



SHIELD Recovery Guide

Supportive Healing Initiative for Emergency, Line, and Disaster Responders

Created by:

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Authorship and Acknowledgements

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The development of this guide was strengthened by the insight, feedback, and support of many peers and trusted collaborators, including:

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- Andrew Johansen
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- Members of the SC-RSI Wellness Team
- Responder peer support leaders across South Carolina and the US

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This guide belongs to the responders who show up for others—day after day, shift after shift—and who now seek steady ground for themselves.

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This guide was developed to support the recovery and resilience of responders affected by trauma. Its structure and materials are intended for use in peer-led, trauma-informed support groups, rooted in the SHIELD Steps and Meeting Format.

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Our intent is not to limit the reach of SHIELD—but to ensure every group offers the same steady, trusted experience it was created to provide.

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Preface

This guide was created for those who want to heal, but don't know where to start. For those who've tried everything else. For those who think they're too far gone. For those who still wear the uniform—and those who had to take it off to survive. This program is also for the veteran responders who didn't necessarily have to take the uniform off, but chose a different path—or reached the natural end of one.

SHIELD is for all of you.

For those carrying things they never meant to carry this long.

For those who have held the line for others and are now learning how to hold grace for themselves.

You don't need to feel steady to be steady.

You just need to come back.

First Edition Notice

This is the **First Edition** of the SHIELD Recovery Guide, developed by the South Carolina Responder Support Initiative (SC-RSI) for the purpose of providing peer-led support and healing resources to first responders and their families. As this program evolves and grows, future editions may include updates based on feedback, new insights, and improvements to the SHIELD model. We are committed to continuously enhancing this guide to better serve those who have served others.

SHIELD Preamble

SHIELD stands for the **Supportive Healing Initiative for Emergency, Line, and Disaster Responders**. It was created by the South Carolina Responder Support Initiative (SC-RSI) in Columbia, South Carolina. SHIELD is a peer-led support group that provides a safe, trauma-informed space for first responders and their families to begin healing from the invisible wounds of trauma.

We are committed to creating a space where confidentiality and grace are central to the healing process. SHIELD complies with **South Carolina Code § 23-3-85**, which protects confidential communications between peer-support team members and their clients. This helps to ensure that your participation in SHIELD meetings remains private and that your trust is honored.

We welcome people from a wide range of service roles, including:

- Law enforcement
- Fire service
- EMS
- Emergency dispatch
- Corrections
- Emergency management
- Search and rescue
- Disaster volunteers and support personnel

If you feel like your experience “doesn’t count” or “wasn’t traumatic enough”—this is still a place for you. We do not define trauma by the scale of the event, only by its impact on you. There is no minimum threshold of trauma required to be here. If you carry distress connected to an experience in service, you belong.

You also do not need a formal mental health diagnosis to participate in SHIELD. We are not clinicians, and we do not attempt to label or categorize your experience as simple, partial, chronic, or complex PTSD/PTSI. We honor your story as it is.

We encourage members to build a recovery network beyond this group. For some, that may include psychotherapy or pastoral counseling. If you choose to pursue therapy, we recommend seeking a provider with trauma-specific training and experience working with responders.

And if you’re uncertain about how the Twelve Steps apply to trauma recovery, that’s okay. We’re glad you’re here. SHIELD offers a path forward—not as the only path, but as one built on shared understanding, steady practice, and healing community.

Section 1 – Why We're Here

You're here because something in you knows this isn't sustainable.
The silence, the short fuse, the guilt, the sleepless nights.
You've been carrying it all—and from the outside, maybe you look fine.
But inside, something is fraying.

You've shown up for others.
Now it's time to show up for yourself.

SHIELD exists for responders who are tired of carrying trauma alone.
We believe recovery doesn't happen in isolation.
It happens in presence, in grace, and in rhythms of truth and steadiness.

You don't have to have it all figured out to begin.
You don't have to share everything on day one.
You just have to be willing to be honest—one step at a time.

Section 2 – The Problem We Face

Many responders are living with invisible wounds.
What we've seen, what we've done, what we've lost—it builds up.
And yet we're taught to stay composed, to minimize, to move on quickly.

But the effects of trauma don't just disappear.
They show up in how we relate, how we sleep, how we cope.
For some of us, the result is anger.
For others, withdrawal.
For many, it's feeling unsafe even when nothing's happening.

SHIELD recognizes that these aren't signs of failure—they're signs of injury.
And we don't recover by ignoring them.
We recover by facing them with others who understand.

Section 2A – Recognizing the Effects of Trauma

If you've ever thought, "What's wrong with me?" or "Why can't I just move on?" — you're not alone...

You're Not Weak—You're Carrying an Injury

After years of showing up in crisis, holding pain, and staying composed when others couldn't, it's easy to think that something must be wrong with us when we finally crack under the weight.

But the truth is: **what you're experiencing may not be weakness—it may be a trauma response.**

The body and mind respond to overwhelming experiences in specific, patterned ways. These reactions are often invisible from the outside but very real on the inside. Left unaddressed, they can shape how we think, relate, sleep, cope, and feel.

Recognizing the signs can help you move from *confusion* to *compassion*—and from *isolation* to *healing*.

Common Trauma Responses in Three Categories

1. Re-Experiencing the Event

You may find yourself reliving the trauma, even when you're safe:

- Intrusive, upsetting memories that seem to come out of nowhere
- Flashbacks (feeling like you're back in the moment)
- Nightmares—about the event or about other frightening things
- Intense emotional distress when reminded of the trauma
- Physical reactions to reminders (e.g., rapid heartbeat, sweating, nausea, tight muscles)

2. Avoidance and Emotional Numbing

Your brain may try to protect you by shutting things down:

- Avoiding people, places, conversations, or feelings that remind you of the trauma
- Forgetting key parts of what happened
- Losing interest in work, hobbies, or relationships
- Feeling emotionally numb or detached—even from people you love
- Believing you won't live a normal life, or not seeing a future for yourself

3. Heightened Alertness (Hyperarousal)

Your nervous system may feel stuck in survival mode:

- Difficulty sleeping or staying asleep
- Irritability, anger, or sudden outbursts
- Trouble focusing or following conversations
- Feeling constantly on guard or “on edge”
- Being easily startled or jumpy

If these sound familiar, please hear this:

You are not failing. You are not alone. You are carrying an injury—and SHIELD is here to walk with you through it.

Section 3 – The Hope We Offer

SHIELD doesn't offer magic words. We offer a path.
One marked by shared steps, steady witness, and honest connection.

We believe healing is possible—not perfect, not instant, but real. And we've seen it happen.

We've seen anger soften. We've seen trust rebuild.

We've seen people laugh again who thought they never would.

What we offer is not certainty—but hope.

You don't need to be fixed.

You need to be seen.

To be heard.

To have your pain named and your presence honored.

We can't do this for you.

But we can do it with you.

And that changes everything.

Section 4 – How It Works

SHIELD isn't a class. It's not therapy. And it's not a place where you have to say the "right" thing.

It's a rhythm. A space. A steady framework where responders can be honest, held, and slowly healed.

We've found that healing doesn't just happen by showing up once. It happens by returning—over and over—to a set of guiding steps and shared values. These steps aren't about checking boxes or earning progress. They're about learning to live differently, one choice, one conversation, one day at a time.

The SHIELD steps are based on proven recovery frameworks—especially the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, responder-specific peer programs, and adaptations for trauma and Complex PTSD.

We've taken those roots and shaped them into something uniquely suited for those who serve in crisis: people like you.

Mentorship, Not Sponsorship

While many 12-step programs use the concept of a **sponsor**—someone who provides one-on-one guidance and support throughout the recovery process—**SHIELD does not follow this model**. Instead, we encourage participants to seek **mentors** who have already gone through the program and can offer support and guidance based on their own lived experiences.

Mentorship in SHIELD is different from sponsorship. Mentors are **not responsible for your recovery**, but they can provide wisdom, encouragement, and **peer-led support**. They are individuals who have walked a similar path and can offer insights into how the program has worked for them. Mentors can offer guidance as you move through your own healing process, but your journey is **your own**. It's about **shared experience**, not a hierarchical relationship.

Having a mentor means finding someone who can walk alongside you when you need advice, encouragement, or even just someone who's been there to help you stay steady. If you're looking for someone to support you, talk to your group facilitator, or reach out to us at shield@sc-rsi.org, and we can connect you with someone who fits your needs.

You don't have to be religious to walk this path. But it does ask for willingness.
A willingness to trust the process. To lean into the discomfort.
To show up even when you feel like running.

Because that's how the old patterns begin to break—and something new begins to take root.

What About the Prayers?

You'll notice that many of the steps are paired with prayers. These are offered not as a requirement, but as a resource.
For many responders, healing has a spiritual component—even if they don't consider themselves religious.

The prayers are simply a way to put words to what's often hard to say: surrender, hope, connection, grace.
If they help, use them. If not, feel free to reflect in your own way.
This space is for you, wherever you're starting from.

In SHIELD, we don't pressure each other to "fix it."
We walk together. We bear witness.
We let the steps unfold at the pace you're ready for.

And when you slip? When you want to give up?

We'll remind you:

You don't need to feel steady to be steady.
You just need to come back.

That's how it works.

Section 5 – Step One

We admitted we needed help and couldn't carry it alone.

Narrative – The Armor Was Heavy Anyway

We were trained to hold it together, to push through, to compartmentalize.
And for a while, it worked. Maybe it even kept us alive.

But over time, that armor became our prison.
We stopped knowing how to take it off.
We forgot what it felt like to breathe without bracing.

Step One is about telling the truth:

I can't keep doing this alone.

I wasn't meant to.

It's not weakness. It's the first act of courage.
The beginning of healing starts when we stop hiding and start asking for help.

Not perfectly. Not loudly. Just honestly.

Reflection – The Courage to Say “I Can't”

- What parts of your life feel too heavy right now?
 - Have you tried to “tough it out” through something that needed to be shared?
 - What would it mean to admit that you're not okay—and that it's okay not to be?
-

Prayer – For the One Who's Weary but Still Standing

God, I've been trying to do this on my own.
I thought if I was strong enough, quiet enough, or useful enough... the pain would go away.
But it hasn't. And I'm tired.
I don't know what healing looks like. But I want something different.
Help me find the courage to be honest.
Just for today—give me strength to take the next step. Amen.

Section 6 – Step Two

We chose to show up honestly with others who understood.

Narrative – Where Honesty Begins

We're used to being the helper, the strong one, the one who doesn't fall apart.

But healing doesn't begin with strength. It begins with **honesty**.
Not performance. Not perfection. Just realness—with people who get it.

Step Two invites us to step into a space where we don't have to explain the weight.
Where we don't have to minimize or justify.
Where someone hears your story and nods—not because they have answers,
but because they've been there too.

You don't have to spill everything at once.
You don't even have to speak if you're not ready.

But when you are... this is where it begins.

Reflection – The First Risk of Being Real

- What's something you've kept to yourself out of fear or shame?
 - Who in your life has offered you a space where you didn't have to pretend?
 - What would it look like to show up in a group like SHIELD—not with answers, but with honesty?
-

Prayer – For the First Brave Step Toward Connection

God, I'm tired of hiding. I've built walls around my pain for so long.
Help me take the risk to show up—to be seen and heard by people who understand.
Meet me in the fear. Remind me I'm not alone.
Let honesty lead me toward healing. Amen.

Section 7 – Step Three

We began to believe that healing was possible, even for us.

Narrative – Believing Anyway

You don't have to believe with certainty.
You don't have to be convinced that it'll all work out.
Step Three isn't about confidence—it's about **willingness**.

Willingness to hope.
Willingness to believe that maybe, just maybe... you're not beyond help.
That you're not too broken. That healing is still available.

It doesn't mean you'll never doubt again.
It just means you're opening the door.

Many of us found that once we said, *"I want to believe,"*
healing had room to begin.

Reflection – The Door Cracks Open

- Have you believed that healing is possible for others but not for you?
 - What would it look like to become open to hope again?
 - How does it feel to consider that healing doesn't require certainty—just willingness?
-

Prayer – For the One Who Wants to Believe

God, I'm not sure how this works. But I want to believe that healing is possible.
That I'm not too far gone. That there's still life ahead of me.
Help me hold on to that hope—especially when it's small.
Show me what's possible. One step at a time. Amen.

Section 8 – Step Four

We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Narrative – Courage in the Mirror

There comes a moment when we stop looking out the windshield and turn to look in the mirror.

Not to beat ourselves up, but to understand what’s really going on inside.

Step Four is that moment.

It’s not about shaming yourself.

It’s about honesty without self-destruction.

It’s about discovering where old wounds became survival patterns—and where survival became sabotage.

This step asks:

What am I carrying that isn’t mine to hold anymore?

Where have I hurt others because I didn’t know how to hold my own pain?

Where do I still believe lies about my worth or my identity?

We don’t write it all at once.

We don’t have to get it all right.

We just have to begin.

Reflection – The Truth That Heals

- What are you afraid you’ll see if you look too closely?
 - What would it mean to approach your story not with judgment, but with curiosity?
 - What pain have you passed on—because you didn’t know how to hold it?
-

Prayer – For the One Ready to See Clearly

God, give me courage to see myself clearly.

Not through shame, but through honesty and compassion.

I want to heal. Help me start with truth.

Help me face the hard things without running.
Help me write what needs to be written. Amen.

Expansion – How to Do a Moral Inventory

This step often includes writing. You don't need fancy language. Just honesty.

Here are four traditional areas you can reflect on:

1. **Resentments** – Who or what are you still angry with? What hurts haven't healed?
 1. Who or what do I resent?
 2. Why do I resent it?
 3. What did this affect in me?
 4. What was my part (if any)?
2. **Fears** – What has fear kept you from doing? How has fear shaped your decisions?
 1. What is the fear?
 2. Why do I have this fear?
 3. What does this affect in me?
 4. How do I respond to it?
 5. How might I release or reframe this fear?
3. **Harm done to others** – Where have your actions or silence caused pain?
 1. Who did I harm?
 2. What did I do?
 3. What was the impact of my actions?
 4. What do I need to own, release, or make right?
4. **Patterns** – What cycles do you keep repeating, even when you know they're harmful?
 1. What is the pattern or shortcoming?
 2. When does it usually show up?
 3. How does it affect me and those around me?
 4. What fear, hurt, or belief might be behind it?
 5. What would it mean to surrender this pattern and choose a new way?

Write just one thing in each category to start. Don't overthink it.

You can come back later and fill in more.

This isn't about speed. It's about truth. And truth takes time.

Section 9 – Step Five

We shared our story, our struggles, and our inventory with someone we trusted.

Narrative – The Healing of Being Heard

Some wounds can only begin to heal once they're spoken aloud.

Step Five is where we give voice to the things we've carried in silence—our pain, our patterns, our part.

Not to be judged. Not to be fixed. But to be heard.

This step isn't about dumping everything on someone else.

It's about finding **one safe person**—a peer, chaplain, sponsor, therapist, or steady friend—who will receive your story with grace.

You don't have to say it all at once.

You don't have to say it perfectly.

But when you speak your truth out loud...

The shame begins to lose its grip.

Reflection – What Happens When You're Heard

- Who could you trust with part of your story?
 - What would it mean to speak something aloud that you've only ever written?
 - How might honesty, spoken and received, begin to set you free?
-

Prayer – For the One Who's Ready to Speak

God, I've carried my story in silence for too long.

I want to speak it—to let someone in.

Give me the words, the strength, and the wisdom to know who's safe.

Remind me that I don't have to do this alone.

Let this be a turning point. Amen.

Expansion – How to Share Your Inventory Safely

This doesn't need to be a dramatic reveal. It's just one step of honesty shared with someone steady.

Look for someone who:

- Has walked a healing path themselves
- Can listen without judging or fixing
- Can hold your story in confidence
- Reflects grace, not shame

Tips:

- Let them know ahead of time what you're doing
- Bring notes if it helps
- Go at your own pace
- End with something grounding—prayer, silence, deep breath, or stepping outside

You are not confessing to be punished.

You are sharing to be free.

Section 10 – Step Six

We became ready to let go of the parts of us that no longer served who we were becoming.

Narrative – What We Carried to Survive

Some parts of us were built to protect us.

The shutdown.

The sarcasm.

The anger.

The numbing.

The need to control everything.

They helped us survive. But now?

They're keeping us stuck.

Step Six isn't about rejecting those parts with shame.

It's about recognizing that we don't need them in the same way anymore.

It's about becoming **ready**—not perfect.

Ready to live differently.

Ready to release what once served you... but no longer does.

You don't have to know how to let go.

You just have to want to.

Reflection – What Needs Releasing

- What patterns or defenses once protected you but now limit you?
 - Are there parts of you that feel like armor—but actually isolate you from healing?
 - What would it mean to become willing to let them go?
-

Prayer – For the One Who's Learning to Loosen the Grip

God, I've worn this armor for a long time.

And I'm grateful it kept me safe.

But it's heavy now. And I'm tired.

Help me let go of what no longer helps me heal.

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Make space in me for something new.
Make me willing to be reshaped. Amen.

Section 11 – Step Seven

We asked for grace and strength to live differently—steadier, freer, and more present.

Narrative – The Shape of Grace

You’ve started to name what no longer serves you.
Now comes the step of asking for something different.

This isn’t about becoming “good enough.”
It’s about becoming *willing* enough to ask for help.

We don’t grow through self-hatred.
We grow through grace—through the slow, daily work of being reshaped from the inside out.

Step Seven is the humbling, hopeful act of saying:
“I can’t do this alone. Help me live another way.”

Not just with less shame—but with more freedom.
Not just with less chaos—but with more presence.

This step doesn’t just remove what’s broken.
It begins to build what’s beautiful.

Reflection – What Strength Really Looks Like

- What would it look like to ask for help in living differently?
 - Is there an area of your life that needs grace more than grit?
 - What’s one small behavior or mindset you want to surrender today?
-

Prayer – For the One Who’s Ready to Grow

God, I don’t want to keep falling into old patterns.
Shape me. Strengthen me.
Help me live in a way that reflects the healing You’ve begun in me.
Make me steady, even when I feel shaky.
Help me walk in grace, not pressure. Amen.

Section 12 – Step Eight

We made a list of people we had hurt or withdrawn from, and became willing to make it right.

Narrative – Looking Back Without Shame

You can't heal in isolation, and you can't fully heal without looking at the wake you've left behind.

Step Eight is not about fixing everything.
It's not about groveling.
It's not even about action—not yet.

It's about **willingness**.

Willingness to take an honest look at where our pain spilled onto others.
Where we pushed people away.
Where we caused harm—not because we were evil, but because we were unwell,
overwhelmed, or unhealed.

This step is sacred.
It helps you begin to **live clean**, not just feel better.
It clears the path for repair—not only with others, but with yourself.

Reflection – The People in the Wake

- Who comes to mind when you think of someone you hurt, shut out, or disappointed?
 - Who do you still avoid because it's too painful to face?
 - What relationships do you grieve but feel unsure how to mend?
-

Prayer – For the One Becoming Willing

God, show me who I've hurt—not to shame me, but to help me heal.
Give me the humility to make things right.
And the wisdom to know how and when.
Prepare my heart for the work ahead. Amen.

Expansion – Building Your List

This list is **not** for action yet. It's a recognition list—a place to name what's been fractured.

Start by reflecting on three areas:

1. **People you hurt directly** – things you said, did, or neglected
2. **People you withdrew from** – emotionally, physically, relationally
3. **People who hurt you** – sometimes amends begins by facing what's been done to you, too

You don't need to write full stories.

Just names.

Just truths.

You're not fixing yet. You're becoming ready.

Section 13 – Step Nine

We made direct amends wherever possible, except when doing so would cause further harm.

Narrative – Making Peace, Not Just Apologies

This is the step where courage becomes action.

But it's not about perfection.

And it's definitely not about proving anything.

Step Nine is about healing—not just yours, but theirs.

It's about owning your part.

Not defending, not blaming, not over-explaining.

Just truth. Spoken with humility.

Sometimes that's a conversation.

Sometimes it's a letter.

Sometimes, it's simply choosing to show up differently—without needing to be noticed.

And sometimes?

It's choosing *not* to make contact because doing so would cause more damage.

That, too, can be an act of integrity.

You're not trying to erase the past.

You're trying to live free from it.

Reflection – What Does Making It Right Look Like?

- Is there someone you know you need to apologize to?
 - Is there someone you cannot contact safely—but can release in your heart?
 - What's one living amends you could begin today?
-

Prayer – For the One Seeking Peace

God, help me make peace where I can.

Give me discernment to know when to speak,

and wisdom to know when to release.

Let my actions reflect a heart that's healing.

Teach me how to repair without reopening wounds.
Make me brave—and make me kind. Amen.

Expansion – Types of Amends

1. Direct Amends

Face-to-face or voice-to-voice ownership of harm caused.
Short. Honest. No excuses.

2. Indirect Amends

When direct contact is not possible or safe.
Examples: donating time, making restitution, writing an unsent letter, or offering forgiveness from afar.

3. Living Amends

Letting your life become the evidence of change.
Consistent actions that reflect new integrity and awareness.

Not every wound can be fixed with words.
But you can live in a way that reflects who you are becoming—not who you were when you were hurting.

Section 14 – Step Ten

We committed to regular self-reflection, and when we messed up, we admitted it promptly.

Narrative – Staying Close to the Mirror

Recovery isn't a straight line—it's a rhythm.
And Step Ten is about staying in that rhythm by paying attention.

This step isn't about obsessing over every mistake.
It's about staying **awake** to what's happening inside of us.

Where did I lose my footing today?
Where did I act out of fear, impulse, or pride?
Where did I choose grace?
Where do I need to make a repair?

When we practice this consistently, our “clean-up” gets smaller.
We catch things sooner.
And we learn to live in truth—not just in crisis.

Step Ten helps us walk steady—one honest day at a time.

Reflection – A Daily Check-In

- When today did I feel most grounded or present?
 - When today did I feel reactive, numb, or disconnected?
 - Did I say or do anything I need to make right?
 - What do I want to carry into tomorrow?
-

Prayer – For the One Who's Learning to Stay Honest

God, help me notice when I'm slipping—
and give me the strength to own it without shame.
Let me live today in a way that reflects who I'm becoming.
Help me rest in truth, not just effort. Amen.

Expansion – A Simple Daily Review

Many people use a 2–5 minute practice at the end of each day.

Here's one version:

1. **Breathe.** Quiet your mind and settle your body.
2. **Recall.** What moments brought peace? What moments brought tension?
3. **Name.** Is there any regret, resentment, or relief you need to acknowledge?
4. **Repair.** Is there anything you need to say tomorrow?
5. **Release.** Give it to God. Go to sleep clean.

You won't always get it perfect.

But you'll get better at staying close to your center—and returning when you drift.

Section 15 – Step Eleven

We sought steady connection with God and our deeper purpose, asking for wisdom and strength.

Narrative – Stillness is Strength

In a world full of sirens, tones, alarms, and urgency, it's easy to confuse stillness with weakness.

But recovery requires it.

Not the stillness of shutdown—but the kind that comes from pausing.
From breathing.
From reconnecting with what's deeper than fear or impulse or shame.

Step Eleven is where we learn to **return**—not to perfection, but to Presence.

For some, that means reconnecting with God.
For others, it's anchoring to a sense of purpose, grace, or values.
What matters is that we stop running—and start listening.

This step isn't about eloquent prayers or long meditations.
It's about staying in relationship with the One who gives us strength, identity, and clarity.

Reflection – Slowing Down to Reconnect

- Where do you feel most spiritually grounded?
 - What happens when you go too long without reflection or prayer?
 - What small daily habit could help you return to steadiness?
-

Prayer – For the One Who's Learning to Be Still

God, help me stay connected to You,
and to the purpose You've placed in me.
Speak through the quiet.
Steady me in the chaos.
Let my strength come from Your presence, not my performance. Amen.

Expansion – Practices That Help You Stay Centered

You don't need hours or eloquence.
Start with one thing a day that brings you back to center.

Ideas:

- A short breath prayer (e.g., "Steady me, Lord.")
- Morning silence with coffee
- Listening to music that brings peace
- Journaling for 3 minutes
- A verse or quote taped to your dashboard
- Going outside to name five things you see or hear

The goal isn't perfection.
The goal is presence.

Section 16 – Step Twelve

Having experienced personal healing, we carried this hope to others still hurting, and lived out these steps with courage and grace.

Narrative – Light for the Next One

You don't have to be fully healed to be helpful.

You just have to be **willing**.

Willing to show up.

Willing to share what you've learned.

Willing to be steady for someone who's still in the storm.

Step Twelve isn't about becoming a savior or an expert.

It's about becoming a witness—someone who's been through the fire and chooses not to walk away from those still inside it.

It's about offering what you didn't have... or what saved you.

It's about letting your story be more than a scar—it becomes a **signal** to someone else that they're not alone.

And it's about continuing to walk the steps—not because you have to, but because you've seen what happens when you do.

Reflection – Becoming a Steady Witness

- Who helped you feel less alone on this journey?
 - Is there someone in your life who might need the space you now have?
 - What does it mean to “carry the message” through how you live, not just what you say?
-

Prayer – For the One Who Wants to Share the Hope

God, thank You for the grace that's carried me this far.

Use my story to bring hope to someone else.

Help me live with purpose and be a steady witness to those still finding their way.

Keep me grounded in humility, honesty, and love.

Let this healing be more than mine alone. Amen.

Section 17 – The Twelve Promises of SHIELD

What We Begin to Experience as We Heal

We can expect to see these transformational changes occur in our lives—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly—as we work the Steps and follow the Traditions.

The Twelve Promises of SHIELD

- Our traumatic memories and intrusive thoughts will begin to fade, and our nightmares will lessen.
- Our defensiveness and sense of threat will decrease, allowing us to feel safer in our surroundings.
- Our irritability, anxiety, and restlessness will diminish, bringing us greater peace and contentment.
- We will no longer feel the need to numb ourselves with unhealthy addictions, compulsions, or actions, and we will develop healthier coping mechanisms.
- We will experience more restful sleep and increased energy, allowing us to engage more fully in life.
- Our quick anger will transform into healthy assertiveness and self-protectiveness.
- Self-love and confidence will grow as we rediscover or develop a sense of personal worth.
- We will no longer feel compelled to avoid social, physical, or emotional connections, and we will learn to trust appropriately.
- We will be free from the psychological grip of guilt, shame, regret, and remorse tied to our traumatic experiences.
- Our ability to tolerate both frustration and excitement will strengthen, and we will express our experiences with greater ease.
- We will regain a sense of hope and actively plan for the future, embracing joy and the mystery of life.
- We will stand firm in our right to exist and thrive, living confidently in our new way of life.

Section 18 – The Twelve Traditions of SHIELD

Principles That Guide Our Groups and Our Growth

The SHIELD Traditions help us stay healthy—individually and collectively. They protect our mission, preserve our culture, and remind us that our strength comes from shared grace and purpose.

The Twelve Traditions of SHIELD

1. **Our common welfare comes first.** Personal healing depends on the safety and unity of the group.
2. **Our group leaders are trusted servants.** They do not govern but guide by example and steadiness.
3. **The only requirement for SHIELD membership is a desire to heal from trauma.**
4. **Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or SHIELD as a whole.**
5. **Each SHIELD group has one primary purpose—to create a space where responders can heal through honest connection and steady practice.**
6. **A SHIELD group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the SHIELD name to any outside organization or cause, lest we lose our focus and integrity.**
7. **Every SHIELD group ought to be self-supporting.** We do not require payment for participation.
8. **SHIELD remains forever peer-led.** We may partner with professionals, but we are grounded in lived experience.
9. **SHIELD ought never be organized in a rigid or controlling way, but we may create service boards or committees directly accountable to those they serve.**
10. **SHIELD has no opinion on outside issues.** Our focus is healing from trauma, not debate or advocacy.
11. **Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion.** We offer the experience of healing, not a sales pitch.
12. **Anonymity and grace are the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, reminding us to place principles before personalities.**

Section 19 – SHIELD Meeting Format

Creating a Safe, Steady, and Supportive Space

SHIELD meetings are designed to be consistent, peer-led, and trauma-informed. They aren't therapy sessions, and they're not religious services. They're sacred spaces of shared presence, grace, and grounded rhythm.

The following format is recommended for all in-person SHIELD groups.

Standard SHIELD Meeting Format

1. Opening & Welcome

Facilitator reads:

"Welcome to SHIELD. This is a peer-led space for responders who want to walk toward healing.

We do not give advice. We listen, witness, and share from experience.

You are not required to speak, and you are free to pass at any time.

What is shared here stays here."

This group is part of a trained peer-support process as outlined in South Carolina Code § 23-3-85. All communications in this setting are considered confidential under state law, unless disclosure is required for safety or legal reasons.

2. Trauma Awareness Reminder

Facilitator reads:

"Before we begin tonight, we take a moment to remember that many of the things we struggle with—like anxiety, flashbacks, emotional numbness, or anger—are not character flaws. They're common trauma responses.

If you've ever felt like you're too much, too broken, or too far gone—this space reminds you: you are not the problem. You're carrying pain that deserves to be seen, understood, and healed. That's why we're here."

It is advisable to review the "Common Trauma Responses" from Appendix A.

3. Opening Reflection or Grounding Prayer

(Choose one from the guide or invite someone to read from the Step material.)

4. Check-Ins (Round-Robin)

Each participant may briefly share how they're doing or simply say "pass." No interruptions or feedback.

5. Step Reading or Discussion Prompt

Facilitator reads the Step of the week or an excerpt from the reflections and invites open sharing.

Optional prompt:

"What resonated with you in that step?"

"What's something you're learning, noticing, or needing this week?"

6. Open Sharing Time

Participants may share from experience. Reminder:

- No cross-talk
 - No advice-giving
 - Listening is an act of presence
 - Silence is okay
-

7. Closing Reflection or Breath Prayer

Choose a closing reading, quote, or moment of quiet together.

8. Circle Back (if needed)

Facilitators may gently check in with anyone who shared something especially heavy. Offer connection, not solutions.

9. Reminder of Resources

If your group provides or refers to outside resources (chaplain, therapist, hotline), share those at the end.

Key Reminder: SHIELD is not responsible for fixing people. We are committed to being present with them.

Section 19B – SHIELD Virtual Meeting Best Practices

Creating Safe and Grounded Online Spaces for Healing

Whether you're gathering responders across regions or offering a space for those not ready to meet in person, virtual SHIELD meetings can be just as meaningful and effective when approached with intention.

1. Before the Meeting

- **Use a secure platform** like Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams with a waiting room or password.
- **Send login info privately**, not through public posts or general social media.
- **Ask participants to log in a few minutes early** to test their mic and settle in.
- **Encourage the use of first names or initials only**, especially for new participants or those concerned about anonymity.

Recommended Zoom Settings:

- Enable waiting room
 - Disable recording
 - Allow participants to rename themselves
 - Mute on entry (with option to unmute)
 - Screen sharing by host only
-

2. Online Meeting Flow

The basic SHIELD meeting structure remains the same, with slight adjustments for virtual pacing and safety:

- **Begin with a welcome and confidentiality reminder**
 - Review the trauma awareness reminders
 - Read a short reflection, step excerpt, or breath prayer
 - Invite brief participant check-ins (“You may speak, pass, or use the chat”)
 - Share the focus step or topic of the night
 - Invite open sharing with grace and listening boundaries
 - Close with a reflection, silence, or grounding breath together
-

3. Facilitator Tips for Online Hosting

- **Keep groups small when possible (under 12)** for connection and ease of sharing
 - **Model calm, grounded presence** on screen
 - **Use a co-host or tech helper** if possible to monitor chat or help with access
 - **Normalize participation variety** (speaking, typing, silent presence)
 - **Open and close clearly**, with a grounding tone to signal transitions
-

4. Creating a Trauma-Informed Online Space

- **Reinforce confidentiality clearly:**

“What’s shared in this space stays in this space.

Please do not record, screenshot, or share what anyone says here.”

- **Normalize varied engagement:**

“You’re free to speak, pass, or use the chat. Your presence is enough.”

- **Be ready to check in privately** if someone seems distressed or disconnected
- **Close intentionally** with quiet, a reading, or a shared phrase like:

“You’re not behind. You’re back.”

5. Legal Protection & Confidentiality Reminder

This meeting is part of a trained peer-support process as outlined in South Carolina Code § 23-3-85.

All communications shared here—including those between participants—are considered confidential under state law, except in cases where there is a risk of harm or legal reporting is required.

This protection applies to all public safety employees and immediate family members as defined by statute.

Virtual meetings can be just as sacred as in-person ones when led with intention, clarity, and presence.

**You don’t have to be in the same room to be in the same story.
You just have to come back.**

Appendix A – Recognizing the Effects of Trauma

You're Not Weak—You're Carrying an Injury

After years of showing up in crisis, holding pain, and staying composed when others couldn't, it's easy to think that something must be wrong with us when we finally crack under the weight.

But the truth is: **what you're experiencing may not be weakness—it may be a trauma response.**

The body and mind respond to overwhelming experiences in specific, patterned ways. These reactions are often invisible from the outside but very real on the inside. Left unaddressed, they can shape how we think, relate, sleep, cope, and feel.

Recognizing the signs can help you move from *confusion* to *compassion*—and from *isolation* to *healing*.

Common Trauma Responses in Three Categories

1. Re-Experiencing the Event

You may find yourself reliving the trauma, even when you're safe:

- Intrusive, upsetting memories that seem to come out of nowhere
- Flashbacks (feeling like you're back in the moment)
- Nightmares—about the event or about other frightening things
- Intense emotional distress when reminded of the trauma
- Physical reactions to reminders (e.g., rapid heartbeat, sweating, nausea, tight muscles)

2. Avoidance and Emotional Numbing

Your brain may try to protect you by shutting things down:

- Avoiding people, places, conversations, or feelings that remind you of the trauma
- Forgetting key parts of what happened
- Losing interest in work, hobbies, or relationships
- Feeling emotionally numb or detached—even from people you love
- Believing you won't live a normal life, or not seeing a future for yourself

3. Heightened Alertness (Hyperarousal)

Your nervous system may feel stuck in survival mode:

- Difficulty sleeping or staying asleep
- Irritability, anger, or sudden outbursts
- Trouble focusing or following conversations
- Feeling constantly on guard or “on edge”
- Being easily startled or jumpy

If these sound familiar, please hear this:

You are not failing. You are not alone. You are carrying an injury—and SHIELD is here to walk with you through it.

Appendix B – Step Prayers & Reflections

A Devotional Companion for the Journey

These prayers and reflections accompany each of the twelve SHIELD recovery steps. They are not meant to be performed—only received and prayed in honesty.

Step 1 – We admitted we needed help and couldn't carry it alone.

Reflection – The Armor Was Heavy Anyway

We were trained to hold it together, but no one taught us how to come undone in safety. The armor that once protected us is now holding us back. Step One is admitting we can't keep carrying this alone—and that we don't have to.

Prayer – For the One Who's Weary but Still Standing

God, I've been trying to do this on my own.

I thought if I was strong enough, quiet enough, or useful enough... the pain would go away. But it hasn't. And I'm tired.

I don't know what healing looks like. But I want something different.

Help me find the courage to be honest.

Just for today—give me strength to take the next step. Amen.

Step 2 – We chose to show up honestly with others who understood.

Reflection – Where Honesty Begins

Vulnerability doesn't mean oversharing. It means being real with someone safe. The moment we choose to speak honestly—even through tears or silence—is the moment healing begins.

Prayer – For the First Brave Step Toward Connection

God, I'm tired of hiding. I've built walls around my pain for so long.

Help me take the risk to show up—to be seen and heard by people who understand.

Meet me in the fear. Remind me I'm not alone.

Let honesty lead me toward healing. Amen.

Step 3 – We began to believe that healing was possible, even for us.

Reflection – Believing Anyway

Belief doesn't require certainty. Just the willingness to consider that something different is possible.

Prayer – For the One Who Wants to Believe

God, I'm not sure how this works. But I want to believe that healing is possible.
That I'm not too far gone. Help me hold on to that hope—especially when it's small.
Show me what's possible. One step at a time. Amen.

Step 4 – We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Reflection – Courage in the Mirror

We avoid what we're afraid will disqualify us. But in the light of grace, truth doesn't condemn—it sets us free.

Prayer – For the One Ready to See Clearly

God, give me courage to see myself clearly.
Not through shame, but through honesty and compassion.
I want to heal. Help me start with truth.
Help me face the hard things without running.
Help me write what needs to be written. Amen.

Step 5 – We shared our story, our struggles, and our inventory with someone we trusted.

Reflection – The Healing of Being Heard

What was once a secret can become a connection. What echoed in silence can finally be received with grace.

Prayer – For the One Who's Ready to Speak

God, I've carried my story in silence for too long.
I want to speak it—to let someone in.
Give me the words, the strength, and the wisdom to know who's safe.
Remind me that I don't have to do this alone.
Let this be a turning point. Amen.

Step 6 – We became ready to let go of the parts of us that no longer served who we were becoming.

Reflection – Letting Go With Open Hands

We heal not by clinging tighter—but by releasing what no longer serves us.

Prayer – For the One Who’s Learning to Loosen the Grip

God, I’ve worn this armor for a long time.
But it’s heavy now.
Help me let go of what no longer helps me heal.
Make space in me for something new.
Make me willing to be reshaped. Amen.

Step 7 – We asked for grace and strength to live differently—steadier, freer, and more present.

Reflection – The Shape of Grace

Grace doesn’t wait for perfection. It meets us in motion—in progress—in breath.

Prayer – For the One Who’s Learning to Live Differently

God, I don’t want to keep falling into old patterns.
Shape me. Strengthen me.
Help me live in a way that reflects the healing You’ve begun in me.
Make me steady, even when I feel shaky.
Help me walk in grace, not pressure. Amen.

Step 8 – We made a list of people we had hurt or withdrawn from, and became willing to make it right.

Reflection – Looking Back Without Shame

You can’t heal in isolation, and you can’t fully heal without looking at the wake you’ve left behind.

Step Eight is not about fixing everything.
It’s not about groveling.
It’s not even about action—not yet.

It's about **willingness**.

Willingness to take an honest look at where our pain spilled onto others.

Where we pushed people away.

Where we caused harm—not because we were evil, but because we were unwell, overwhelmed, or unhealed.

Prayer – For the One Becoming Willing

God, show me who I've hurt—not to shame me, but to help me heal.

Give me the humility to make things right.

And the wisdom to know how and when.

Prepare my heart for the work ahead. Amen.

Step 9 – We made direct amends wherever possible, except when doing so would cause further harm.

Reflection – Making Peace, Not Just Apologies

Amends aren't about clearing your name. They're about clearing your path to live with peace.

Prayer – For the One Seeking Peace

God, help me make peace where I can.

Give me discernment to know when to speak,
and wisdom to know when to release.

Let my actions reflect a heart that's healing.

Teach me how to repair without reopening wounds.

Make me brave—and make me kind. Amen.

Step 10 – We committed to regular self-reflection, and when we messed up, we admitted it promptly.

Reflection – Staying Close to the Mirror

Self-reflection isn't about guilt. It's about clarity. We don't look to beat ourselves up—we look to stay awake.

Prayer – For the One Who's Learning to Stay Honest

God, help me notice when I'm slipping—
and give me the strength to own it without shame.
Let me live today in a way that reflects who I'm becoming.
Help me rest in truth, not just effort. Amen.

Step 11 – We sought steady connection with God and our deeper purpose, asking for wisdom and strength.

Reflection – Stillness is Strength

We don't find peace in noise. We find it in pause. In prayer. In presence.

Prayer – For the One Who's Learning to Be Still

God, help me stay connected to You,
and to the purpose You've placed in me.
Speak through the quiet. Steady me in the chaos.
Let my strength come from Your presence, not my performance. Amen.

Step 12 – Having experienced personal healing, we carried this hope to others still hurting, and lived out these steps with courage and grace.

Reflection – Light for the Next One

You don't have to be fully healed to be helpful. Just honest. Present. Willing.

Prayer – For the One Who Wants to Share the Hope

God, thank You for the grace that's carried me this far.
Use my story to bring hope to someone else.
Help me live with purpose and be a steady witness to those still finding their way.
Keep me grounded in humility, honesty, and love.
Let this healing be more than mine alone. Amen.

Appendix C – SHIELD Resources for Family Members

Supporting Those Who Support Responders

Family members of first responders and disaster personnel often carry their own burdens, witnessing the toll that trauma and service take on their loved ones. SHIELD recognizes the important role family members play in the recovery journey, both as supporters and as individuals who need healing and support themselves.

This appendix is designed to provide **family members** with understanding, resources, and tools to support their loved ones in a meaningful way while also caring for their own well-being.

1. The Impact of Trauma on Families

Trauma doesn't just affect the responder—it impacts the entire family system. Family members may experience secondary trauma, which can manifest as:

- **Increased stress** due to changes in the responder's behavior (e.g., irritability, withdrawal, hypervigilance)
- **Emotional and physical exhaustion** from supporting a loved one who may be coping with unresolved trauma
- **Isolation** from the responder's focus on work or emotional detachment
- **Difficulty communicating** due to a lack of understanding of the trauma experience

Understanding that trauma affects families in these ways is the first step in providing support.

2. Encouragement for Family Involvement in Recovery

SHIELD is open to **family members** who are affected by the responder's trauma or who have experienced their own difficulties related to the work and stress of living with a first responder. Participating in the healing process together can help family members understand each other's pain and needs, creating a stronger foundation for recovery.

Family members do not need to attend SHIELD meetings, but they may find benefit in:

- Participating in **support groups** or **family sessions** focused on trauma recovery
- **Understanding the emotional impact** of first responder work on their loved one
- **Opening communication lines** about their own emotional needs
- **Learning healthy coping mechanisms** to manage stress and anxiety

3. Family Support Resources

If you are a family member of a first responder and you are looking for additional resources or help, here are some options:

- **Therapists with Trauma Experience:** If you need therapy for yourself or as a couple/family, consider finding a therapist with experience in trauma, especially **responder-specific trauma** (e.g., PTSD, secondary trauma).
 - **Referral Resources:** SHIELD can help you connect with local mental health professionals who specialize in trauma recovery.
 - **Online Therapy Options:** Many therapists offer remote sessions, providing an accessible option for busy families.
- **Trauma Recovery Programs for Families:**
Some organizations offer family support programs specifically for responders and their loved ones:
 - **National Alliance for Grieving Children:** Provides resources for families coping with trauma.
 - **Crisis Support Services:** Find support groups for families affected by first responder trauma.

4. Tips for Supporting a Loved One in Trauma Recovery

If you have a loved one who is part of SHIELD or in any stage of trauma recovery, here are some tips for **supporting them while also caring for yourself**:

- **Listen without judgment:** Sometimes your loved one just needs to talk without advice or fixing. Be present and affirming.
- **Respect their process:** Everyone heals at their own pace. Allow your loved one to share when they are ready and don't push for more than they can give.
- **Set boundaries:** It's okay to protect your own well-being. If your loved one's behavior becomes overwhelming, it's important to set boundaries and take breaks as needed.
- **Encourage outside support:** Be supportive of their involvement in peer groups like SHIELD or individual therapy.
- **Practice self-care:** You cannot pour from an empty cup. Make sure to prioritize your own well-being by seeking your own support and practicing regular self-care.

5. Family Support Programs and Workshops

Many responder wellness programs offer **family workshops** or **support groups**. These can help you better understand the experience of your loved one and help you navigate the challenges that come with supporting them.

- **SHIELD Family Nights:** Depending on your local SHIELD chapter, some groups may offer “Family Nights” where spouses and family members are invited to learn about trauma recovery and connect with others in similar situations.
 - **Webinars and Workshops:** SHIELD may offer online workshops for family members to learn about responder trauma, family coping strategies, and wellness practices.
 - Contact shield@sc-rsi.org for more details.
-

6. Online Resources for Families

There are also many online resources available to help you learn more about trauma and support your loved one through the process.

- **Responder Wellness Websites:**
 - www.sc-rsi.org
 - www.responderwellness.org
 - www.code4couples.org
 - **Books for Families of Responders:**
 - “The Trauma of Everyday Life” by Mark Epstein
 - “The PTSD Workbook: Simple, Effective Techniques for Overcoming Traumatic Stress Symptoms” by Morton C. Shulman
 - “Helping Your Partner Heal from PTSD: A Practical Guide for Couples” by Michele A. Sherman
-

Final Thought:

As a family member of a responder, you have a unique role in the healing process. By caring for yourself and supporting your loved one in a healthy, loving way, you can strengthen the entire family unit and contribute to the ongoing recovery journey.

Appendix D – Permissions & Group Use

Guidelines for Starting and Using SHIELD Groups

We're honored that SHIELD may be meaningful to you or your community. While this guide is designed to support healing far beyond its origin, we ask that all use of the SHIELD name, materials, or meeting structure follow these guidelines to maintain safety, consistency, and purpose.

Before Starting a SHIELD Group or Reprinting Any Part of This Guide, Please:

1. **Contact shield@sc-rsi.org** to request permission and introduce your intent.
2. **Describe your setting:** Is it a peer support team, chaplain program, or community group?
3. **Commit to following the SHIELD structure**, including its trauma-informed language and core values.
4. **Understand SHIELD is a peer-led initiative**; it's designed to support responders and their families—not to offer professional therapy or replace clinical services.
5. **Get familiar with our resources**, including materials that might help you build a group (see Appendix C for a checklist, and Appendix D for the Group Leader Guide).

Important Guidelines for Group Use

- **SHIELD is not a clinical or religious program.** It is a peer-led, non-clinical support model rooted in shared experience and a trauma-informed approach.
- **Confidentiality is key.** All participants are expected to maintain the confidentiality of what is shared during meetings (see Section 23-3-85 regarding confidentiality and privilege).
- **Respect the format.** While SHIELD is flexible to meet group needs, we recommend maintaining the basic meeting structure to preserve its safety and healing potential.
- **Peer support is central.** Participants in SHIELD meetings must engage as peers. This isn't a group for professional advice-giving, and it's not a space for advocacy, promotion, or religious proselytizing.
- **Accountability is part of the process.** Facilitators are expected to hold each group member accountable to these norms of safety, respect, and confidentiality.
- **Facilitator Training Requirement:** Group facilitators must be trained by SC-RSI or its designee in accordance with this manual and current peer support best practices. Facilitators should understand and apply the trauma-informed principles outlined in the SHIELD guide, ensuring a safe and supportive environment for all participants.

How to Contact SHIELD for Permission or Further Information

If you'd like to start a SHIELD group or have questions about using this material, please contact:

- **Email:** shield@sc-rsi.org
- **Website:** www.sc-rsi.org

We are here to support you and are committed to walking with you through your healing journey. Thank you for respecting our program guidelines.

Appendix E – SHIELD Quick-Start Checklist

For Starting a Safe and Steady Peer Support Group

This one-page checklist is designed to help new leaders start a SHIELD group with clarity, intention, and support. For full guidance, refer to the **SHIELD Group Leader Guide** (Appendix D).

Before You Launch a Group:

- ☐ **Contact shield@sc-rsi.org** to request permission and guidance.
- ☐ **Identify your co-facilitator or leadership team** (2+ leaders preferred for consistency).
- ☐ **Complete approved SHIELD Facilitator Training.** (2+ leaders preferred for consistency).
- ☐ **Choose your setting** (in-person, virtual, or hybrid).
- ☐ **Ensure the setting allows for privacy, consistency, and emotional safety** (confidentiality is key).
- ☐ **Familiarize yourself with the SHIELD Meeting Format** (Section 19) and **Steps** (Sections 5–16).
- ☐ **Review Section 2A – Recognizing the Effects of Trauma** and be prepared to normalize these experiences.
- ☐ **Clarify your group’s intended audience** (e.g., fire, EMS, multi-agency, family-inclusive).

Before Each Meeting:

- ☐ **Review the Step or reflection for the day.**
- ☐ **Set up the space with intention** (quiet, comfortable, water available).

- ☐ **Choose someone to lead the welcome and reading** (or rotate).
 - ☐ **Remind yourself: You don't need to fix anyone—you just need to be steady.**
-

Each Meeting Should Include:

- A brief **welcome and trauma-awareness reminder**.
 - A **reading** from the SHIELD guide or a prayer/reflection.
 - Time for **personal check-ins** and **open sharing**.
 - A reminder of **confidentiality** and **grace-based listening**.
 - A review of the 12 Promises of SHIELD.
 - A moment to close in **reflection** or **silence**.
-

Ongoing:

- ☐ **Attend SHIELD leader check-ins** or connect with other facilitators.
 - ☐ **Stay grounded in your own wellness**—don't carry others alone.
 - ☐ **Consider rotating leadership** to prevent burnout and build ownership.
 - ☐ **If something feels off, pause and re-center. Safety > schedule.**
-

"You don't need to feel steady to be steady. You just need to come back."

Appendix F – SHIELD Facilitator Agreement

A Commitment to Safe, Steady Leadership

This agreement outlines the core responsibilities of a SHIELD group facilitator and affirms alignment with the mission and principles of the SHIELD recovery program.

SHIELD (Supportive Healing Initiative for Emergency, Line, and Disaster responders) is a peer-led, trauma-informed recovery framework developed by the South Carolina Responder Support Initiative (SC-RSI). Its purpose is to provide a safe and steady space for healing among responders, guided by the SHIELD Steps, traditions, and meeting format.

By signing this agreement, you are affirming your role as a **steady witness and peer support** in service to others—not as a therapist, authority figure, or fixer.

As a SHIELD Facilitator, I Commit To:

- **Protecting the integrity and safety** of SHIELD meetings by following the core values of confidentiality, grace, and shared experience.
- **Using only approved SHIELD materials**, including the meeting format, steps, and prayers, without alteration or substitution.
- **Not using the SHIELD name or meetings** to promote personal, political, religious, or commercial agendas.
- **Creating space—not pressure—for sharing, healing, and presence.**
- **Avoiding unsolicited advice-giving** or "fixing" others in the group.
- **Referring participants to appropriate clinical or spiritual resources** when needs exceed the scope of peer support.
- **Maintaining regular contact with SC-RSI** and notifying us of any group changes, concerns, or incidents.
- **Upholding the trauma-informed heart of SHIELD** by continually learning, reflecting, and grounding myself as a leader.

Facilitator Information

Name: _____
Phone/Email: _____
Organization (if applicable): _____
Location of SHIELD Group: _____
Type of Group: In-person / Virtual / Hybrid

Signature & Agreement

I have read the SHIELD Facilitator Agreement and commit to leading in a way that reflects its values. I understand that this agreement is not legal in nature, but a mutual understanding that helps protect the mission, model, and participants of SHIELD.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Return completed agreements to:
shield@sc-rsi.org

Appendix F – SHIELD Outreach Tools

Flyers, Handouts, and Sample Invitations to Help You Share the Message

SHIELD groups grow best by personal invitation and honest storytelling. These outreach tools are designed to help you share what SHIELD is and invite others into the healing journey—without pressure or performance.

You may customize these for your local group, but please preserve the heart and format of the message.

1. Sample SHIELD Flyer (8.5 x 11)

[Top Banner or Graphic: SHIELD logo or symbol]

Title:

You’ve Held the Line. Now Let Someone Hold Space for You.

Body Text:

SHIELD is a peer-led support group for first responders and disaster personnel—including fire, EMS, law enforcement, dispatchers, emergency management, corrections, and search and rescue. It’s a safe, non-clinical space to process trauma, reduce isolation, and begin walking toward healing.

- You do not need a diagnosis to attend.
- You do not need to speak if you’re not ready.
- You only need to show up—and want something better.

SHIELD stands for:

Supportive Healing Initiative for Emergency, Line, and Disaster Responders.

Meetings are free, confidential, and open to any responder seeking peace after the storm.

Local Meeting Info:

[Day/Time] – [Location or Zoom link]

For more info, email **[Your Contact]** or **shield@sc-rsi.org**

Bottom Line:

You don’t need to feel steady to be steady. You just need to come back.

2. Social Media Post Template

Image Caption or Text-Only:

Trauma doesn't always look like breakdown.

Sometimes it looks like silence, irritability, trouble sleeping, or pulling away.

If you're a responder who's been through the hard stuff—and you're tired of carrying it alone—**you're not alone.**

SHIELD is a safe, confidential peer support group for first responders and disaster workers.

No pressure. No fixing. Just presence, grace, and a path forward.

Join us: [insert day/time or link]

#ResponderWellness #TraumaHealing #SteadyWitness #SHIELDRecovery

3. One-Page Intro Handout

SHIELD: A Place for Responders to Heal

- **What it is:** A peer support group based on shared experience, steady practice, and trauma-informed grace
- **What it's not:** Therapy, religion, or a place to be fixed
- **Who it's for:** Fire, EMS, law enforcement, dispatch, corrections, EM, SAR, and disaster personnel
- **What to expect:** One-hour meetings with structured steps, honest conversation, and zero pressure to speak
- **The goal:** Not to go back to who you were—but to become someone whole and steady in the present

"This is the only space where I didn't have to explain the weight I was carrying. People just got it."

For more information, contact: shield@sc-rsi.org

4. One-Page Outreach Invitation

Help Spread the Word About SHIELD

SHIELD is a **confidential peer support group** for first responders and disaster personnel. You don't need a diagnosis or prior experience—just a desire to start healing. We offer steady, consistent support for those who've carried trauma alone for too long.

We meet weekly, and all first responders and their immediate families are welcome.

How to get involved:

- **Meetings are free.**
- **Meetings are confidential.**
- **You don't have to speak, just show up.**

For more information:

Contact **[Your Contact Name/Group Name]** at **shield@sc-rsi.org** or visit **[website link]**.

Appendix G – SHIELD Group Leader Guide

A Practical and Grace-Centered Support Tool for SHIELD Facilitators

This guide is designed to help you lead a SHIELD group with steadiness, clarity, and care. You do not need to be a clinician, chaplain, or expert to lead well—you just need to show up as a steady witness.

1. Your Role as a Facilitator

You are not here to:

- Give advice
- Lead therapy
- Be the most healed person in the room
- Have all the answers

You are here to:

- Keep the group grounded in **safety** and **grace**
 - Protect **confidentiality** and **peer values**
 - Reflect steadiness when emotions rise
 - Share from your own experience when appropriate
 - Maintain the SHIELD rhythm and meeting format
-

2. Core Values of Every SHIELD Group

- **Confidentiality** – What’s said here stays here.
 - **Grace** – We don’t fix or shame; we listen and affirm.
 - **Pace** – People share when they’re ready, not before.
 - **Trauma-awareness** – We recognize the signs and respond gently.
 - **Peer equality** – No one is the expert on someone else’s story.
-

3. Group Do’s and Don’ts

Do:

- Open every meeting with a **grounding statement**
- Invite, but never require, sharing
- Keep the group focused on **experience**, not **opinion**

- Redirect if someone is dominating or offering advice
- Close with presence and reassurance

Don't:

- Allow unsolicited **advice-giving** or **cross-talk**
 - Let side conversations derail the group
 - Overreact to silence or tears—both are sacred
 - Pressure anyone to speak, relive, or reframe their story
-

4. Responding to Difficult Moments

If someone becomes overwhelmed or shuts down:

- Gently acknowledge them and offer a **breath pause**:
“Let’s take a moment to breathe together.”
- If needed, offer space:
“You’re safe here. You don’t have to finish. Just being here matters.”

If someone shares something intense or graphic:

- Thank them:
“Thank you for trusting us with that.”
- Remind the group that trauma shows up differently for all of us.
- Circle back to **safety** and **breath** before moving on.

If a crisis arises (e.g., someone discloses suicidal thoughts):

- Stay calm
 - Ensure they’re not alone after the meeting
 - Follow your group’s **safety plan** or connect them to **local resources**
 - Email **shield@sc-rsi.org** for support or referral options
-

5. Staying Grounded as a Leader

Leading a SHIELD group is an act of service—but also of **vulnerability**. Protect your own wellbeing:

- **Debrief** with a co-facilitator or trusted peer
 - Keep your own **support circle** strong
 - **Take breaks** from leading when needed
 - Return to your own **rhythms of rest, faith, or recovery**
 - Remember: **Steady doesn't mean perfect. It means present.**
-

6. Final Encouragement

If you're asking, "*Am I really the right person to do this?*"—you probably are. SHIELD isn't led by experts. It's led by people who have been through it, and who refuse to let others walk alone.

"We show up. We listen. We witness. And in doing so, we heal together."

Appendix H – SHIELD Safety Protocols & Crisis Management

Guidelines for Responding to Crisis Situations During SHIELD Meetings

While SHIELD is designed as a peer support space for healing, we acknowledge that difficult moments can arise, especially when participants are sharing intense emotions or trauma experiences. As facilitators and group members, we must be prepared to handle any crises that may occur in a thoughtful, trauma-informed way.

This appendix outlines the **Safety Protocols** and **Crisis Management Guidelines** for SHIELD facilitators to ensure the well-being of all participants and maintain the integrity of the SHIELD recovery process.

1. Crisis Management Guidelines

In the event that a crisis arises during a SHIELD meeting (either in-person or virtual), it's important to have a plan in place. Facilitators should remain calm, grounded, and clear in their responses. Here are the **key steps** to follow:

A. If a Participant Becomes Overwhelmed or Distressed:

- **Acknowledge their experience** with empathy:
“I can see that what you’ve shared has brought up a lot for you. It’s okay to take a moment.”
- **Offer a break:** Suggest a few minutes of silence or grounding practice.
“Let’s take a moment to breathe together. We’re here, and you’re not alone.”
- **Create space for a check-in:**
“Would you like to talk about what’s going on, or would you prefer some space right now?”
- **Ensure a safe space:** If needed, move the person to a quieter part of the room or offer a private space in virtual settings to regroup.

B. If a Participant Discloses Suicidal Thoughts or Self-Harm:

- **Stay calm and composed.**
 - In an in-person meeting, ensure that the participant is not alone.

- For virtual meetings, ensure the participant has support available (such as a trusted contact they can call).
- **Ask open questions to assess their safety:**

“Are you thinking about hurting yourself (in cases of self-harm thought disclosure) or killing yourself (in cases of suicidal thought disclosure) right now?”

“Do you have a plan?”

- **Do not promise confidentiality in crisis situations.** It’s important to disclose that in cases of risk to self or others, there are reporting obligations.
- **Immediately connect them to resources:**
 - **Emergency services** (911 or local emergency line)
 - **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** (1-800-273-8255)
 - **Text Line:** 9-8-8
 - **In SC, SC Department of Mental Health Hotline:** 1-833-364-2274
- **Offer continued support** and remind them that reaching out is a courageous act:

“You matter. We want you to be safe. I’ll stay with you until we can get you the right support.”

2. Emergency Contact Information

Ensure that all participants have access to emergency contact details, and remind them regularly of these resources:

- **Crisis Hotline (24/7):** 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-8255
- **Text Line:** 9-8-8
- **Local Emergency Services:** Dial 911
- **In SC, SC Department of Mental Health Hotline:** 1-833-364-2274

SHIELD Facilitators should always have access to local crisis resources, including:

- Local crisis centers
- Mental health professionals who specialize in trauma recovery
- Peer support team for referral options (chaplains, social workers, etc.)

3. Handling Disclosures of Abuse or Trauma

If a participant discloses abuse (either from the past or present), remember to remain present, without judgment or overreaction.

A. Respond with Compassion

- **Acknowledge their bravery:**

“Thank you for trusting us with that. We believe your story matters and deserves to be heard.”

B. Offer Emotional Safety

- Encourage them to take breaks or step back if needed.
- Be present, but don’t pressure them to share further if they’re not ready.

C. Connect with Support Resources

- Refer them to **specialized therapy or support groups:**

“This is an important moment. You don’t have to carry this alone. Here are some resources that can help you process safely.”

- If you're in-person: **Confidential resources**, including therapy, shelters, or law enforcement, should be clearly communicated.

4. Managing Group Dynamics During High-Stress Sharing

It’s important to maintain a steady environment when intense emotions arise. Here are strategies for managing group dynamics:

A. Redirect Negative Energy

If someone is monopolizing the discussion or interrupting others, gently but firmly steer the conversation:

“We value everyone’s time to share. Let’s make space for others to speak, and we’ll come back to you if there’s more you’d like to share.”

B. Address Discomfort in the Group

If someone expresses discomfort with another person’s share or behavior, step in to manage the situation. Offer a private conversation or time for them to share separately if needed.

“I sense that what’s being shared might be difficult for some. Let’s take a moment to check in and ensure everyone feels safe.”

C. Encourage Healthy Boundaries

If participants share something too heavy for the group or inappropriate for the setting, step in to remind them of the ground rules. You can gently say:

“We’re here to support one another, but it’s important we keep the space safe for everyone. If you need more specialized support, please let us know, and we’ll connect you to someone who can help.”

5. Creating a Supportive Closure

At the end of each meeting, close with grounding, connection, and reassurance. This is especially important if heavy topics have been discussed. It leaves participants feeling supported and safe.

- **Use a closing reflection or shared affirmation:**

“Thank you for showing up today. You are not alone. We’re walking this path together, one step at a time.”

- **Give participants a moment of silence:**

Allow everyone to breathe, reflect, and absorb the space they’ve created together.

6. Self-Care for Facilitators

Facilitating SHIELD meetings can be emotionally demanding. Remember to prioritize your own well-being to show up steady for others:

- **Debrief with your co-facilitator or trusted peer** after challenging sessions.
- **Use your own support system:** It’s okay to reach out to other facilitators or professionals when you need help.
- **Practice self-care** regularly: Whether it’s exercise, hobbies, or therapy, ensure you’re nurturing your own mental health.

Final Thought:

The role of a SHIELD facilitator is to hold space—physically, emotionally, and mentally—for

participants to heal at their own pace. The better equipped we are with safety protocols and crisis management tools, the more effectively we can foster a supportive environment for everyone involved.

Appendix I – SHIELD Facilitator Development & Training Materials

Tools and Resources to Support SHIELD Group Leaders

Effective SHIELD facilitators are key to creating a safe, supportive, and steady space for responders. This appendix provides resources to help facilitators develop their skills, understand trauma, and embody the values of SHIELD in their leadership.

1. SHIELD Facilitator Training Overview

Purpose:

To equip facilitators with the skills and knowledge to lead SHIELD groups confidently, grounded in trauma-informed practices and peer support principles.

Training Areas:

- **Understanding Trauma:** Basic knowledge of the effects of trauma and how it impacts first responders.
 - **Facilitation Skills:** Techniques for guiding discussions, creating a safe environment, and managing difficult emotions.
 - **Peer Support Principles:** How to foster an environment of shared experience, active listening, and mutual respect.
 - **Crisis Management:** How to handle disclosures of distress, suicidal thoughts, or other critical situations.
 - **Self-Care for Facilitators:** Importance of maintaining your own wellness to lead effectively.
-

2. Recommended Readings and Resources

A key part of facilitator development is continual learning. Here are several books and resources that can enhance your knowledge and leadership abilities:

Books on Trauma and Peer Support:

- **“The Body Keeps the Score” by Bessel van der Kolk**
This book offers an in-depth look at how trauma affects the body and mind, with important insights into recovery.
- **“Trauma and Recovery” by Judith L. Herman**
A foundational book on the psychology of trauma and the recovery process, particularly in the context of survivors of extreme stress.

- **“The Responder's Guide to Post-Traumatic Stress” by Dr. Jonathan Shay**
Specific to responders, this book connects trauma to first responder work and provides insight on healing.

Online Courses and Workshops:

- **Trauma-Informed Care**
A free, online resource offered by various universities and professional organizations. It’s an essential primer on understanding trauma and applying it to peer support.
- **Peer Support Training**
Many organizations offer free peer support facilitator training online, which can be used in conjunction with SHIELD’s structure. Look for programs from trauma-focused organizations like the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI).

Professional Journals:

- **Journal of Trauma & Dissociation**
Read up on the latest research regarding trauma, dissociation, and PTSD.
- **Journal of Peer Support & Community Recovery**
A journal dedicated to the exploration and application of peer support models in recovery.

3. SHIELD Facilitator Skills

Effective SHIELD facilitators develop the following core skills:

A. Active Listening

- **Empathy:** Demonstrating that you understand the speaker’s emotions.
- **Non-judgment:** Reflecting the speaker’s experience without offering solutions or advice.
- **Reflection:** Paraphrasing what was said to show understanding (e.g., “What I hear you saying is…”).

B. Group Facilitation Techniques

- **Encouraging participation:** Gently inviting quieter members to share when they feel ready.
- **Maintaining group flow:** Keeping the meeting on track while respecting the pace and emotional states of participants.
- **Setting boundaries:** Helping the group stay focused on the healing process without veering into personal problem-solving or unsolicited advice.

C. Conflict Resolution

- **Calming emotional flare-ups:** Addressing tension with calmness and empathy.
- **Setting and maintaining boundaries:** Encouraging group members to respect each other's time, space, and healing process.

D. Grounding and Centering Practices

- **Breathing exercises:** Guiding the group to pause and breathe if things become overwhelming.
- **Short moments of silence:** Allowing space for emotional processing during meetings, especially after intense sharing.

4. SHIELD Crisis Management Training

While SHIELD meetings are not designed as crisis intervention spaces, facilitators need to be prepared for the possibility of a crisis arising, such as suicidal ideation or a participant becoming emotionally overwhelmed.

Crisis Protocols:

- **Immediate Action:** When someone shares thoughts of harming themselves or others, facilitators should remain calm and ensure safety. The facilitator should not promise confidentiality if a participant poses a risk of harm. Immediate steps should be taken to connect the person with the appropriate resources.
- **Contact Information:** Facilitators should always have the contact information for local emergency resources (e.g., crisis lines, local mental health professionals, and suicide prevention services).

Suggested Training for Facilitators:

- **Mental Health First Aid:** This course is highly recommended for all SHIELD facilitators. It provides foundational skills for managing mental health crises and supporting individuals in distress.
- **Crisis Communication Training:** Training in de-escalation techniques and effective communication in high-stress situations.

5. Facilitator Self-Care and Well-Being

Facilitators carry the emotional weight of the group, and it's vital that they practice **self-care** to avoid burnout. Here are some key practices for facilitator well-being:

- **Personal Reflection:** Set aside time to process your own emotions and experiences. Don't skip your own recovery.
 - **Peer Support:** Find your own group or trusted peer to share and process the emotional load.
 - **Boundaries:** Know when to step back, take breaks, and allow yourself to recharge.
 - **Mindfulness Practices:** Engage in grounding practices like meditation, yoga, or journaling to help maintain emotional balance.
 - **Regular Supervision or Debriefing:** Facilitators should check in with a supervisor, mentor, or fellow facilitator regularly to discuss challenges and seek support.
-

6. SHIELD Facilitator Certification

If you are looking to become a **certified SHIELD Facilitator**, SC-RSI offers training sessions and evaluations for leaders who want to deepen their involvement. Certification is based on:

- **Completion of SHIELD Facilitator Training**
- **Ongoing participation in SHIELD groups**
- **Completion of a Facilitator Evaluation Process**

For more information about certification, contact shield@sc-rsi.org.

Appendix J – Resources Available for SC First Responders

Below is a list of resources available to first responders in South Carolina and beyond. These organizations offer support for mental health, wellness, recovery, and peer assistance. Whether you are looking for local peer support, crisis intervention, training, or specialized care, these organizations are committed to helping those who serve.

- **Big Red Barn Retreat**
<https://thebigredbarnretreat.org/>
- **Boulder Crest Foundation**
<https://bouldercrest.org/>
- **Coastal Crisis Chaplaincy**
<https://crisischaplaincy.org/>
- **Coastal Recovery**
<https://coastalrecoverycenter.com/>
- **Concerns of Police Survivors**
<https://www.concernsofpolicesurvivors.org/>
- **First Responders Foundation**
<https://firstrespondersfoundation.org/>
- **Harbor of Grace, MD: National Law Enforcement & First Responder Wellness Center**
<https://harborofgracerecovery.com/>
- **Lake CISM Training**
<https://lakecism.com/>
- **Low Country Firefighter Support Team**
<https://firefightersupport.org/>
- **National EMS Memorial Service**
<https://www.national-ems-memorial.org/>
- **National Fallen Fire Fighters Foundation**
<https://www.firehero.org/>
- **Peer Connect App**
<https://peerconnectapp.com/>
- **Rebound Behavioral Health**
<https://www.reboundbehavioralhealth.com/>
- **SC Department of Mental Health**
<https://www.scdmh.org/resources/>
- **SC EMS Association**
<https://scemsa.org/>
- **SC Fire Fighters Association**
<https://scfirefighters.org/>
- **SC Law Enforcement Assistance Program (SCLEAP)**
<https://scleap.org/>
- **SC NENA (South Carolina National Emergency Number Association)**
<https://www.scnena.org/>

- **SC Public Safety Chaplain's Association**
<https://scpsca.org/>
- **SC-RSI (South Carolina Responder Support Initiative)**
<https://sc-rsi.org/>
- **SCFAST (South Carolina First Responder Assistance and Support Team)**
<https://scfast.org/>
- **Shatterproof FHE Health Florida**
<https://fherehab.com/services/first-responders/>
- **Support 1**
<https://www.support1.us/>
- **Warrior's Heart, VA**
<https://veterans.warriorsheart.com/>