

# MARVELOUS MENTAL HEALTH

A TOOLKIT  
FOR HEROES  
IN HISTORIC TIMES

**FROM FANDOM FORWARD**

# INTRODUCTION

We love watching our favorite superheroes in action: whether they are gaining amazing powers, uncovering a wild mystery, or protecting their friends in a battle, it's fun to watch them save the world! But, just like in the real world, we rarely consider the mental exhaustion heroes may face from the change, violence, and responsibilities they endure. **Even superheroes struggle with their mental health, and knowing that can be comforting.** From Wanda to Sam, we've watched our favorite heroes process the ramifications of the Blip, that moment when Thanos snapped his fingers and half of humanity (and every other living thing) suddenly disappeared. Those who remained struggled through grief, guilt, anger, and adjusting to a new, smaller, sadder world. After 5 years of the "new normal," everything changed again when those who had disappeared suddenly returned, and the world had to go through a whole new cycle of powerful emotions and structural changes.

**We've all experienced our own kind of Blip in the last few years,** as the COVID-19 pandemic turned the world on its head. Two years in, things are shifting once again, even as other world-changing events as big as the Blip, like climate change, war, rising fascism and more, layer on top of the changes wrought by the pandemic. Like our favorite superheroes, we're having to reckon with loss, pain, change, and who we're becoming as we live through the Blip. **But just like our heroes, we don't have to do it alone: our friends, our communities, our resources, and the powers that make each of us unique will help to support us as we explore our new reality.**

In this toolkit, you'll learn why mental health is so important both for you and for your relationships and communities as a collective. We'll practice some basic ways to find resources, reduce stigma, advocate for change, and care for the mental health of yourself and those around you. At the end of this toolkit, you'll also find an addendum for sharing this conversation with kids in your life, because good mental health care is crucial at every age - and it's never too early (or too late!) to start!

## ***CONTENT WARNING:***

We've kept this toolkit as light as it can be, but there will always be some heavy stuff when talking about mental health. Make sure you're in the right headspace before you read each section. Heroes know their own limits!



# RECOGNIZING THE NEED FOR HELP

One of the most challenging aspects of mental illness is that most people can (and often do) hide their struggles for a lot of a different reasons, whether because they fear punishment (like loss of a job or someone calling the police), think their problems can't be solved, or they just don't want others to worry. **As a result, a lot of people are struggling with mental illness - but they look as heroic as ever.**

## After the Blip, we see a lot of the Avengers demonstrating some of the most common signs of struggle:

- Feeling sad or down for extended periods of time
- Confused thinking or reduced ability to concentrate
- Excessive fears or worries, or extreme feelings of guilt
- Extreme mood changes of highs and lows
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Significant tiredness, low energy or problems sleeping
- Detachment from reality, paranoia or hallucinations
- Inability to cope with daily problems or stress
- Trouble understanding and relating to situations and to people
- Problems with alcohol or drug use
- Major changes in eating habits
- Excessive anger, hostility or violence
- More detail about this list can be found at the [Mayo Clinic](#)

Our favorite heroes experience a lot of these symptoms in the wake of the world changing. Thor drinks heavily, Hawkeye becomes a violent vigilante, everyone at the Avengers Compound demonstrates signs of tiredness, sadness, anger, and guilt. Even Tony Stark becomes isolated and cut off from his friends.

It's worth noting that some people will deal with mental health struggles by diving even more deeply into work or school. That's what Maria Rambeau did when she started developing S.W.O.R.D.'s protocols for when the Vanished (those that disappeared during the Blip) returned. Maria's work turned out to be prophetic and useful - but diving headlong into work can also be a way of avoiding your emotions. That means that even if your friend is looking productive, it's still worth having those conversations to let them know you're a safe person to talk with about the hard stuff. And if you're the person burying themselves in work? It's worth taking some time to reflect on why.

# FIGHTING STIGMA

After the events of Avengers: Endgame, Wanda Romanoff was really going through it. By this point, she had lost her parents, her brother, and her partner, and she was grieving all of them while also struggling with tons of guilt around the consequences of her past actions. Finding no way to cope with her guilt and grief in a constructive way, and no one to talk to, she used her magic to accidentally create her own fake town (where she built a fake family and mind controlled all the town residents) to escape from the pain of her reality. Oops.

S.W.O.R.D. Director Tyler Hayward was unwilling to help Wanda and could only see her mental health crisis as justification that she was the villain in the story. This happens a lot in our world, too. Sure, people don't use chaos magic to bend reality into their favorite sitcoms. But people experiencing mental health crises often face severe punishment from figures of authority, like teachers, bosses, or police - even though **the vast majority of people experiencing severe mental illness [do not commit violence](#)**.

Other people, like Monica Rambeau, Darcy Lewis, and Jimmy Woo, (aka the Dream Team) saw the truth: that Wanda was in incredible pain and she needed help. The Dream Team modeled the kind of action that we need in the real world. They recognized the signs of a mental health crisis and rather than vilify Wanda, they offered her help, compassion, and understanding.



What did the dream team notice about Wanda's mental health? How did they help?

- They attempted to safely contact Wanda, rather than use force like Hayward.
- They recognized and acknowledged certain boundaries Wanda may have whenever she pushed back. Even though they had a mission, they still showed empathy and respected her space.
- They made an effort to learn and understand her story. They figured out who the key players were and even went to great lengths to help protect them. They let her know that she wasn't alone.
- They were the first ones to step in when others, like Hayward, tried to villainize her further.
- They let her have a chance to acknowledge what was actually happening and figure out how she was going to move forward.

There is a long history (and present-day practice) of authority figures treating mentally ill people like villains, burdens, and criminals. This creates a strong stigma around admitting that you're struggling. If we fear asking for help will lead to punishments, like expulsion, loss of income, violence, or even jail time, we're way less likely to seek help or even admit we're struggling in the first place. Helping your community learn to think like the Dream Team is one way that you can help reduce stigma around mental illness and treatment.



It's important to remember that while Wanda was experiencing pain and grief, she still hurt people and controlled them without their consent. Harm is harm, even if we're in a crisis when we inflict it. Thankfully, there are healthy ways to atone and move forward in community.

[\[Read more about that here.\]](#)

Wanda's not the only superhero struggling. In Avengers: Endgame, we see a side of Thor we've never seen before - one who is battling depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and alcoholism. Much like Wanda, Thor's crisis is not recognized by everyone around him for what it is. Instead, his struggles become comedic relief. You can imagine how difficult it might be for him to open up about his mental health when everyone (especially Rocket) is laughing at him.

But there is good news, Thor's mom Frigga immediately recognized that Thor needed help - and she offered it to him.

HOW FRIGGA TREATED THOR	HOW ROCKET TREATED THOR
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acknowledges that "the future has not been kind" to Thor</li><li>• Offers comforting touches</li><li>• Talks to Thor when he expresses that is what he needs</li><li>• Actively listens to Thor while he is talking</li><li>• Reminds Thor that his failure makes him "just like everyone else"</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Calls Thor by mean-spirited nicknames and mocks his weight</li><li>• Slaps Thor when he's having a panic attack</li><li>• Minimizes Thor's struggles because he's "not the only one who lost people"</li><li>• Speaks to Thor not with compassion, but with anger</li></ul>

Rocket (and the Marvel filmmakers that bring him to life) demonstrated another huge cause of stigma around mental illness: he treats Thor like a joke. Rocket's struggling too (that's why he says Thor's "not the only one who lost people"), but instead of using that shared struggle as a source of empathy and kindness, he uses it as a reason to belittle his friend. In the real world, lots of people keep their struggles a secret because they worry they will be mocked, minimized, and not taken seriously - just like the god of thunder. Sometimes, we'll even play Rocket's part to ourselves, using our internal monologue to say that our pain shouldn't matter in comparison to the problems of others.

Fortunately, we don't have to behave like Rocket. We can choose, instead, to be like Thor's mother, Frigga. Frigga recognizes that, like the rest of the world living through the Blip, her son is suffering and deserves compassion. She makes time for him, actively listens, speaks with kindness, and responds to his needs. Frigga uses her own experiences with pain and loss to demonstrate compassion and encouragement towards her son.

**We can use language like Frigga to support friends (and even ourselves!) with mental health struggles:**

- I can see that you're struggling. Would you like to talk about what's going on?
- I can make time to talk. It's important.
- Everyone struggles and fails sometimes. It's normal. I still love and support you.
- You are still worthy.
- I've struggled with this stuff, too!
- Would you like help making a plan?
- Would you like a hug?



In another part of the MCU, Bucky Barnes and Sam Wilson actually go to therapy in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*. Even if they were a bit reluctant, they do attend, talk about their feelings, and share what they are going through with each other. While the scene is largely played for laughs, talking about therapy in honest ways (both in media and in real life) can help to reduce the stigma people (especially men) may feel about seeking help. Together, Bucky and Sam help demonstrate that people - regardless of gender - can talk about their feelings, seek support, and still be strong, even in the midst of chaos.

It's also important to note that even though Sam is a therapist himself, he still needed help! Maintaining our mental health during world-changing crises is challenging, even if you have knowledge, training, and skills like Sam. Instead of trying to struggle alone, we can all work together to acknowledge that everyone needs help sometimes, and it's okay to reach out.



Words of encouragement from friends makes a difference - just ask Peter Parker himself! In Spider-man: No Way Home, Peter experiences an enormous loss, his Aunt May. Thankfully, Peter's friends and the Peter Parkers from parallel universes were there to help him in his time of grief.

The other Peters recognized what he was going through because they'd experienced similar grief themselves. By offering their words of encouragement, they helped him avoid the same mistakes that they had made in their own universes. The two visiting Spideys managed to help MCU Peter break the cycle of violence and revenge they all had been living through, which helped provide some healing to the three heroes and all the people around them.



# EVERY HERO NEEDS A TEAM

Once we've recognized that a friend needs help, or that we ourselves are struggling, what do we do? Let's look to our heroes again:



- Being an active part of his community - Asgard/ Avengers/Guardians
- Even though some might think he went too far, Thor let himself grieve, ultimately accepted his grief, and was able to move on.

- Frigga listened to Thor, acknowledged his pain, and reminded him that he was still worthy, even when he doubted himself.
- Heimdall remained a true friend and consistently stood by Thor's side.



- Realizing the pain she has caused, Wanda worked to accept reality, and spent time alone after Westview to learn more about her powers. Being alone isn't always the answer, but sometimes it's important to help us recharge!

- Vision didn't give up on his relationship with Wanda. He's also not afraid to let her know if she was doing harm.
- Monica, Darcy, and Jimmy advocated for her and tried repeatedly to help her in supportive ways.



- Opening up to friendship.
- Seeking help and treatment.
- Following through with the work on his journey of recovery.

- Steve went to great lengths to make sure his friend had a fair chance to recover. This kindness was also amplified by T'Challa, Sam, and Ayo.



- Spending time with his family and community.
- Working on his friendship with Bucky, and trying to reach a shared peace with Karli.
- Taking time to become comfortable in his new role.

- After Sam comes back to Louisiana, his sister Sarah plays a huge role in his post-Blip recovery. Not only does she consistently offer him support, she's also the one who gives him honest and loving reality checks since she wasn't blipped.



- Letting May, Ned, and MJ finally help him more so he doesn't always have to do everything on his own.
- Acknowledging his feelings and realizing when he may have gone too far.

- Peter's inner circle is a crucial part of his life. They help remind him that he's not alone. They let him have a safe space to be both Peter Parker and Spider-Man, and they stand by him when the world turns against him.

These are just examples of the many ways you can support both yourself and those around you. Let's brainstorm some specific tools and resources available to you.

# YOUR TOOLS

Kate Bishop is amazed by Hawkeye's collection of trick arrows and the things they allow him to do. Together, Kate and Clint go through each arrow, identifying their strengths and helping Kate fill a quiver of her own. For this activity, let's fill your quiver with your "trick arrows" - that is, the powers you possess for supporting your mental health and your friends. Do this activity on your own, or with the Kate and Clint in your life. And don't forget to give each of your trick arrows a name!

*Example: Arrow of Knowledge*

Arrow (Skill or Interest)	Why It Is Useful	How I Use This Arrow
<i>Example: Arrow of Knowledge</i>	<i>My Arrow of Knowledge helps me research problems, learn solutions, and think about how to apply them to my life.</i>	<i>Reading this toolkit; reading/listening to books, podcasts, videos, etc; journaling; talking about what I learn with friends</i>

# YOUR AVENGERS CAMPUS

Heroes always end up with a secret hideout or a tricked out home base, and there's a reason why! Relying on resources from your community is important for anyone dealing with big things. While you might not have access to Stark Industries tech, there's a lot of ways to find resources right where you are.

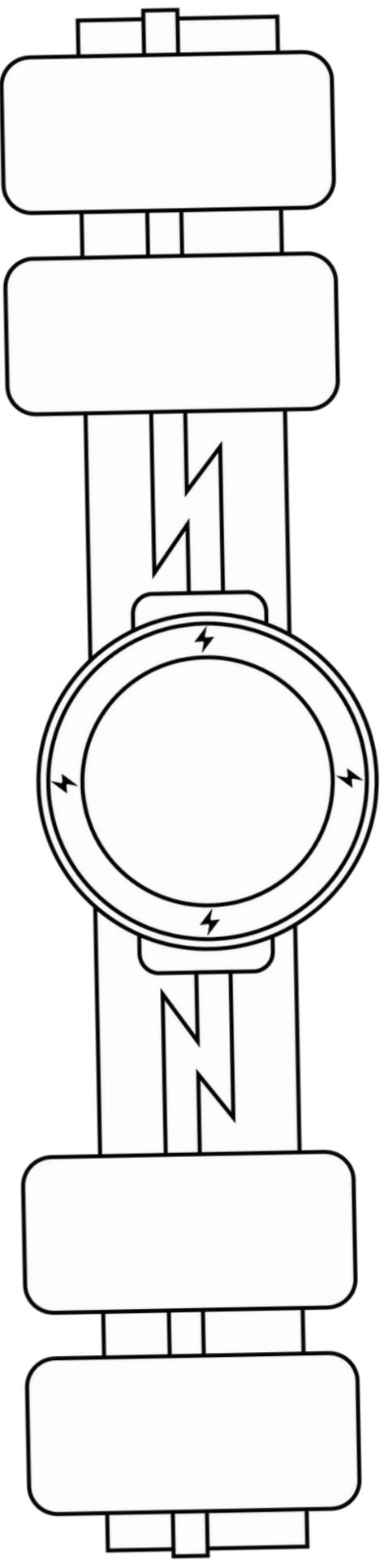
Resource	Look Locally	Look Online
Find a Therapist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speak with your healthcare provider</li> <li>• Use programs based at your school or workplace</li> <li>• Ask friends who they know and trust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://psychologytoday.com/us/therapists">psychologytoday.com/us/therapists</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://findatherapist.com">findatherapist.com</a></li> </ul>
Find a Support Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speak with your healthcare provider or therapist</li> <li>• Check community bulletins and news</li> <li>• Ask friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://nami.org">nami.org</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://mhanational.org">mhanational.org</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://psychologytoday.com/us/groups">psychologytoday.com/us/groups</a></li> </ul>
Find a Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take a class</li> <li>• Volunteer</li> <li>• Attend events at your local library</li> <li>• Join or start a Fandom Forward chapter!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://fandomforward.org/chapters">fandomforward.org/chapters</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://idealist.org/en/days/about">idealist.org/en/days/about</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://randomacts.org">randomacts.org</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://nanowrimo.org">nanowrimo.org</a></li> </ul>
Find a Financial Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The following may have local support programs:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Your doctor</li> <li>◦ Health Department</li> <li>◦ Dept. of Social Services</li> <li>◦ Public Library</li> <li>◦ Nonprofits</li> <li>◦ Colleges &amp; Universities</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look for therapists advertising sliding scale</li> <li>• <a href="http://openpathcollective.org">openpathcollective.org</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://findtreatment.gov">findtreatment.gov</a></li> </ul>

# YOUR HERO UTILITY BELT

Every superhero has a set of tools that help them save the day. Captain America has his shield, Iron Man his suit, Batman his utility belt! Now, it's time to think about what tools help you when you're struggling. Below, is your official hero utility belt!

Now let's equip it:

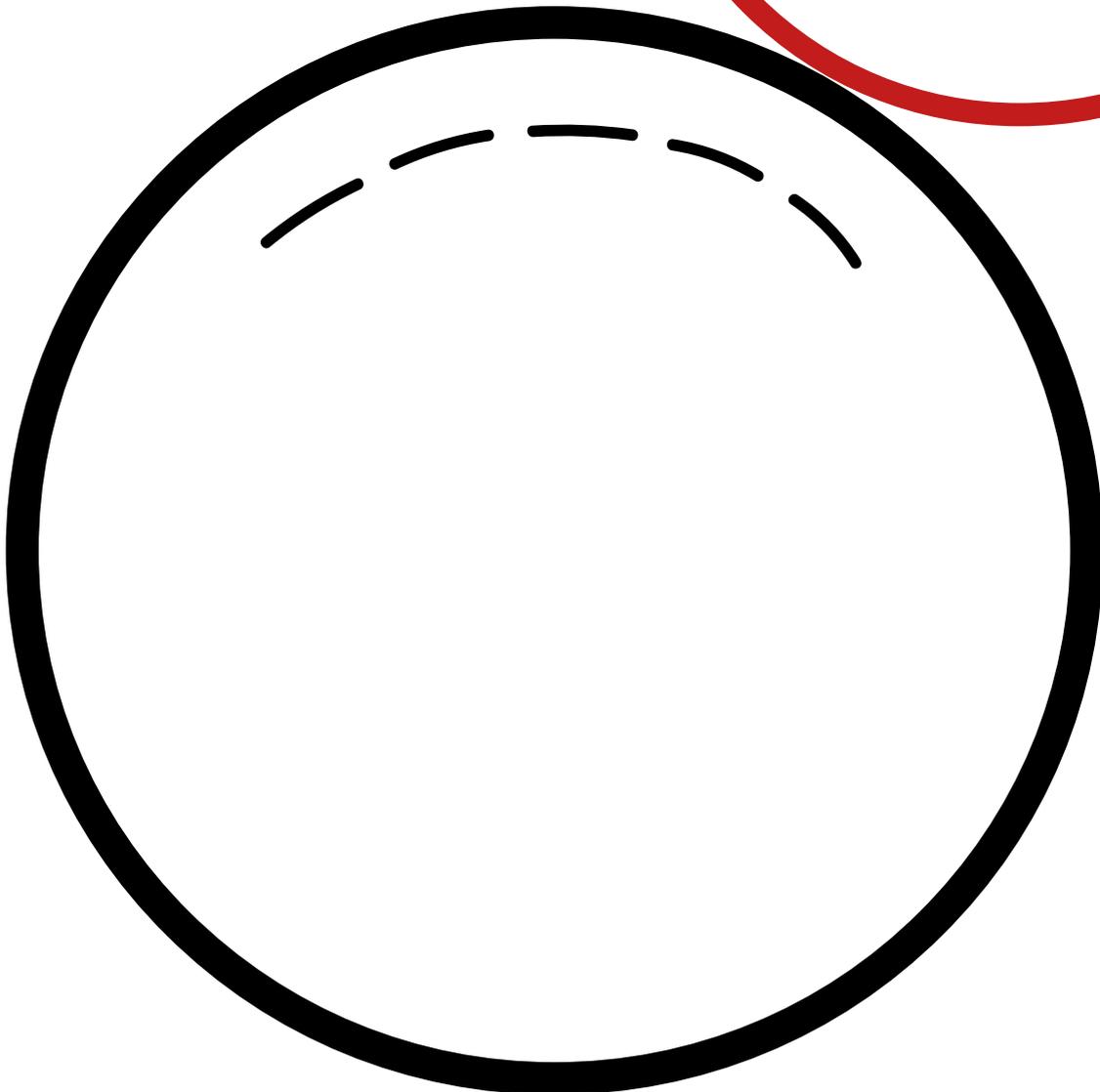
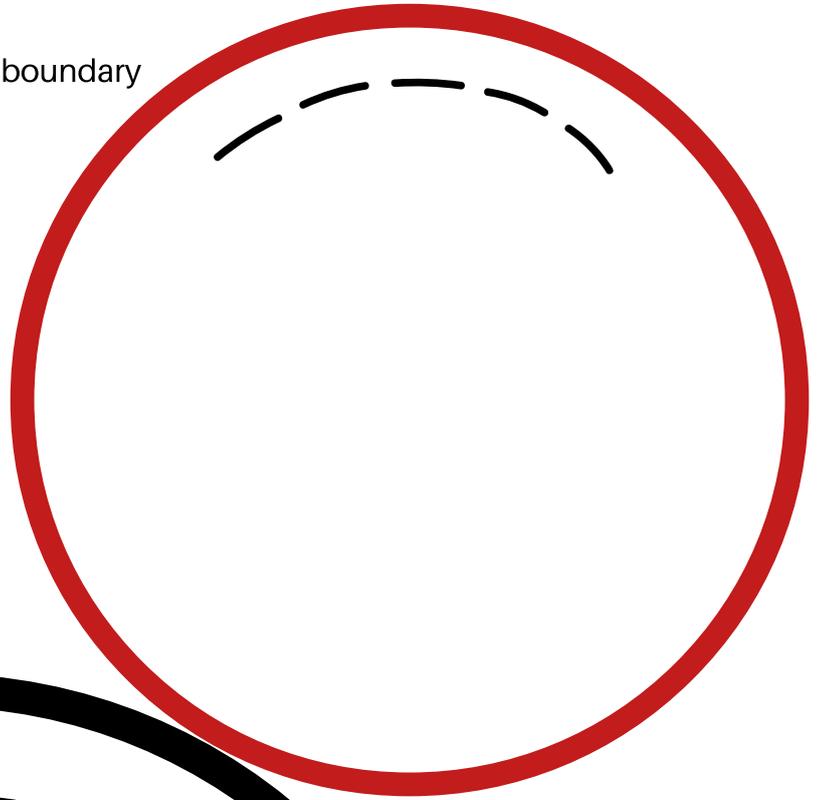
1. Think about things you enjoy doing - listening to music, going outside, talking to friends, and more!
2. Write four of those things in the blank spaces on your utility belt.
3. Brainstorm your superhero name and write that in the circle at the center of the page.
4. Your utility belt is full of super tools to help you feel better when you're feeling sad or mad. Hang it up in a place where you'll see and be able to use the tools whenever you need!

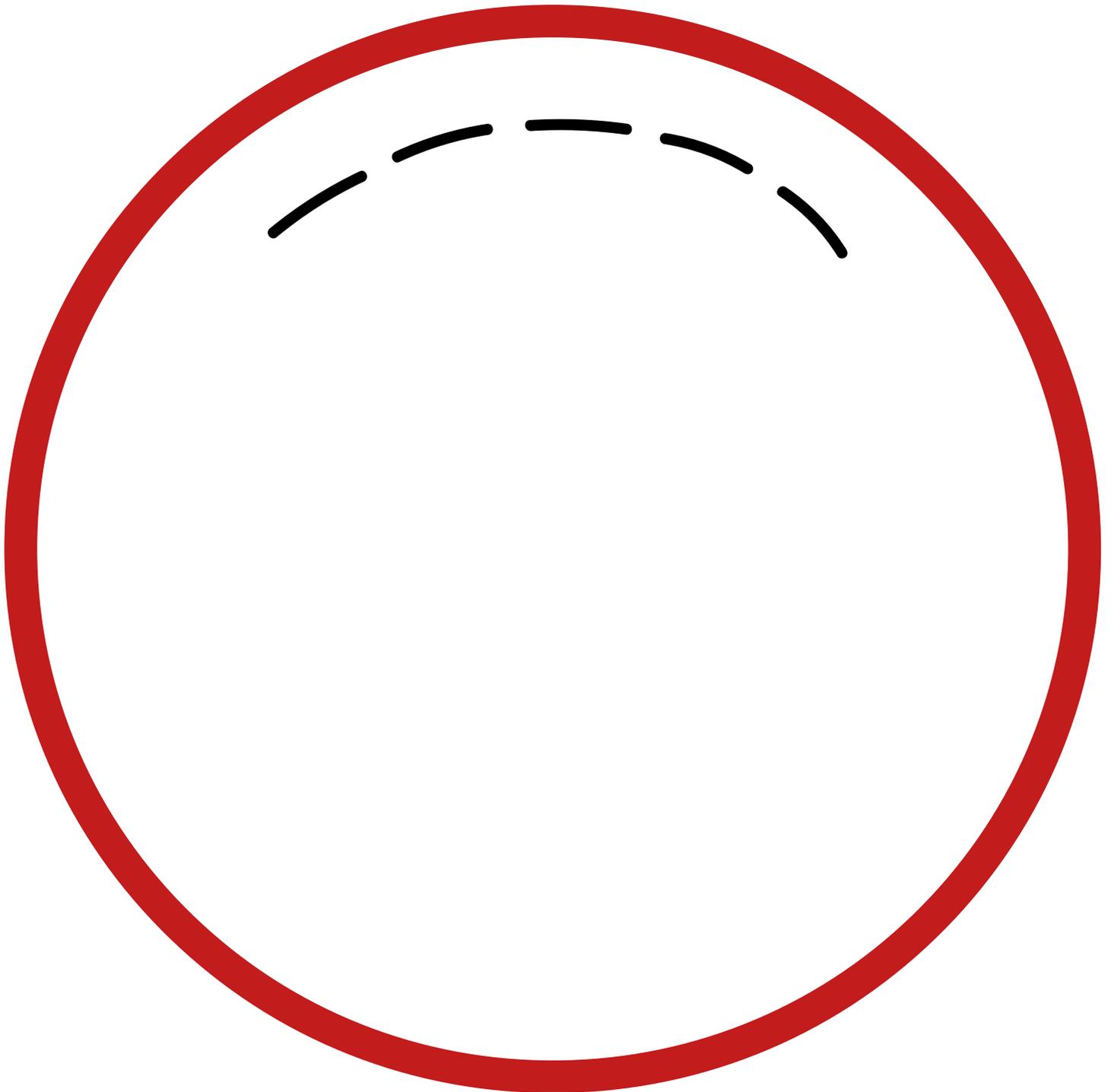
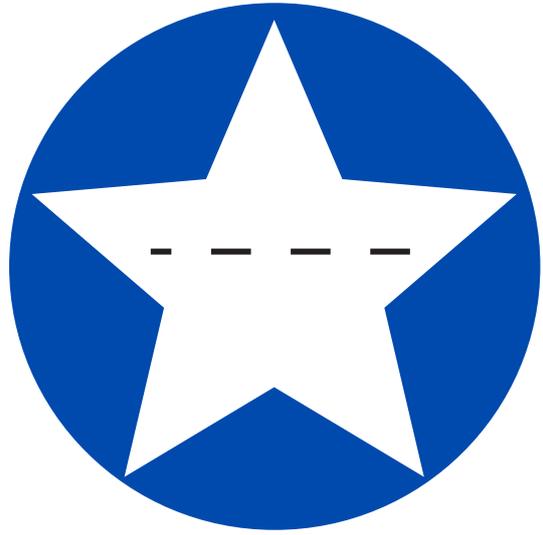


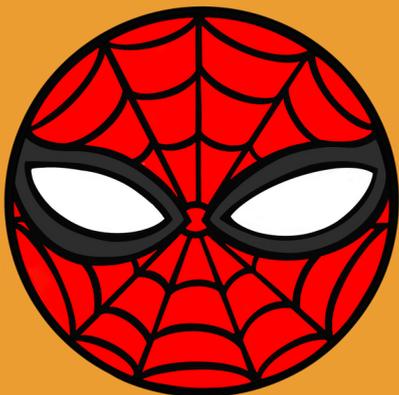
# YOUR SHIELD

Now that we know the tools we need, we need to think about how we communicate those needs to other people. Using Captain America's shield, let's practice setting boundaries!

1. Cut out the pieces of the shield.
2. On each layer, write an example of a boundary setting phrase. For example:
  - No, thank you.
  - I need to take a break.
  - Please give me space.
3. Using glue or tape, assemble your shield!







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