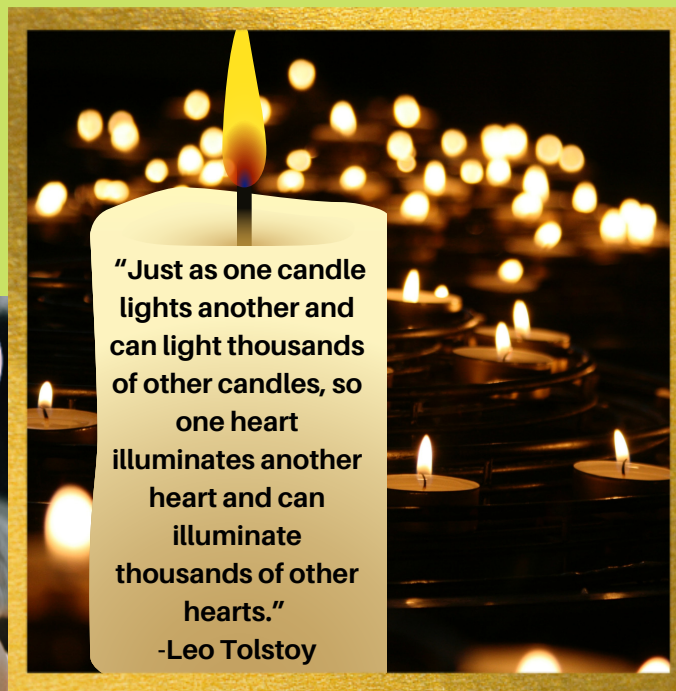
# DECORATE A QUOTE

## Instructions:

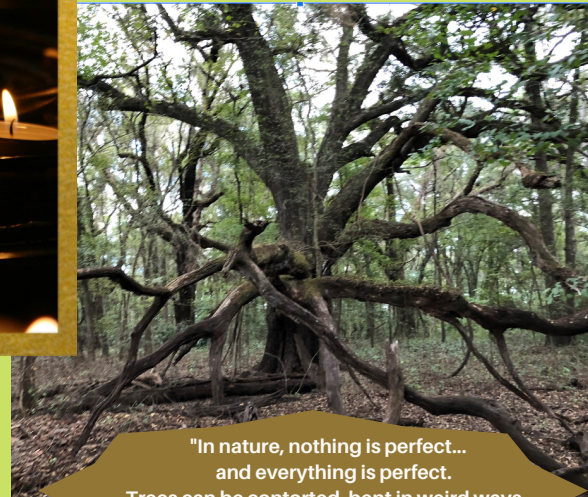
- 1) First, find or write a quote that feels inspirational to you. You can put this quote on any type of material (e.g. paper, cardboard, canvas, etc.) or even online (e.g. Google Docs, Powerpoint, Canva, Slidesgo, etc.)
- 2) Next, illustrate your quote with images (e.g. drawings, cut-outs from magazines, photographs, online images, etc.)

## Examples:

"Big journeys start with tiny steps."  
-Chinese Proverb

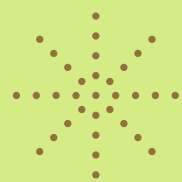


"Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love."  
- Mother Teresa



"Every child begins the world again."  
- Henry David Thoreau

"In nature, nothing is perfect... and everything is perfect. Trees can be contorted, bent in weird ways, and they're still beautiful." - Alice Walker.



# 3

# POETRY



There are many ways poetry can inspire and comfort us. Here are three ideas -- Feel free to come up with your own!



**Idea #1.** Find a poem online and share or journal about it!

## Idea #2 Acrostic Poetry

Start with any word (e.g. a baby or a person's name, a word you like, etc.) Include each letter of that word inside a sentence, or pick adjectives that include each letter.

- N** - Noble
- I** - Inspiring
- C** - Courageous
- U** - Understanding

## Idea # 3 - Create poetic sentences.

**Step 1** For each of the words below, write down the first associated word that comes mind. **Step 2** Create a short paragraph of 3-6 sentences using as many words as you can from your list.

- Color
- Animal
- Feeling
- Blanket
- Medication
- Vital Sign
- Hat
- Natural Phenomenon
- Tool
- Time of Day
- Flavor
- Food

# 4

# PAINT

How deep do you want to go with painting?

## Distract me!

Calm the Nervous System by engaging with colors, shapes, designs, etc.

## Supply Ideas

- Canvas (onesie, bib, reusable diaper, paper, cardboard, seed paper, etc.)
- Paint (watercolor, acrylics, etc.)
- Paintbrushes
- Cups with water
- Paper towels
- Plate to hold different colors

## Help me make sense of this!

Gain more clarity by accessing a different part of our brain.

Coloring Book

Mandala

Paint by Numbers

**Paint any nature scene** (e.g. river, ocean, mountains, forest). Then **answer any/all of these prompts** in a journal or with a trusted person, related to the scene you painted:

- What would you title your painting?
- What does [a piece of the painting] mean?
- What stands out to you?
- What do you notice has the most power/energy/action? The least?
- If something about this painting could speak, what would it say?
- If an aspect could do something, what might it do?
- Now that you've explored this, what might be the subtitle?

# 5 MINDFUL COMMUNICATION

## Purpose of mindful communication:

- **Connect** internally & interpersonally
- Engage **Curiosity & Compassion**
- **Communicate** your needs
- Helps shift the brain's **Center of Activation** from our amygdala (our self-protective emotion center) to our prefrontal cortex (where we access higher understanding and insight)

## Layers of Noticing and Naming

Journal your responses with words and/or images, and/or discuss them with a trusted person.



### Right Here & Now...

- My Body is Experiencing...
  - See Somatic Language examples on next page
- My Heart is Feeling...
  - See Emotion examples on the next page wheel below
- My Mind is Thinking...
- My Intuition Knows...





# MINDFUL COMMUNICATION - RESOURCES

## A selection of Somatic Language

Expansive	Contracted	Inner Climate	Colors	Metaphors
Open	Tight	Burning	Brown	Pit in Stomach
Elevated	Pain	Boiling	Black	Weight on Chest
Alive	Sharp	Flooded	Silver	Lump in Throat
Vibrating	Stiff	Soaked	Pink	Walking on Eggshells
Tingling	Stuck	Cool	Purple	In Knots
Shimmering	Empty	Cold	Blue	Hibernating
Fluid	Lifeless	Freezing	Green	Stuck in Mud
Weightless	Congested	Frozen	Yellow	Hurricane
Loose	Heavy	Neutral	Orange	Thundering
Soft	Shaky	Dehydrated	Red	Explosion
Flexible	Thick	Cloudy	White	Gut-Wrenching
Full	Achy	Foggy	Speckled	Faucet
Sweating	Narrow	Hot	Transparent	Waterfall
Energized	Raw	Warm	Rainbow	River

### Examples of Emotions



For an enlarged view, visit: [feelingswheel.com](http://feelingswheel.com)

# REFERENCES - PAGE 1

Bie, A. (2019). Music therapy in the NICU and pediatrics: a program proposal for Stony Brook Children's Hospital (Doctoral dissertation).

Bieleninik, Ł., Ghetti, C. & Gold, C. Music therapy for preterm infants and their parents: a meta-analysis. *Pediatrics* 138, e20160971 (2016).

Carlson, J. M., & Galan, H. M. (2016). An Exploration Of Creative Arts Therapies In Pediatric Hospitals. (Dissertation)

Councill, T. (2012). Medical art therapy with children. In C.A. Malchiodi (Ed.), *Handbook of art therapy* (pp. 222-240). New York: Guilford Press.

Dunphy Kim, Baker Felicity A., Dumaresq Ella, Carroll-Haskins Katrina, Eickholt Jasmin, Ercole Maya, Kaimal Girija, et al. 2019 . Creative Arts Interventions to Address Depression in Older Adults: A Systematic Review of Outcomes, Processes, and Mechanisms. *Frontiers in Psychology* (9) 1-24.

Filippa, M., Lordier, L., De Almeida, J. S., Monaci, M. G., Adam-Darque, A., Grandjean, D., ... & Hüppi, P. S. (2020). Early vocal contact and music in the NICU: new insights into preventive interventions. *Pediatric research*, 87(2), 249-264.

Fancourt, D., & Perkins, R. (2017). Associations between singing to babies and symptoms of postnatal depression, well-being, self-esteem and mother-infant bond. *Public health*, 145, 149-152.

Gabriel, B., Bromberg, E., Vandenbovenkamp, J., Walka, P., Kornblith, A. B., & Luzzatto, P. (2001). Art therapy with adult bone marrow transplant patients in isolation: a pilot study. *Psycho-Oncology: Journal of the Psychological, Social and Behavioral Dimensions of Cancer*, 10(2), 114-123.

Haidari, E., Main, E. K., Cui, X., Cape, V., Tawfik, D. S., Adair, K. C., Sexton, B.J., & Profit, J. (2021). Maternal and neonatal health care worker well-being and patient safety climate amid the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Perinatology*, 41(5), 961-969

Haslbeck, F. & Stegemann, T. The effect of music therapy on infants born preterm. *Dev. Med. Child Neurol.* 60, 217 (2018).

Kittithanesuan, Y., Chiarakul, S., Kaewkungwal, J., & Poovorawan, Y. (2017). Effect of music on immediately postpartum lactation by term mothers after giving birth: a randomized controlled trial. *J Med Assoc Thai*, 100(8), 834-42.

Leivas, K. A., Ramos, L. Z., Piperno, G. C., de Jesus Alves, A. F., Kawata, C., Sabino, H. A. C., & Molinari, B. C. (2022). The benefits of music therapy on preterm infants in the intensive care unit.

# REFERENCES - PAGE 2

Mandel, S. E., Davis, B. A., & Secic, M. (2019). Patient satisfaction and benefits of music therapy services to manage stress and pain in the hospital emergency department. *Journal of Music Therapy*, 56(2), 149-173.

Martin, E.S. (2013). Bringing the family into medical art therapy. In C.A. Malchiodi (Ed.), *Art therapy and health care* (pp.304-315). New York: Guilford Press.

Nainis, Nancy. 2008. Approaches to art therapy for cancer inpatients: research and practice considerations. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* 25(3) pp. 115-121

Negrete, B. (2020). Meeting the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic: Virtual developmental music therapy class for infants in the neonatal intensive care unit. *Pediatric Nursing*, 46(4), 198-206.

Patel, V., Brackman, S., Shafi, U., Causey, A., Melnik Allen, L., Dittmar, A., & Panda, M. (2021). Overview of an emergent, arts-based resiliency curriculum to mitigate medical trainee burnout. *Arts & Health*, 13(1), 98-106.

Reed, K., Cochran, K. L., Edelblute, A., Manzanares, D., Sinn, H., Henry, M., & Moss, M. (2020). Creative arts therapy as a potential intervention to prevent burnout and build resilience in health care professionals. *AACN Advanced Critical Care*, 31(2), 179-190.

Samuels, M., & Lane, M. R. (2013). *Healing with the arts: A 12-week program to heal yourself and your community*. Simon and Schuster.

Sonke, J., Pesata, V., Arce, L., Carytsas, F. P., Zemina, K., & Jokisch, C. (2015). The effects of arts-in-medicine programming on the medical-surgical work environment. *Arts & health*, 7(1), 27-41.

Stacey, S., Osborn, M. & Salkovskis, P. (2015). Life is a rollercoaster...what helps parents cope with the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU)? *Journal of Neonatal Nursing*, 21, 136-141.

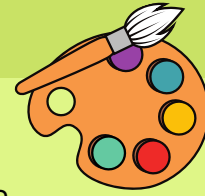
Svensk A.C., Oster I., Thyme K.E., et al. 2009. Art therapy improves experienced quality of life among women undergoing treatment for breast cancer: a randomized controlled study. *European Journal of Cancer Care* (18) pp 69-77.

Tjasink, M., & Soosaipillai, G. (2019). Art therapy to reduce burnout in oncology and palliative care doctors: a pilot study. *International Journal of Art Therapy*, 24(1), 12-20.

van der Heijden, M. J. et al. Do hospitalized premature infants benefit from music interventions? A systematic review of randomized controlled trials. *PLoS ONE* 11, e0161848 (2016).

White, M.P., Anderson S., Stansfield K.E., Gulliver B. (2010). Parental participation in a visual arts programme on a neonatal unit. *Infant*. 6(5): 165-69.

# WANT MORE IDEAS?



- Register for a **free** online course - **Healing with the Arts**:
  - <https://www.healingwiththearts.com/programs/#freecourse>
- **Hack Your Nervous System** card deck that helps alleviate anxiety, reduce stress and increase awareness of mind-body experience:  
<https://www.etsy.com/listing/1102479298/hack-your-nervous-system-card-deck>
- **Collage** a box or furniture with magazine cut-outs, scrabble pieces, fabric
- Make designs out of **nature** items (e.g., rocks, sticks, shells, leaves, pebbles)
- Listen to a guided imagery and let your **imagination** soar
- Dance, stretch, body movement, or **yoga**
  - Move in the privacy of your own home, or attend a **dance** class that interests you
- **Cook** or bake something delicious
- Sew, knit, or **crochet**
- **Sing** in the shower
- Give a **presentation** on a topic of interest, at a conference, at a local school, etc.
- **Write** a letter or card to a loved one
- Do a jigsaw **puzzle**
- Make a **video** montage of your favorite photos and images
- Write a blog post or short **story**
- Play a musical **instrument**
- Create a **vision board**
- Start a **garden**
- Play with **clay** or attend a pottery class
- Create a **mosaic**
- Possibilities are **infinite!**



*"Art offers sanctuary to everyone willing to open their Hearts as well as their Eyes."  
-Nikki Giovanni*

Free guidebook:  
[drlenes.com/nicu](http://drlenes.com/nicu)

