

Module 8

Psychological and Emotional Issues After a Cesarean

Both Mothers and Fathers
Can Experience
a Cesarean as an
Emotionally Difficult Birth

Mothers' Feelings About Cesarean Birth Vary Widely

- Some mothers recover quickly, resolve and integrate their birth experience as one step towards becoming a mother.
- Some mothers who may have had an unexpected cesarean after a long and painful labor may experience disappointment, loss, sadness, grief, guilt or anger.
- Some mothers experience their cesarean as a physical assault and a form of institutional violence. For others the surgical birth was experienced as a rape.

An Unexpected Cesarean Can Have a Significant Emotional Impact

An unexpected cesarean can:

- Affect a mother's self-esteem;
- Delay mother-infant attachment;
- Affect a mother's ability to respond to her baby's needs;
- Affect her feelings about breastfeeding;
- Impact her relationship with her partner;
- Affect her desire for more children.



Jukelevics, N. (2008). Breaking the silence: Birth trauma, cesareans, and post-traumatic stress in *Understanding the dangers of cesarean birth: Making informed decisions*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, p. 60-68.

Photo- © Andy Dean/Dollar Photo Club

An Unexpected Cesarean

Can Have a Significant Emotional Impact

- Often the emotional impact of a cesarean is misunderstood, dismissed, or overlooked.
- The outcome of the pregnancy, a healthy mother and baby, are validated, but not the process of the birth or the negative feelings the mother may have experienced.

They Don't Understand

Friends, family, and even partners of mothers who had an emotionally difficult cesarean often **do not understand** why mothers don't just “move on,” or why they “obsess” about their birth experience.

From a Mother Who Had Two Cesareans Ten Years Apart

“What bothered me the most about my sections was the way they were acknowledged by the rest of the world I guess. I mean yes, I had a wonderful baby, and wasn’t I happy, and the answer was no. I actually felt assaulted and violated and out of control...I didn’t feel there was anything out there really to help me deal with getting it together psychologically.”

Birthrites: Healing After Your Cesarean, <http://www.birthrites.org>

Mothers' Feelings About Cesarean Birth Vary Widely

- Some mothers experience post-traumatic stress after a cesarean.
- They experience the same physical and psychological symptoms as those experienced by combat veterans, major disaster victims, or plane crash survivors.
- The symptoms of birth-related PTSD may emerge weeks, months, or even years after the birth.

Traumatic Childbirth

- Birth trauma is defined as an event occurring during the labor and delivery process that involves actual, threatened or perceived serious injury or death to the mother or her infant.
- The birthing mother experiences intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and horror.



Jukelevics, N. (2008). Breaking the silence: Birth trauma, cesareans, and post-traumatic stress in *Understanding the dangers of cesarean birth: Making informed decisions*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, p. 60-68.

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Traumatic Childbirth

- She may feel as if she has been stripped of her dignity, left alone and abandoned.
- She may feel that she was not cared for with respect and empathy.
- Her rights were not recognized and her wishes for her birth not included in the care decisions made by the staff.

Symptoms of a Traumatic Birth

- Intrusive thoughts and re-experiencing of the birth in flashbacks or nightmares;
- Avoidance of people or places that may trigger a reminder of the birth and bring out intense feelings of distress;
- Numbing of emotions and general responsiveness;
- Hypervigilance, disturbed sleep, anxiety, lack of concentration, feeling irritable or angry.

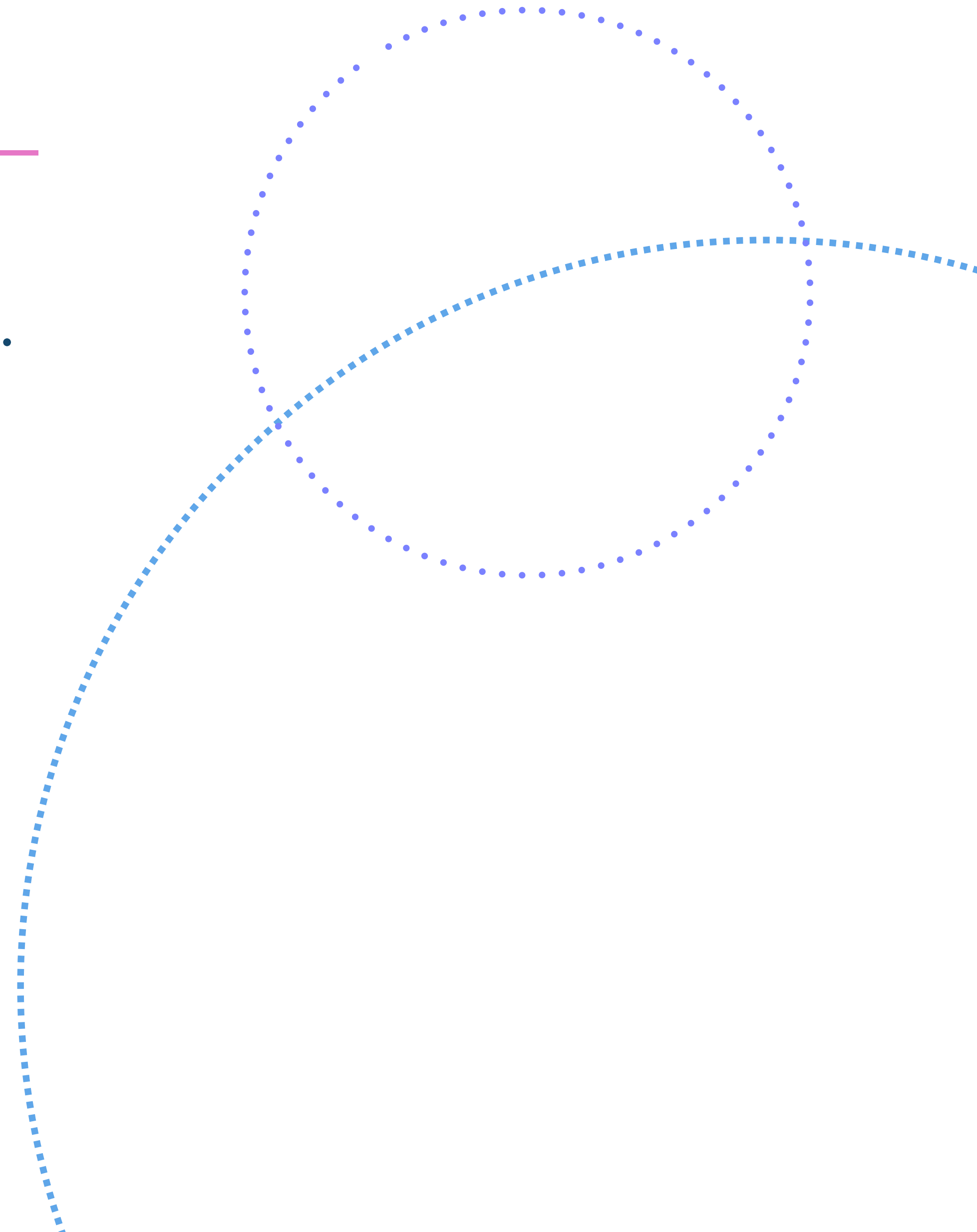
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Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

- When symptoms occur in the first 30 days after the traumatic birth it is called an acute stress response.
- The diagnosis of PTSD is made when the clinical symptoms persist.



Traumatic Childbirth

A traumatic birth of any kind can leave a woman feeling **disempowered, violated, or betrayed.**



Memories of a Traumatic Cesarean Birth

“When my son was three years old I was nine weeks pregnant. I became terrified. Terrified of doctors, hospitals, everything. I hadn’t seen a doctor; I was too scared to get shafted again. The terror and pain came back to me. I began to relive the experience again.”

Memories of a traumatic cesarean birth

“Many mothers go through tough times after giving birth, and I was one of them. I didn't have PPD, but I cried daily for three months over what had been done to me, and what had been taken away. My cesarean stripped me of my autonomy and humanity and left me angry, fearful, physically ill and shaking any time I was touched for almost a year. I had flashbacks of being strapped to a table, hearing my baby cry and not seeing him, not being able to touch him, crying out for him while I was ignored.”

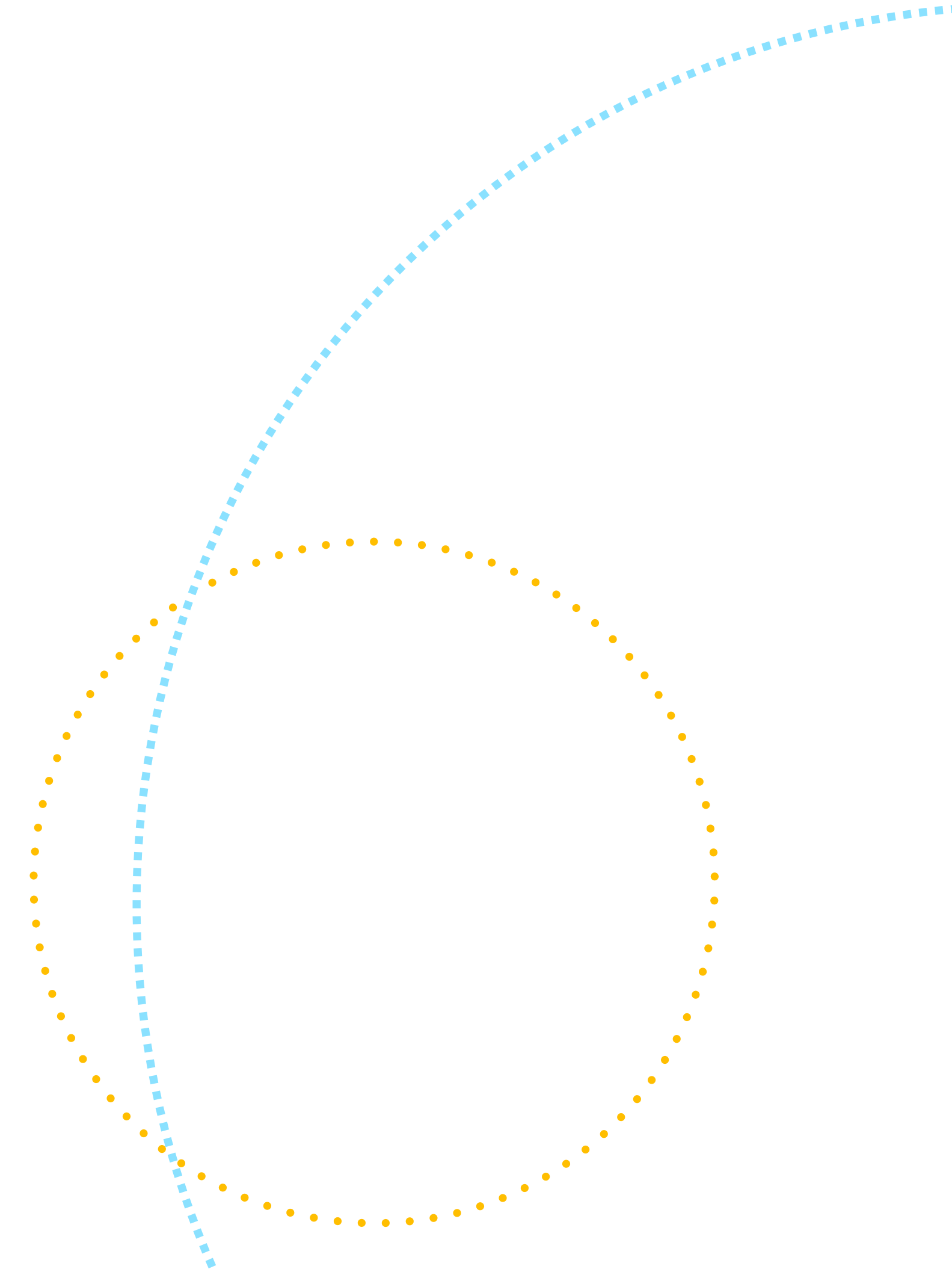
International Cesarean Awareness Network. Personal communication, January 30, 2015.

Photo- Shutterstock

Flashbacks

After an Emotionally Difficult Birth

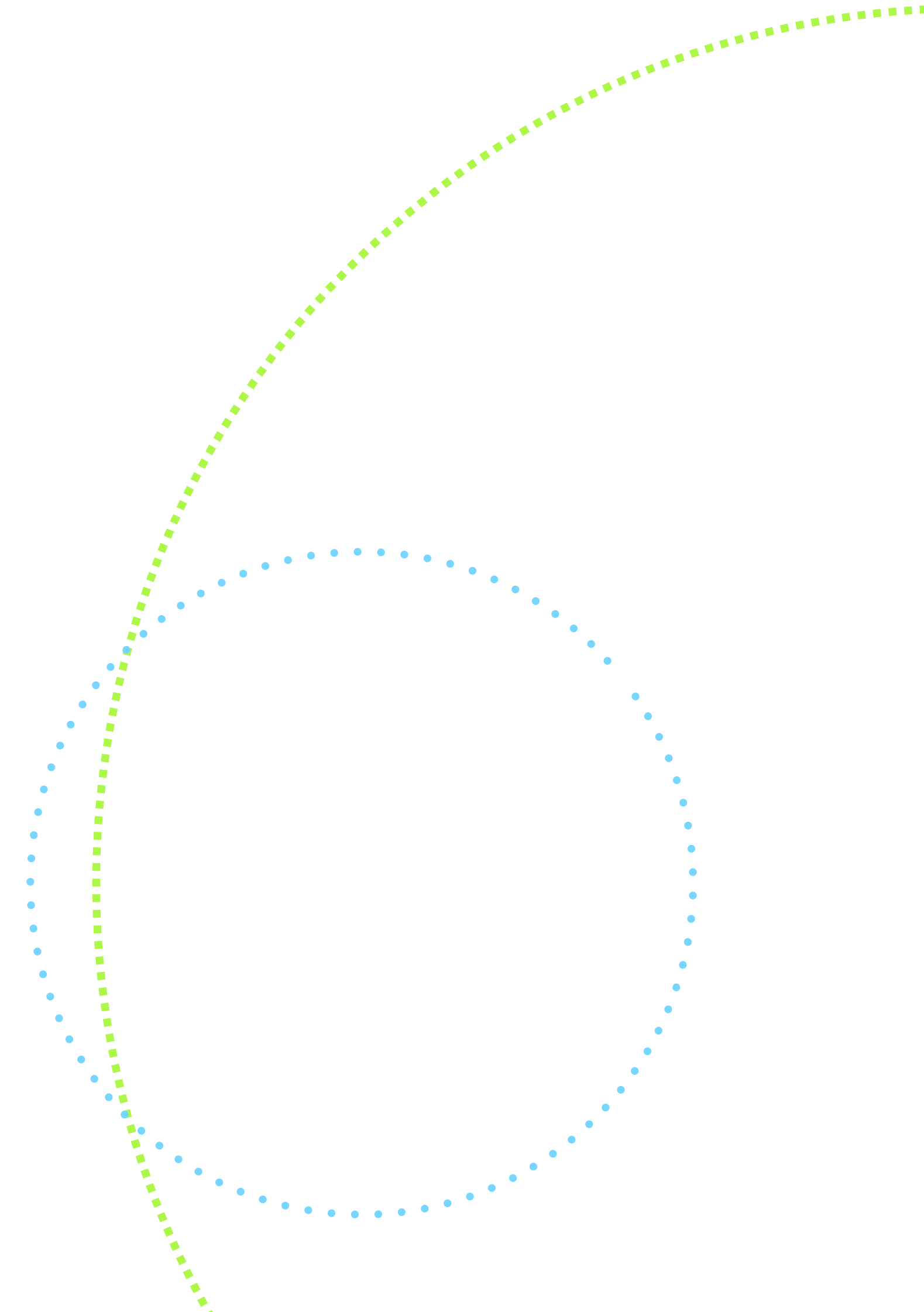
- When laboring for a VBAC some women react strongly to sounds, events, or smells that they experienced before with an unexpected cesarean.
- Some mothers take these stimuli to mean that their current birth will turn out just like their previous one.
- These sensations may trigger tension, distract you from your labor, or give you a feeling of not having any control over the situation.



Flashbacks

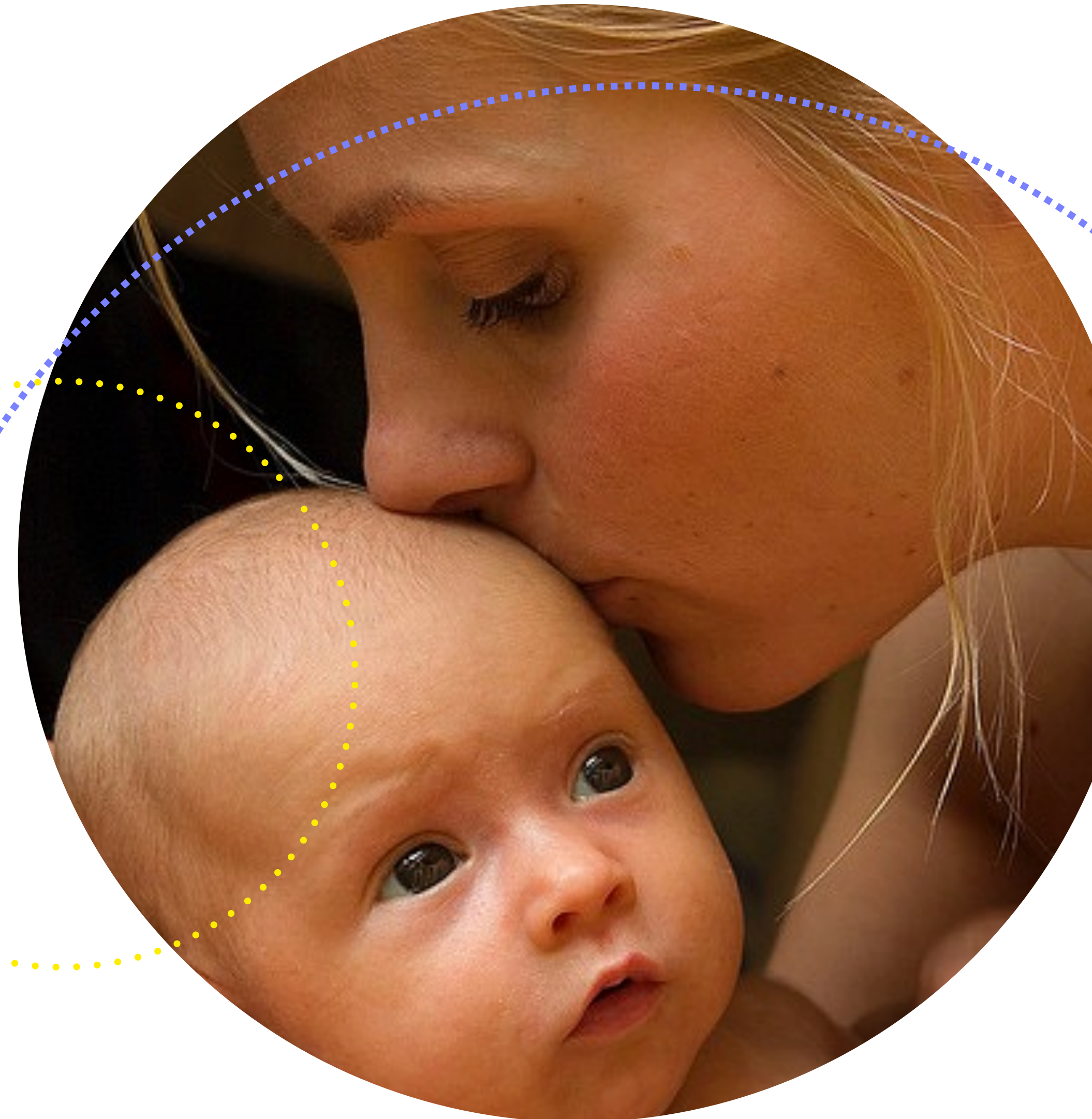
After an Emotionally Difficult Birth

- If this happens to you while laboring for a VBAC you may change your mind and decide to just go ahead with a repeat cesarean.
- It will help to discuss these issues with someone you trust during your pregnancy so you know how to cope with those moments should they reoccur.
- It may help to visualize yourself reacting differently to those triggers and progressing to a safe and healthy birth this time.



A VBAC Can Be a Healing Experience

Often, having a VBAC helps mothers heal from a previous traumatic birth.



A VBAC Can Be a Healing Experience

“I didn't realize the extent of my darkness until I had my VBAC. A slow light began to burn within me and I was awakened. It has motivated me to educate, advocate, and support others.

After my unmedicated VBA2C (vaginal birth after 2 cesareans) I honestly, truthfully felt like I could do ANYTHING! I felt complete. I felt secure in my body. Good research and education along with support from ICAN, a doula, and an OB who believed in me enabled me to experience the birth of my 4th baby just the way I wanted.”

It's Normal

- A mother can feel grateful for a healthy baby while still feeling sad, confused, or angry about the cesarean experience itself.
- Take the time to process your cesarean birth before you labor for a VBAC.



Checklist for Parents

When you are ready:

- Find the right time;
- Find a safe place;
- Find someone you trust;
- Begin to share your cesarean experience.
- What are the positive things you can think of?
- Think about what you would like to have done differently.
- Think about what you need to feel empowered and ready to labor for a VBAC.

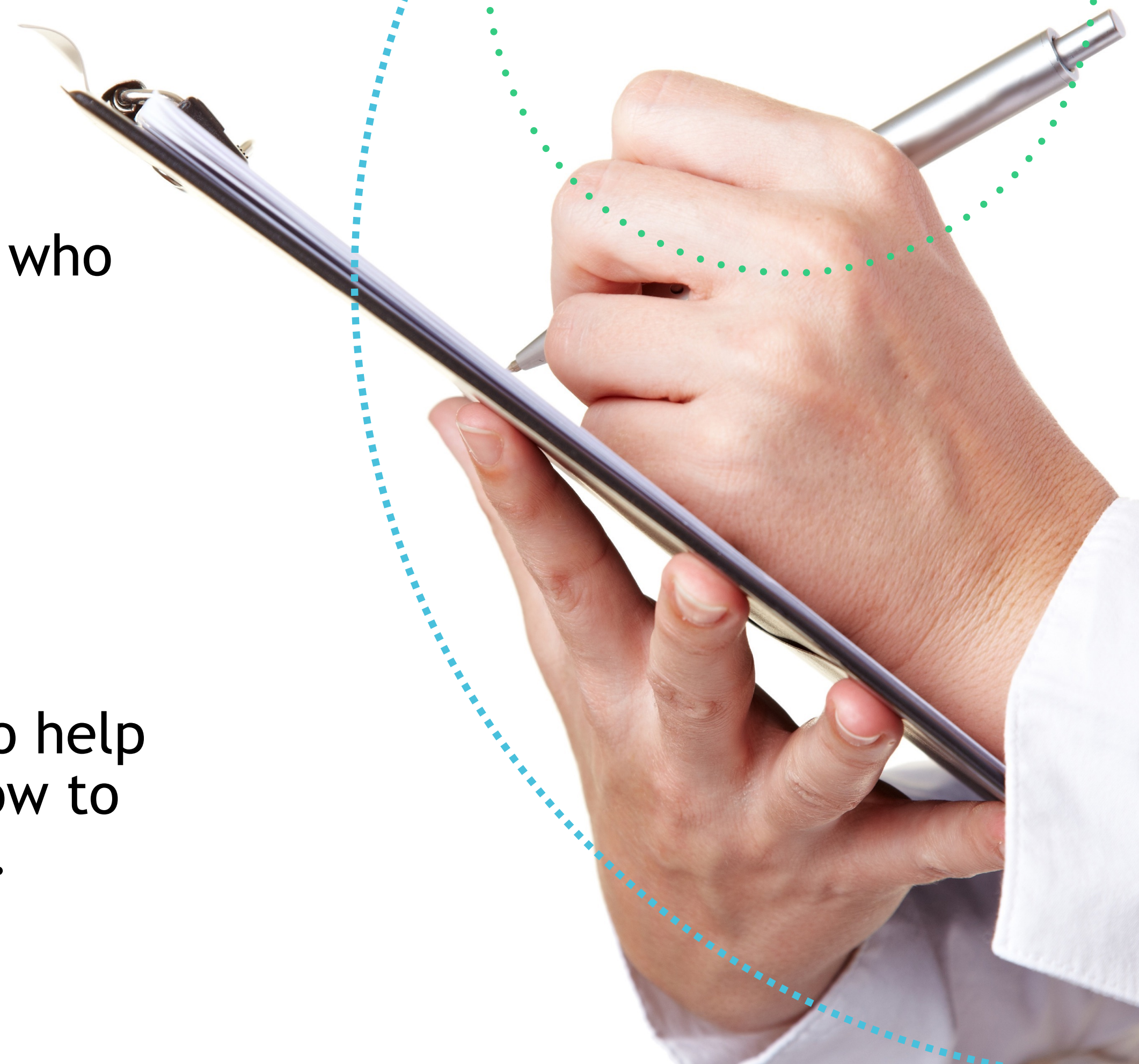
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Checklist for Parents

When you are ready:

- Talk to your partner about how you feel;
- Share your experience with other mothers who are likely to understand;
- Reach out to a support group;
- Write or draw your feelings in a journal;
- Hold your baby in your arms and share the positive feelings of your birth experience;
- Gather as much information as you need to help you understand your cesarean birth and how to make the changes that you want this time.



Resources for Parents

- ◉ **Birthrites Australia**
- ◉ **Birth With Confidence Blog**
The Traumatic Birth Prevention & Resource Guide
- ◉ **International Cesarean Awareness Network**
Recovering From A Cesarean: Tips on Healing
- ◉ **Penny Simkin and Phyllis Klauss**
Self-Assessment of Maternal Distress After a Difficult Birth
Strategies For Specific Triggers of Anxiety During Childbirth



Resources for Parents

- ⦿ [Postpartum Support International](#)
 - ⦿ [Prevention and Treatment of Traumatic Childbirth](#)
 - ⦿ [Solace for Mothers](#)
 - ⦿ [The Birth Trauma Association, U.K.](#)
 - ⦿ [Trauma and Birth Stress, New Zealand](#)
 - ⦿ [Vancouver Birth Trauma, Canada](#)
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Concerns that Fathers or Partners May Have About VBAC

Partners Can Feel Differently About Planning a VBAC

- Some fathers are ready to provide the support the mother needs to prepare for a VBAC.
- Some partners fear another complicated birth and prefer the “safety” and predictability of a repeat cesarean.
- Some partners are not sure they can meet the challenge of another possibly long birth.
- Each partner is different and needs to prepare in his or her own way for the coming birth.



From a Father, Preparing for a VBAC

“As soon as Nicole got pregnant for the second time, we talked about birth again. I felt resistant. For me it was a case of ‘once a cesarean, always a cesarean’. I was worried about a uterine rupture. I also couldn’t help thinking how Nicole had been in labor for 24 hours and she hadn’t opened up. I was wary of her desire to have a VBAC, but in the end I didn’t put up too much opposition.”

Hélène Vadeboncoeur, *Birthing Normally After a Cesarean or Two: A Guide for Pregnant Women, Exploring Reasons and Practicalities for VBAC.*

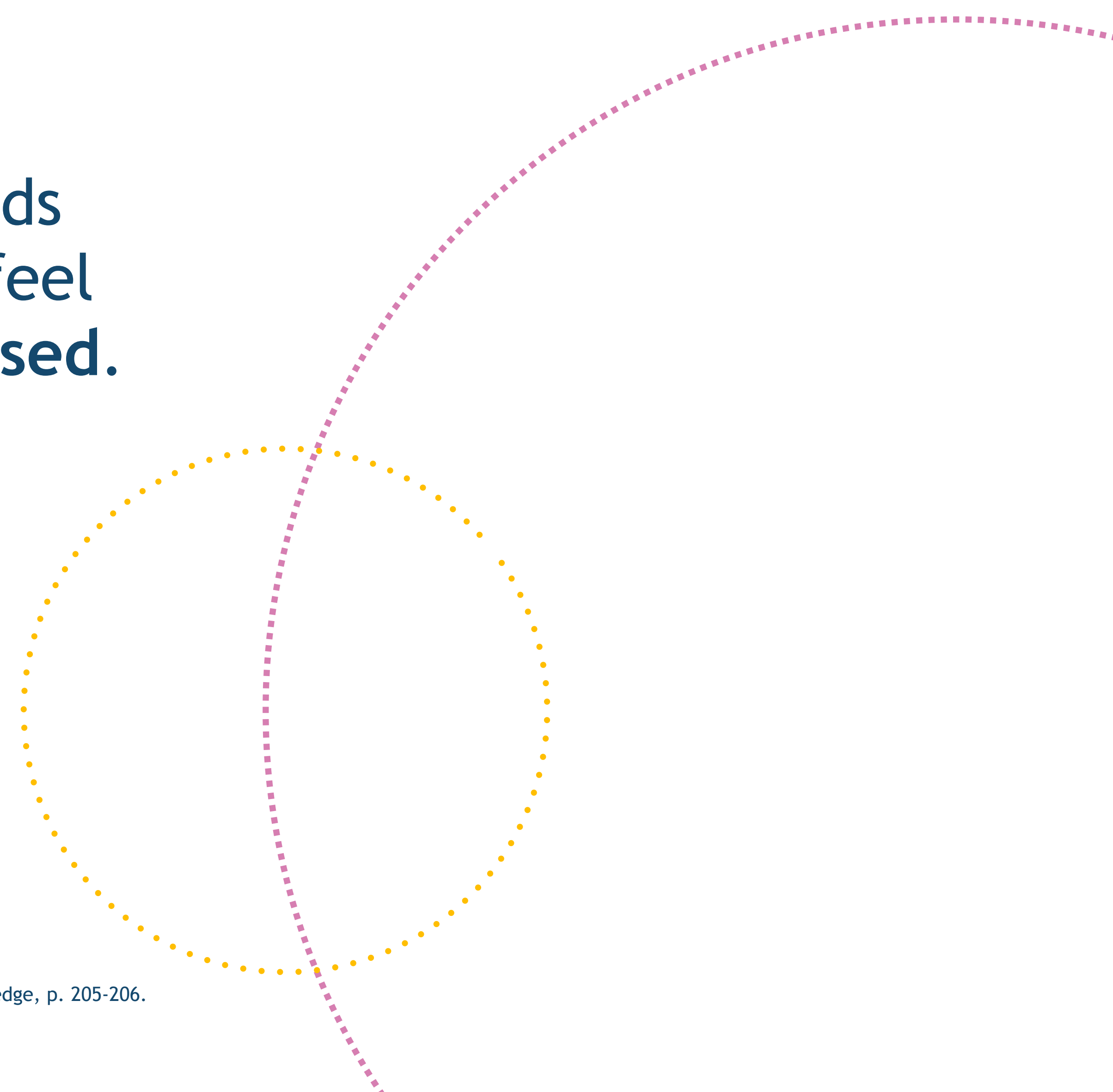
Birth can be
stressful for
fathers





Birth Can Be **Stressful for Fathers**

A long and difficult birth that ends in a cesarean can make fathers feel **helpless, alienated, and distressed.**



From a Father at a First Birth that Ended with a Cesarean

“There were moments when I felt desperate, not believing that she would ever give birth or that a baby would eventually come out. I felt like I was in an unreal world. Several times I left the room and even the corridor and headed for the stairwell to cry because of my own sense of impotence.”

Hélène Vadeboncoeur, *Birthing Normally After a Cesarean or Two: A Guide for Pregnant Women, Exploring Reasons and Practicalities for VBAC.*

Birth Can Be Stressful for Fathers

- Being a witness to complications of labor or birth such as maternal hemorrhage, an umbilical cord prolapse, or the baby's need for neonatal intensive care can be terrifying.
- Being present at their partner's experience of birth as traumatic can cause some fathers to experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress.
- When complications develop and the staff needs to move quickly fathers can feel like spectators and not participants in their child's birth.
- Some fathers need time to recognize and grieve the loss of their expectations for a healthy birth.
- When mothers want to plan a VBAC, fathers need to express and resolve their feelings so that they can provide the support she will need.



Tatano Beck, C., Watson Driscoll, J. & Watson, S. (2013). *Traumatic childbirth*. London & New York: Routledge, p. 205-206.

Photo- Shutterstock



Fathers should define for themselves how they are best able to **support** their partner during childbirth.

Partners Should Define for Themselves How They Are Best Able to **Support Their Partner During Childbirth**

- A difficult birth can be traumatic for partners also.
- All mothers need support and reassurance during childbirth. Partners may not be able to provide all the support a mother needs.
- Parents may want to consider having a doula at their birth.
- It helps if partners can talk about any negative impact the prior labor or cesarean may have had and to define for themselves how they can best be involved and supportive.



Key Points to Review

- Partners may have a different point of view about the best way to give birth after a prior cesarean.
- Childbirth can also be emotionally difficult or traumatic for partners.
- Fathers should take the time to talk about the prior birth and define for themselves how they can best support their partners.



Checklist for Parents

- What advantages do you see for your partner, yourself, and your family if you plan a VBAC?
- What are the disadvantages?
- What issues do both of you agree and disagree on?
- Can you think of ways of working through these issues?
- Have you thought about accompanying your partner to a prenatal appointment?
- Would you consider going with her to a VBAC support group?

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Checklist for Parents

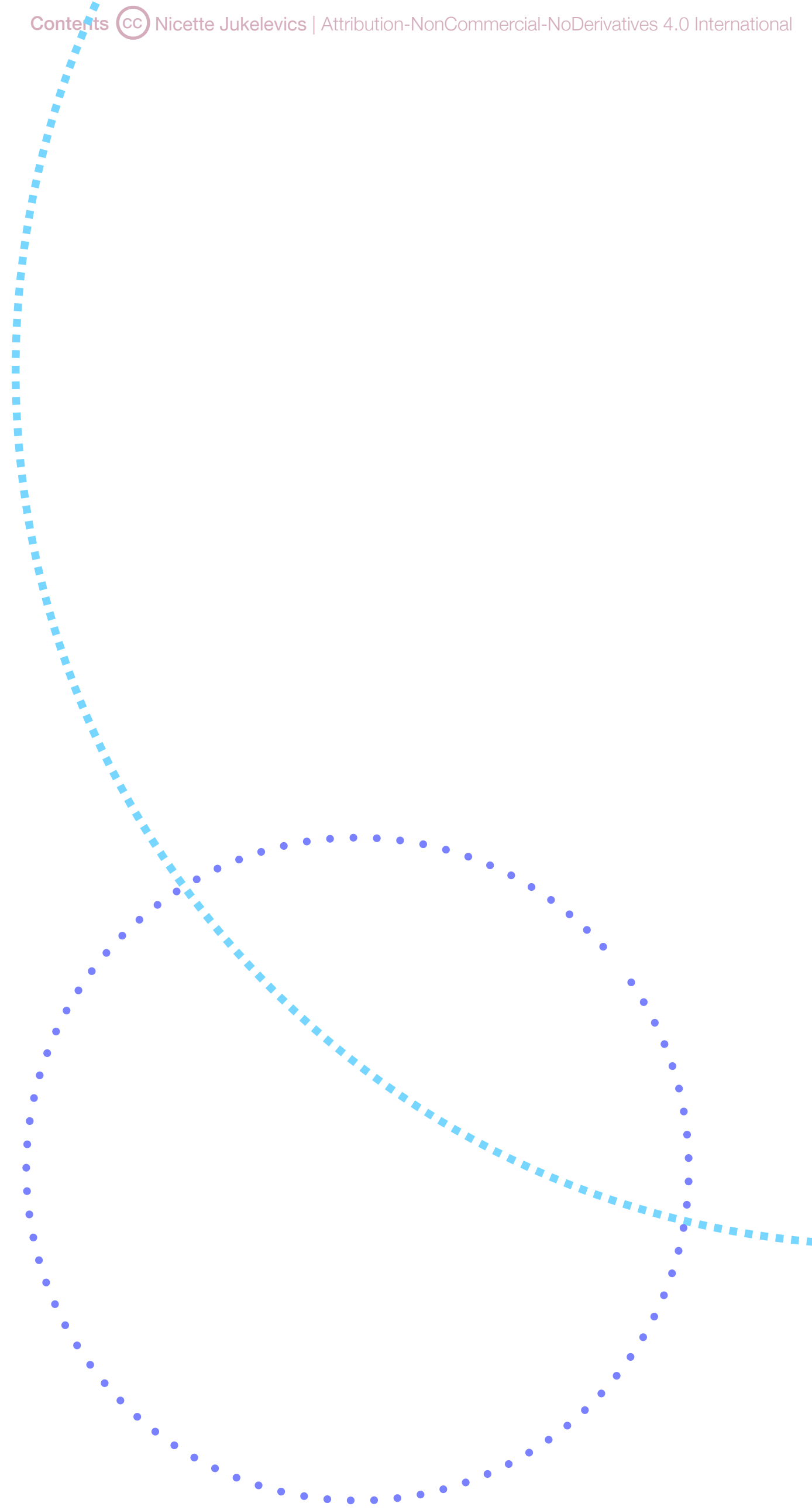
- Supporting a woman in childbirth is hard work. Are you worried you won't be able to give her what she needs?
- Have you thought about having a doula that can guide and support you during labor and birth?
- What information or reassurances do you need to make you feel comfortable about planning a VBAC?
- You feel strongly that a scheduled repeat cesarean is the safest and easiest way to have this baby. Can you understand why your partner feels strongly about planning a VBAC?

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Resources for Parents

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- ⦿ [Postpartum Support International Resources for Fathers](#)
- ⦿ [Prevention and Treatment of Traumatic Childbirth](#)
Ten Questions for a Partner of PTSD Survivor
Fathers and PTSD
- ⦿ [The Birth Trauma Association, U.K. Fathers/Partners' Page](#)

