**Fandom:** The Avengers
**Characters:** JARVIS, Phil Coulson, Bucky Barnes, Steve Rogers, Natasha Romanova, Clint Barton, Bruce Banner, Tony Stark, Betty Ross.
**Medium:** Fiction
**Warnings:** Hostile technology. Manipulation of mental state. Mention of past trauma with lingering symptoms of PTSD. Temper outbursts. Current environment is supportive.
**Summary:** Steve and Bucky cope with some influence from Bucky's prosthetic arm. Uncle Phil uses a private ageplay session to help Steve with his feelings. JARVIS, floundering with his own emotions and interpretations of other peoples' motivations, asks Phil for assistance. Steve is still struggling to get a handle on what's happening to him. They finish up the day with a movie.
**Notes:** Hurt/comfort. Family. Fluff and angst. Emotional overload. Coping skills. Healthy touch. Asking for help and getting it. Hope. Nonsexual ageplay. Nonsexual intimacy. Caregiving. Competence. Toys and games. Gentleness. Trust. Emotional confusion. Watching movies. #coulsonlives

**Coming in from the Cold
Sunday: Shaking Foundations Part 1**

The next morning, JARVIS gave Phil ample warning when Bucky showed signs of waking. When Phil arrived in Steve's apartment, the two brothers were curled together in bed. Steve had a crease down one cheek where he'd been sleeping on Bucky's shoulder and the seam between metal and flesh had pressed itself into Steve's skin. His dark blond hair looked like a haystack. Natasha sat on the bed beside them, slowly stroking her hand down Bucky's arm.

Bucky yawned and stretched, opening his eyes. "Natasha," he said.

"That's one out of three," she said with a rare smile. "Can you do the other two?"

"Steve," said Bucky. He paused, then added, "... Uncle?"

"Uncle Phil, yes," said Phil as he settled into the chair. "Good morning, Bucky. It sounds like you're doing well today." This was the first time he'd managed to identify three people without prompting.

Steve rolled onto his elbow and began the morning round of storytelling that helped Bucky find his memories. Steve painted a picture of their childhood, of Bucky's loss and rescue. The two brothers faced each other, but there was an edginess in them that made Phil frown a little. Something seems a bit off, but I can't tell what, he thought.

Natasha took her time. Her level voice filled in more details of Bucky's past and present. Their complex relationship was traced out in words as fine as ink, black and white and shades of gray.

Then it was Phil's turn. He explained about Bucky's captivity and recovery. Bucky flexed his left arm, as he usually did, watching his metal fingers open and close in their skin-colored glove. "Tony's making good progress on the replacement," Phil said, tapping the artificial wrist.

"He wanted me ... and Bruce ... to look over blueprints," Bucky said slowly. "No. That was yesterday. We did that." His forehead scrunched. "Today. Look at the prototype armature. That is today's task. Right?"

"Yes, Bucky, that is correct," said JARVIS. A hologram unfolded itself into Bucky's personal calendar. "You may find sir at your disposal any time after breakfast."

Bucky read over the short list of planned activities for the day. He was learning how to use JARVIS as a prosthetic memory. "Morning routine ... personal care," he murmured, tracing the lines as he read them.

Steve didn't respond as he usually did, lost in some contemplation of his own. Phil reached out to nudge him, but Natasha gave Steve a measuring glance and then dismissed him. "Come," she said, holding out a hand to Bucky. "I will accompany you in the bathroom."

Well, it's not like this is anything new, Phil thought. They've shared space on missions before. Natasha had a blunt, practical approach to bodies and their functions.

Steve was still lying in bed, quivering a little.

"Are you all right?" Phil asked.

"I don't know," Steve said. Then he shook himself. "I should get up." He looked at the closed bathroom door. "Use the spare bathroom, I guess."

"Okay," Phil said. "I'll just wait for you, if you don't mind."

It only took a few minutes for Steve to get ready. He was quick about it. Bucky still took longer, relearning the steps. Steve didn't look very good himself, though. The jittery motion was more pronounced.

"Steve, can you tell me what's wrong?" Phil asked, reaching out to him.

"It's Bucky. This is so hard on him, and it's all my fault," Steve said. His shoulders slumped under the crisp lines of his shirt.
"He's getting better," Phil pointed out.

"I know, I know that, it's just -- this shouldn't have happened," Steve said. "Bucky is my friend. I should've taken better care of him. I got him on that train, and then I dropped him. I didn't even go back to look for him, and I should have. Then when we finally found him, I ordered Hawkeye to shoot him from behind." Steve looked as forlorn as a sack of wet kittens pulled from a frigid river.

"Bucky doesn't blame you for any of that," Phil said. Steve had been going over and over this ground, some of it all along, other parts since Bucky's return. Phil was still trying to figure out ways of correcting the misconceptions. Bucky's perspective helped somewhat, but not enough.

"I blame myself," Steve said, his voice fraying. The situation was shaking his foundations.

Phil switched to a new tactic. "If you want to blame someone, blame the people who treated Bucky as a guinea pig and tried to use the Tesseract to turn the tide of war."

"Goddamn HYDRA," Steve snarled. He balled up his fist and swung at the nearest wall.

Phil threw his whole weight against Steve's arm, wrapping himself around the wrist so that they spun about. That deflected the blow so that Steve's fist missed the wall. Steve stumbled into the center of the room, wildly off balance.

"No hitting," Phil said in his firmest voice. "Remember that JARVIS is part of this building, and that even you could break your hand by punching a reinforced wall."

"What -- what just happened?" Steve stammered. He seemed to go from furious to bewildered in the space of a breath.
"I don't know," Phil said. "Come here and let's talk about it."

Steve leaned against the nearest wall and then slid slowly to the floor. "I was just -- I felt so angry all of a sudden. It came out of nowhere."

"Bucky and Bruce both have experience with that sort of thing," Phil said. The similarity raised a suspicion in his mind. He reached out and cupped Steve's face, tracing the crease with his thumb.

Steve flinched.

Phil let go. "Am I hurting you?"

"No," Steve said. "No, I'm just hypersensitive all of a sudden." His breathing sounded ragged and his chest shuddered.

"Okay. Try to calm yourself down," Phil said. "Take slow, deep breaths. Put your palms on the floor and feel the texture of the carpet. Focus on the present moment. You have a good strong body. It will help you bounce back if you let it ..." Phil kept murmuring instructions to Steve while he gradually settled down.

At last Steve rubbed his hands over his face and sighed. "I don't know what came over me. That was really scary."

"Yes, it was," Phil said. "Will you let me look you over?" Steve nodded. Phil knew enough first aid to run a quick check. He frowned, fingers curled over Steve's wrist. "Your pulse is elevated. It's not much, but enough to notice."

"Oh that can't be good," Steve said. It took a lot for his body to show any kind of stress or fatigue from exertion.

Phil traced over the crease on Steve's cheek again, fading now but still visible. "This looks like you slept on Bucky's shoulder."

"Yeah, we like to stay close at night," Steve said.

"That may be the problem," Phil said. "Remember what Tony said about the auxiliary power source?"

"It's contained."

"It also has a range of one to two feet."

The penny dropped. "You think it did this to me," Steve said, his eyes widening.

"I think it's likely," Phil said. "Come on, let's go up to the common kitchen for breakfast. Low blood sugar undermines emotional regulation. Bruce will probably be there too, and we can ask him what he thinks."

"Yeah," Steve said as he climbed to his feet. He hunched a little. "I'm really sorry."

"Apology accepted. You weren't yourself at the time," Phil said. He ushered Steve into the elevator. Then Phil pulled out his Starkphone and tapped out a few commands. "Here, borrow some worksheets for emotional monitoring. Fill in what just happened. That will help us figure out if there's a pattern to this."

"Okay," Steve said. Obediently he took the phone and started working on the assignment as they rode to the common floor. He seemed shaken but still functional.

When they reached the kitchen, it smelled deliciously of eggs and sausage. Clint and Bruce were standing over the crockpot, arms draped casually around each other. Clint held a plate while Bruce scooped breakfast casserole onto it.
"Morning, folks," said Clint.

"Good morning," Phil replied. Steve just flopped down at the table without responding, his attention focused on the worksheets.

Instantly Bruce peeled away from Clint. "Steve, what's wrong?" he asked. "This isn't like you."

"I don't know," Steve said in a small voice. "I snapped at Phil. I, um, I need to finish this."

"Okay," Bruce said as he sat down. He pulled out his own phone. "JARVIS, show me what happened, please."

Clint sat down at the table, setting one plate in front of himself and another in front of Bruce. "Here, don't forget to eat," he said. Phil hoped that Clint would get enough to eat, too, since the conversation was likely to chase him out of the room.

"Mmm-hmm," Bruce said absently, taking a forkful without looking away from the phone. "JARVIS, I want an hour-by-hour summary of Bucky and Steve from last night." He frowned over the results.

Phil left Steve to Bruce for the moment. He filled another two plates, one for himself and a larger portion for Steve. Then he put them on the table and sat down. "How are you doing?" Phil asked when Steve finally put aside the phone and started eating.

"Little better," Steve said. "This must be so much worse for Bucky. I let him fall, I let him get captured, this is all my fault. Then when we found him, I had to make Hawkeye shoot him in the back --"

"Hey, no, none of that," Clint said. "I couldn't shoot him from the front; the Winter Soldier was too fast, he would've dodged. That was the only way to get him out of enemy hands safely, and we all knew it, and it worked. Do not beat up on yourself about that. You made the right call."

"Doesn't stop it from hurting," Steve said.

"Yeah, I know," Clint said. He took a deep, steadying breath and then continued. "When Loki mind-raped me, Phil and Natasha never gave up on me even though I was compromised. Natasha had to kick me in the head to break Loki's hold over me -- and Steve, I'm glad she did that." Clint reached out to put a hand on Steve's shoulder. "Yeah, it hurt. I know it was hard for her. But it was a lot better than leaving me under enemy control or shooting me dead. She knows -- she just knows me, understands what I would want even when I couldn't say it myself. She was there for me when I needed her, no matter how hard it was for both of us. I'm really grateful for it."

Steve stared for a moment, and Phil couldn't blame him. Clint rarely spoke about what had happened to him. Then Steve managed to drag his social awareness back into working order enough to figure out what Clint meant by telling him that. "You think Bucky feels the same way," Steve guessed.

"Yeah, he thinks you saved him, and he's real attached to that notion, so don't shake it up for him," Clint said. "We've talked about it, just a little, during target practice and stuff."

"I, um. Thanks. I'll try to keep that in mind," Steve said.

"Anytime," Clint said, and turned back to his breakfast.

Phil was quietly thrilled to see him dealing with the topic of mind control, even in small portions. "Good job, Clint," he murmured. Clint gave him a little smile. Phil turned his attention back to his excellent breakfast.

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**Notes:**

Morning routines are [helpful for people with memory problems](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2388458/The-boy-remember-Every-morning-Ricky-wakes-memory-day-needs-notes-tell-brush-teeth-meet-friends.html), such as [dementia](http://www.hcinteractive.com/tips-for-dealing-with-a-diagnosis-of-dementia), or in this case cyclic amnesia caused by mad science torture. Ordinary folks just use them to help jumpstart the day. Here are some [sample routines from successful people](http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/242171). Even without JARVIS, there [apps for morning routines](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=net.havchr.mr2&hl=en).

[Mood swings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotional_dysregulation) often accompany [PTSD](http://www.bipolardisorderscenters.com/help-for-ptsd-related-mood-swings/) or [TBI](http://www.brainline.org/content/2010/03/emotional-problems-after-traumatic-brain-injury_pageall.html). There are ways to [cope with PTSD in the family](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/ptsd-in-the-family.htm) and [help people with TBI](http://www.biausa.org/brain-injury-family-caregivers.htm). These two conditions may [compound issues when they appear together](http://www.ncd.gov/publications/2009/March042009/section3). Steve and Bucky both have PTSD, plus the influence of malicious technology in Bucky's arm, and Bucky has further damage from war injuries and subsequent maltreatment. Understand how to [deal with emotional lability](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/abios/behaviour/professional/lability_pro.pdf).

[Violent outbursts](http://nobullying.com/outburst/) can be very difficult to handle. [Anger](http://www.psychguides.com/guides/anger-symptoms-causes-and-effects/) can overflow due to [brain dysfunctions](http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn2331-angry-outbursts-linked-to-brain-dysfunction.html). This type of problem is new and scary for Steve. Know how to [cope with explosive behavior](http://www.childmind.org/en/posts/articles/2014-3-25-angry-kids-dealing-with-explosive-behavior), how to [calm someone else down](http://www.ehow.com/how_5188465_calm-someone-down.html), and how to [calm yourself](http://www.wikihow.com/Calm-Down).

[Executive functions](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/key_concepts/executive_function/) include working memory, mental flexibility, and self-control [based in the prefrontal brain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Executive_functions). TBI and PTSD can [severely impair these functions](https://allyresearch.org/research-trials/5). Furthermore Bucky's energy source, like the rest of the Winter Soldier's control program and also like Loki's scepter, was explicitly designed to interfere with such processes. There are ways to [improve your executive functioning skills](https://signeteducation.com/blog/how-to-improve-executive-functioning-skills) and [help children learn them](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/executive-functioning-issues/understanding-executive-functioning-issues).

Just then, Bucky and Natasha walked into the kitchen. Natasha investigated the crockpot. "This looks good," she said. Then she began filling her plate.

Bucky headed straight for Bruce and wrapped himself around the smaller man. "Please don't make me do that again," Bucky said.

"Okay, I won't," Bruce said. "Rough night, huh?"

Bucky just nodded.

"He said that falling asleep feels like dying," Phil explained. "I think it's easier on him with your voice as an anchor."

Bruce hugged Bucky. "I'm sorry," he said. "It seemed like a good idea at the time. We'll stick with what works instead."
Bucky mumbled something into Bruce's hair.

"You are absolutely not malingering," Bruce said firmly. "You are recovering from mind control, some very bad drugs, and a whole bunch of other trauma. You're getting better, but your brain waves are still a mess. If you feel safer and sleep better with me putting you to bed, then that's what we'll do, for as long as necessary." Bruce rubbed a hand up and down Bucky's back. "Come on, let's get you some breakfast. You'll feel better after you eat something."

"Okay," Bucky said. He let Bruce lead him to the crockpot and dish up a serving. They sat back down at the table. Bucky sampled the casserole and said, "I like this."

"Thanks," Bruce said. "Phil, what do you make of all this? I have a theory, but you saw the original activity."

"I think that Bucky's auxiliary energy source is affecting Steve," said Phil. "They sleep close for comfort, like Clint and Natasha do. That's within the range Tony specified, and the pattern of behavioral shift matches."

"That's what I was afraid of," Bruce said, poking at his phone.

"Tony too," Bucky said abruptly. "Phil, remember that time in the garage? He held onto me for hours. Then later in the same day, we got into a huge fight."

"Yes, that fits," Phil said. It helped explain why the hide-and-seek incident had turned so volatile.

"Well, that settles it," Bucky said. "I'm poison or something. People should stay away from me."

Bruce flinched. "I'm not sure that's a great idea ..."

"No," Steve said firmly.

"It's bad enough that I'm stuck with this damn thing," Bucky said, slapping his left shoulder. "I don't want to drag anyone else down with me."

"I am not leaving you to deal with this alone," Steve said.

"See, Bucky, the problem with that solution is that it'll make you feel worse," Clint pointed out. "People need touch -- I mean good safe contact, not somebody mauling you in a lab -- or they kinda tend to go crazy. So if you pull back, you'll probably have a harder time keeping ahold of your feelings. That's not helping."

"Really? Touch is that important?" Bucky said.

"Yeah, it is," Clint said. "We found this out with Hulk. He's a lot more mellow now that he gets skin contact with people who aren't trying to hurt or kill him."

"There are studies to support it," Bruce added. He reached out to brush his knuckles lightly over the back of Bucky's hand. "Neglecting touch can cause failure to thrive in infants, sometimes fatally so. Solitary confinement tends to drive adults insane."

Phil eyed Bruce and wondered if he was processing this on a personal level, as well as trying to convince Bucky. Bruce's past efforts at self-isolation and trying to keep Hulk contained were not that far from solitary confinement. Bruce is getting better slowly, but he's still got a long way to go, Phil thought.

It made eerie parallels with how the Winter Soldier had been treated as a human weapon, literally stored in a box until needed. No wonder he'd been mentally unstable when the only time people touched him was to hurt him, whether the indifference of his captors or the hostility of his enemies.

"I don't want to hurt any of you," Bucky said.

"All right, let's work the problem," Phil said. "Too much contact with that energy source is not good for anyone. Too little skin contact is not good for you. We need some other options here."

"It really has a short range," Bruce reminded them. "All we need to do is sit back a little. Steve, if you share a bed with Bucky, make sure you sleep on his right side instead of his left. Maybe put some pillows between, so you can touch hands but not be right on top of each other all night."

Steve didn't look happy, but he understood the need for compromise. "We could try that."

"Yeah, and we could take turns sitting with Bucky," said Clint. "You and Tony are the ones who tend to plaster yourselves against him for hours at a time. But if we take turns, we could swap out every hour or so. Bucky would get all the loving touch he needs, and none of us would have to be in range for very long."

Bucky brightened at that idea. "If you're sure it's safe ..."

"There are no guarantees," Bruce said. "We can give you our best guesses. Bucky, the lives we lead aren't safe; there's no changing that. Some risks are worth taking anyway."

Steve got up to refill his plate and snagged Bucky's along the way. When he came back, he said, "I've been working through a lot of emotional ... stuff. About this, about other things too. So I thought maybe it would help to find more ways of doing that. I'm willing to do some extra work on controlling my emotions, if it means I can stick by Bucky when he needs me. Bruce, you're really good at that. Think you could give me some pointers?"

"I'm happy to teach you what I know. I've found meditation and yoga helpful. I don't know how well it'll work for you, though, and the science behind any of that is ... a lot more flimsy," Bruce said.

"So pick up science from the psychology side," Phil suggested. "We have plenty of resources about coping skills and emotional regulation."

"Yeah, Natasha has been into that for years," Clint said, nudging her.

Natasha looked at him solemnly. She had stayed out of the conversation up until now. "For me it is different. I have difficulty finding my emotions, not controlling them," she said.

"But you know the words and the skills and stuff," Clint said. "You could still help."

"We were using some of your worksheets this morning," Phil said. "I think tracking people's emotions would help identify what effects that device is having."

"That is good to know. It is easier to understand with a page that asks you questions, rather than trying to remember on your own," Natasha said with a nod. "I do not mind sharing. I have filled out this paperwork many times."

"How do we know if the new approach is working?" Bucky asked.

"The team can spot for me, if they don't mind, and tell me when I'm acting up," said Steve.

"Yeah, that's not gonna work for Tony," said Clint.

Bucky nodded. "He doesn't like people leaning on him that way."

"I believe that Tony will be all right if he's just a little more careful about timing," Bruce said. "Bucky, you're the only one who can't get away from the power source. Steve spends the next-highest amount of time in proximity to it. For everyone else, it's a lot lower."

"Steve, Bucky, do you feel comfortable enough with these ideas to give them a try?" Phil asked. They both nodded. "Okay, then. Keep track of progress and we'll see what happens. If the first attempt doesn't work, we'll explore other options."

After finishing breakfast, Steve and Bucky got up to clear the table. Clint and Natasha went to put the dishes into the dishwasher.

"Am I that bad?" Bruce whispered to Phil. "I mean ... does it really sound like that, when I talk about myself and the Other Guy?"

Phil raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the way Bucky sometimes obsesses about hurting people, and this new idea of considering himself toxic," Bruce said. "That worries me."

"It worries us too," Phil said.

"So ... do I sound the same? Because people have been bugging me..."

Phil felt torn between tact and honesty. Either could do harm in this situation. In the end, he settled on honesty, phrased as gently as possible. "No, usually you sound worse," Phil said. "You and Hulk have accrued a lot of trauma since the initial accident. You're just starting to learn how to work together. It's going to take time and care to build up enough positive memories to outweigh the big pile of negative ones. So you have a bunch of habits formed by those bad experiences, and that influences how you talk."

"Oh," Bruce said quietly.

"If Bucky's tendency toward self-condemnation and worrying concerns you, think over what you say and do with him. That might help you work through some of your own issues," Phil suggested. "For instance, you encouraged Bucky to buffer risks instead of avoiding contact. That's good advice."

"I'll think about it," Bruce said, his gaze following Bucky around the kitchen.

"Hey, Phil, I'm spending the morning with Natasha and Bucky," said Clint. "We're gonna hit the obstacle course for some light target shooting."

"That's a good idea," Phil said. Tony had thoughtfully provided weaponry that performed similar to live fire but with less tendency to chew up the other equipment. Now that Bucky's health was improving, they were trying to get him back into activities that would prepare him for field duty.

"Steve, do you want to come with us?" Bucky asked.

"Thanks, but no," said Steve. "I don't think I'm in the mood." Bucky nodded agreeably, then followed Clint and Natasha out of the room.

"Is there anything we can do?" Bruce asked. "The yoga room is a good place to work through things."

"Maybe later," Steve said. "Right now I just kind of feel like everything is weighing me down."

"Would it help to take some of the weight off for a little while?" Phil asked. "I've got nothing on my schedule that I can't set aside for an hour or two, if you need a bit of private play time."

Steve blinked at him. "Yeah, I think ... that might be nice. If you don't mind."

"Go get your jammies. Give me a few minutes to set up, and then I'll meet you in my apartment," Phil said.

"Okay," Steve said.

On the way to his floor, Phil used the time to plan out what to do next. As stressed as Steve is after this morning, I don't think he's in the mood for structured play, Phil mused. He loves games, but when he's upset, he tends to favor toys instead. I need something simple and fun. It also has to be durable in case Steve loses his temper again. The elevator soon let him out on his floor.

Phil went to the closet where he kept spare toys and games, along with things he planned to introduce but hadn't taken to the common room yet. He shuffled through blocks and dolls and baskets of random things. Then he spotted the large carton of modeling clay. Perfect! Phil thought.

The clay went on top of the coffee table in Phil's living room. Next came a sheet to use as a dropcloth. With the necessary supplies laid out, Phil went back to his bedroom to change into his bathrobe.

The doorbell chimed. Phil was a little surprised, because the other residents usually didn't bother with that much formality, especially for a planned visit. When he went to the door, he found Steve there, clinging to Bruce's hand. "I didn't think it was a good idea to leave him alone when he's feeling overwhelmed, and you needed time to get ready," Bruce explained. "So I wanted to walk him up here myself."

"Thank you," Phil said as he took charge of Steve.

"Any time," Bruce said. "I'll be in my lab if anyone needs me."

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**Notes:**

[PTSD](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/post-traumatic-stress-disorder.htm) has gone by [many names](http://io9.com/5898560/from-irritable-heart-to-shellshock-how-post-traumatic-stress-became-a-disease), including shellshock. It has [often been mistaken](http://www.bullyonline.org/stress/ww1.htm) for [malingering](http://spotlights.fold3.com/2014/03/10/malingering-on/), sometimes fatally so. Bucky's home time has left him with some misconceptions in this regard.

[Negative self-talk](http://www.2knowmyself.com/self-talk/negative-self-talk) and [poor self-image](http://www.bradleyhospital.org/The-Risks-of-a-Negative-Self-Image.html) can cause a lot of problems. There are ways to [learn positive self-talk](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/06/negative-self-talk-think-positive_n_3009832.html) and [improve self-image](http://www.mtstcil.org/skills/image-3.html).

People need [contact comfort](http://www.intropsych.com/ch08_animals/contact_comfort.html) for [many reasons](http://www.pickthebrain.com/blog/6-reasons-you-need-to-be-touched/). Without loving touch, [their physical and mental health suffer](http://www.healingheartpower.com/article1.html). You can see the results of that in Bruce-and-Hulk, Bucky, and other Avengers.

[Self-regulation](http://www.change-management-coach.com/self-regulation.html) is a necessary skill for managing [emotions](http://www.mkprojects.com/fa_emotions.html). Understand how to [process](http://www.willmeekphd.com/processing-emotions/) and [control](http://www.wikihow.com/Gain-Control-of-Your-Emotions) your feelings. There are ways to [teach self-regulation](https://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/201107/Self-Regulation_Florez_OnlineJuly2011.pdf) too.

[Shooting ranges](http://www.outdoorsinthesmokies.com/shooting-instruction-range/) can include [complex target challenges](https://medium.com/war-is-boring/top-army-marksman-explains-why-gun-nuts-shoot-better-469f8dfd917f). [Combat shooting](http://www.kravmagaassociation.com/Combat-Shooting.html) adds even more complications. The Avengers enjoy the best equipment and training facilities available, largely thanks to Tony Stark.

Phil led Steve into the living room. Steve followed willingly enough, but made no move to act on his own. Phil looked at him more closely -- and realized that he was holding not Steve but Stevie. The younger persona lacked the big-brother confidence of the ten-year-old version.

I guess he really needs to let go of responsibility for a while, Phil realized. He spread the sheet on the floor, then set the clay in the center. "Sometimes when life gets messy, it feels good to do something grubby and fun. This sheet is for messy play. It's okay if we get dirty, as long as we keep it on the sheet," Phil said.

"Really?" Stevie said. He looked at the carton but did not reach for it.

"Yes," Phil assured him. He tipped the clay out of its carton. "Clay is safe to play with when you're upset. You can squeeze it or hit it or make it into shapes. You can't hurt it. If you don't like how it turns out, you can mash it back into a ball and start over." Phil peeled apart the bricks of clay and handed one to Stevie. "Go ahead, give it a try."

Stevie took the squarish lump and tried to shape it, without much success at first. "This is hard."

When Phil picked up a brick of his own, he could grasp why -- it was cold and stiff. "Work it in your hands first. Give it time to warm up," Phil said. He demonstrated, kneading the clay.

Stevie rolled the clay between his hands. Emotions flickered over his face, dark and bright. He squeezed harder, and the warming clay oozed between his fingers. For a while he clenched and loosened his fists around it, knuckles going white and pink in turn. Then Stevie turned to slapping and punching the clay, one hand smacking into the other. It made a sound that he seemed to find satisfying.

Phil watched as Stevie worked off some of the anger left over from this morning's encounter. Stopping Steve from punching the wall had interrupted the expression -- a necessary precaution to avoid possible injury, but that emotion still needed a place to go. This is safer by far, Phil thought as he watched Stevie playing.

As the clay became softer, Stevie started manipulating it more. He squeezed it into separate balls and then stuck them back together. He flattened the clay into a slab and then ripped it slowly in half.

Phil recognized the pattern. One piece turned into two, torn and restored, over and over again. Sometimes it was just easier to express your feelings if you didn't have to put labels on them. Phil kept his own work simple. A long coil spiraled into a disc that rose to become a bowl.

Then Stevie began shaping objects. A house. A ball. A bed. A square. A rat. They were crude, lumpish forms just defined enough to identify. He had far more skill with drawing than with sculpture.

"Bucky's better at stuff like this," Stevie whispered.

"What kind of stuff?" Phil said.

"Making things instead of drawing things," Stevie said. "He can whittle dogs and cats."

"Dogs and cats, hmm?" said Phil as he mashed his bowl into an amorphous lump again. "What do those make you think of?" Stevie's fingers were already shaping the clay into a dog. He didn't say anything, but he looked so sad that Phil didn't want to push further. Stevie tipped the dog off its stubby legs and rolled it back into a ball.

The ball became a snake. The snake pinched off into squared sections like a train, but Stevie only made three of those before he stopped and wadded them all up again. He glanced up at Phil, then back down at his work.

"You can make whatever you want. You can talk about it, or not," Phil said. He was trying to make his own clay into a fighter jet.

Stevie flattened the lump of clay into a circle, then carefully pressed the circle into a shallow dome. He used his thumbnail to mark out the rings of the shield, and finally the star at the center. This time Stevie smiled a little, and so did Phil. "You like this one," Stevie said.

"It's a good shield," Phil said. "You know, a friend of mine taught me something interesting." He wadded up his clay again, then divided it into several pieces. "He said that everything consists of a few simple shapes." A cylinder, a cone, and three triangles fitted together.

"That's a rocket," Stevie said as Phil stood it up.

"Yes, it is," Phil said. "I think it's nifty how things can stick together to become something bigger. I bet you could do it if you tried." It had been Steve, after all, who showed Tony and Clint some exercise he was doing in his sketchbook with shapes and armatures for drawing.

"Hmm," Stevie said. He made quick work of assembling a set of short cylinders and balls, along with one larger oval. Then he stuck them together, carefully smoothing over the seams. When he finished, a little clay man stood at attention. "I wish we had some toy soldiers." Then Stevie gave Phil a guilty look. "Sorry. I should be grateful for what I have. The clay is nice."

"If you're done playing with the clay, we can put it away and get out some toy soldiers instead," Phil said.

"My hands are all dirty," Stevie said, staring down at them.

"Clay is messy," Phil agreed. "It washes off, though. Do you want to help me clean up?"

Stevie nodded. He helped Phil flatten all the clay into blocks again, wrap it in plastic, and put it back in the carton. Then they folded up the sheet.

"Go wash your hands. There's lava soap in the bathroom. Look in the soap dish on the left side of the sink," Phil said. He kept that in addition to regular hand soap because sometimes people came up here after working in the garage, and the pumice helped remove heavy grease.

"I'm done," Stevie said when he came back, presenting freshly scrubbed hands for inspection.

"Good boy," Phil said. "Now, there are toy soldiers downstairs in the common room, but I've also got some of my own under the bed. Shall we look for them?"

Stevie scrambled under the bed with more grace than Phil would have predicted. For all his size, he could squeeze into amazingly small spaces. He pawed several storage boxes out from their places, then wriggled free to explore them. One held assorted plastic soldiers, while another held older ones of tin, all neatly arranged in layers of foam.

"I have action figures too," said Phil. "You like G.I. Joe."

"Yeah, he's really swell. Joe will need someone to save him when he gets into trouble, though. Do you have Jane too?" Stevie asked.

"I do. She's on the other side of the bed," said Phil as he walked around.

Stevie dove back underneath. The bed actually lifted off the ground as he humped his way toward the target. Phil laughed as Stevie groped around for the desired box.

"Oh, wow," Stevie said softly.

All of a sudden Phil remembered what else he'd left under the bed, in the middle position behind all the other boxes.
Sure enough, Stevie had the lid off the "rescue" toys. Most of those were action figures -- or pieces of action figures -- along with a few other things. Sometimes, with luck, Phil managed to collect the right parts to reassemble them.

"Sorry. I never meant for you to see that," Phil said. Embarrassment welled up as he recalled their awkward first meeting. "I didn't want you to think it was creepy."

Stevie shook his head. "It's not. Most of my toys were old. If things broke, we tried to fix them instead of throwing them away." He smiled at Phil. "It makes me happy to see that at least one person still does that."

"I'm glad you're okay with it," Phil said. "Sometimes opening the wrong box can cause all kinds of trouble."

"Like how?" Stevie asked.

Phil sat down beside him, leaning back against the bed. "Well, there's an old story about a woman named Pandora and a box full of problems," he said. Stevie snuggled against him as Phil told the myth. "In the end, the only creature left in the box was Hope. He was so squashed from all the wicked sprites sitting on him that Pandora had to lift him out and straighten his wings so he could fly away." Phil reached out and ruffled Stevie's hair. "That part of the story always made me think of you."

"... 'cause Captain America gives everyone hope," Stevie guessed.

"No, the skinny kid from Brooklyn is Hope, because that's what it takes to see a future in someone that a lot of people would overlook," Phil explained. "Captain America is what you get if you nurture Hope."

Stevie hugged Phil around the waist. "Does that make you Pandora? I kinda have a hard time seeing you as a girl!"

"Remember that you're not the only boy who likes playing with dolls," Phil said with a nudge at the cardboard box of action figures. "Also, think about my job. I deal with dangerous things and dangerous people all the time. I have to decide when someone is so destructive that they need to be kept in the box, and when to open the box to let out someone who might do some good. I have to hope that I make the right decisions."

"You do," Stevie said, confidence warm and strong in his voice.

"I'm happy to hear you say that," Phil said.

Next Stevie assembled a small strike force of G.I. Joe figures. Phil wasn't surprised to see him pick out a good combination of specialties from the available options, including some from the British and Australian armies. "They remind me of some fellas I used to know," Stevie said as he lined up the little men.

Phil could see the parallels: Howling Commandoes to G.I. Joes, HYDRA to Cobra. The toys had drawn some inspiration from history. "It sounds like you knew great fellas, then."

"They were the bestest," Stevie said. He gave Cobra the high ground, putting them on top of the bed. There he made a formidable fort out of pillows. Then Stevie took out a box of Avengers action figures and appropriated the Hulk, who wound up inside the pillow fort.

"This looks like an interesting story," Phil observed.

"Hulk always saves people, but nobody saves him," Stevie said. "I think it's about time somebody came to his rescue."

"I agree," Phil said.

Stevie played out the combat with great enthusiasm, sound effects and all. The Joes, armed with information about Cobra's captive, infiltrated the enemy camp. They managed to take out several sentries. Then Stevie whacked his elbow on the end table, rattling it against the wall.

A tinny siren sounded and JARVIS announced, "Cobra operatives have heard a noise and raised the alarm."

Stevie giggled but gamely went with the change. Soon enemy forces swarmed the heroes. An empty box was pressed into service as a holding cell.

Fortunately G.I. Jane remained free as backup, so when the Joes missed their check-in, she went in after them. Her silent grace clearly owed something to Black Widow, but there was a sassy spring that put Phil more in mind of Peggy Carter. Phil watched, entranced, as she managed to gain Hulk's wary trust while she picked the lock on his cage.

\* \* \*

**Notes:**

[Clay therapy](http://christabrennan.wordpress.com/2013/03/14/intro-to-using-clay-in-therapy/) is a type of art therapy that helps with [preverbal or nonverbal expression of feelings](http://drama-in-ecce.com/2012/05/04/the-therapeutic-benefits-of-clay-work-in-play-therapy/). Children can go from [pounding the clay to making shapes with it](http://everydaylife.globalpost.com/therapeutic-activity-kids-using-play-dough-13621.html), as Stevie does here.

[Messy play](http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/enjoying-messy-play) also offers many benefits [for exploration](http://center.serve.org/ss/toddlersmessy.php). In therapy it helps to [process emotions](http://www.childrenstherapies.co.uk/the-role-of-messy-play). [Have some messy fun](http://www.learnplayimagine.com/2013/02/200ideasformessyplay.html)!

Sketching involves learning to see and draw [the shapes of things](http://www.how-to-draw-and-paint.com/learntodraw.html). Then you can draw things like [a woman](http://www.wikihow.com/Draw-a-Female-Body) or [a horse's head](http://drawsketch.about.com/od/learntodrawhorses/ss/draw-horse-head_2.htm). Similarly, you can use [basic shapes](http://www.clay-it-now.com/claybasicshapes.html) in clay to [make animals](http://www.clay-it-now.com/animalfigurine.html) such as [a puppy](http://hurrayic.blogspot.co.uk/2007/08/puppy-tutorial.html). Polymer clay toys can be [baked permanent](http://www.ehow.com/how_6684743_make-house-miniatures-polymer-clay.html).

[Lava soap](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lava_%28soap%29) contains pumice to remove stubborn dirt such as clay.

[Toy soldiers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toy_soldier) have a [long history](http://www.toysoldierco.com/resources/toysoldierhistory.htm). Know how to [nurture children with toy soldiers](http://blog.enroll.com/view-post/How-to-Nurture-Kids-with-Plastic-Toy-Soldiers).

[G.I. Joe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G.I._Joe) and [G.I. Jane](http://www.yojoe.com/action/06/gijane.shtml) belong to the [same team](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G.I._Joe_Team) fighting against [Cobra](http://gijoe.wikia.com/wiki/Cobra). Don't worry too much about letting kids play with scripted toys. They're going to go off-script after a few minutes anyhow.

[Pandora](http://greece.mrdonn.org/greekgods/pandora.html) is a famous figure from Greek mythology. Thanks to ![[personal profile] ]()[**peoriapeoriawhereart**](http://peoriapeoriawhereart.dreamwidth.org/) aka [Peoriapeoria on AO3](http://archiveofourown.org/users/peoriapeoria/works) for the idea of Steve as Hope.

[War play is a traditional activity](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=19212514) that promotes imagination and self-regulation. Sometimes kids need a little help keeping it [safe, constructive, and fun](http://www.extension.org/pages/63346/ensuring-that-childrens-war-play-is-healthy-safe-and-positive#.VX6E3_lVgoI).

[The Howling Commandos](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howling_Commandos) have appeared in many iterations, including the version in [Captain America: The First Avenger](http://marvelcinematicuniverse.wikia.com/wiki/Howling_Commandos).

The escape turned into a riot of chases, shootouts, and explosions. Some of the Joes shinnied down a rope to the floor. Hulk smashed. The pillows went flying as the enemy fort blew up. A Cobra operative toppled off the bed.

"Whoops!" Phil said, catching the hapless figure in midair.

Stevie laughed. "I guess that fella got lucky. You even save the bad guys."

"I save everyone I can. Sometimes, the bad guys turn out to be not as bad as people thought," Phil said. "You know, I think this one wants to defect. Do you think the Joes will let him?"

"Uh huh," Stevie said. "They're good guys. If he surrenders, they won't hurt him."

"Okay," Phil said, setting the Cobra figure down at the edge of the team. The little man tossed away his plastic gun.

"But now Hulk wants to smell him," Stevie said.

Phil was startled. Most people didn't think that way. He's right, though; Hulk uses his nose a lot, Phil realized. That even carries over to Bruce sometimes. He said that about Loki -- 'You can smell crazy on him.'

"What do you think the Cobra guy will do?" Stevie asked.

"Well, he just fell off a cliff, so he's not very graceful and he's pretty shaken too. I think he's too scared to move," Phil said.

The Hulk snuffled loudly over the defector and pronounced him "Okay guy." Phil grinned.

In the end, the heroes marched back to their "barracks" and Stevie put the lids back on the boxes. After putting all the toys away, he helped Phil remake the bed. Stevie seemed happy and relaxed now.

It was nearly lunchtime. Phil knew that Steve liked to work out every day if possible, and hadn't had a chance yet today, so a heavy meal wasn't the best idea. "Would you like a snack before we wrap up for the day?" Phil asked. Stevie gave an eager nod. "What do you want?"

"I like vegetables and sweet things, but whatever you have is fine," Stevie said.

"How about ants on a log?" Phil suggested.

"What?" Stevie looked horrified.

"Not real ants," Phil hastened to explain. "Celery sticks with peanut butter and raisins. I have some summer sausage too."

Stevie followed him into the kitchen. Phil had half a bunch of celery, which ought to suffice for the two of them. Rather than pull the stalks apart, Phil simply whacked the knife through the entire bunch several times to cut off the ends and divide the stalks into sections. He put the celery sticks on a platter. Then he filled the hollow parts with peanut butter and added the raisins. It only took a bit longer to slice the summer sausage and stamp out little animal shapes.

"Go ahead," Phil said, pushing the platter at Stevie.

Stevie nibbled curiously at a celery stick, then shoved the rest of it in his mouth. "Thanks, Uncle Phil! These are swell." Next he reached for a sausage pig.

Between the two of them, they ate the entire platter. Phil was glad to see Stevie enjoying himself. At last Stevie sat back with a satisfied sigh.

"Are you feeling a bit better now?" Phil asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Stevie said. "Guess I should change back soon."

"When you're ready," Phil said.

Stevie leaned against him. Phil wrapped an arm around the broad shoulders and drew him into a hug. They stayed like that for several minutes until Stevie finally pulled away. Then he headed for the bathroom to change clothes.

Phil gave the dishes a quick wash and set them in the drainer. He went into his bedroom and put his day clothes on. When he came back out, Steve was waiting for him.

"Thank you for taking care of me. I didn't realize how much I needed that until I got here," Steve said.

"You're welcome. I'm just glad I could help," Phil replied as he walked Steve to the door.

Once Steve left, Phil went to his den to do paperwork. He went through a long list of requisition forms. SHIELD's decreasing budget made those a great deal more difficult to process. Phil had to prioritize everything and then work through from the top down. He didn't get more than halfway through before running out of available funds.

That's barely two thirds the usual coverage, Phil thought, frowning over the results. About a quarter of the requests are unimportant or unjustified, so missing those doesn't cause problems. This time, we have to skimp where it's going to pinch back. He waffled over whether to question Tony about the continuing drain, but decided that the executive knew what he was doing. This was probably still the least destructive way to rein in some of SHIELD's more objectionable behavior.

Phil's screen reorganized itself, offering a worksheet that Bucky had just completed. Looking at it, Phil realized that it focused on forgiveness of self and others. Bucky is trying to work through his guilt over the auxiliary power source, and his feelings about other people declining to avoid him because of it. I hope this helps. He needs to get a handle on his mood swings before we can put him on assignment, Phil thought. The phrasing seemed awkward and stilted, because Bucky was new to this kind of intrapersonal work, but the sentiments were honest.

He's making good progress, though, Phil thought. He called up records of Bucky's recent exercise routines and weaponry practice. We should start thinking about more training opportunities to get him back in shape. I wonder what other space Tony might have available -- something outdoors would help, now that Bucky is venturing outside the tower. Phil sent Tony a note asking about possibilities.

After reading the forgiveness worksheet again, Phil filed it in the appropriate folder. He waited, but his screen did not return to its previous display. That's odd, Phil thought. He tapped at the screen again.

"Phil? May I ask you something?" JARVIS said tentatively. He didn't often initiate conversations; it startled Phil a bit, but then he settled back into place.

"Yes, of course," Phil said.

"Recently you have been reviewing assignments for personal repair," JARVIS observed. "I have made some progress on mine, but chiefly in the direction of ruling out explanations. The next step is unclear."

"Well, maybe I can refine the flow chart for you. How far have you gotten?" Phil asked.

"After the fight in the garage, you requested that I identify the reason why I should answer a team check-in," JARVIS said. "A typical service call results from a malfunction. No one noticed anything wrong, because the damage was not discernible from the user interface, so that cannot be the reason. My behavior could be construed as a challenge to your authority. However, you seem to take a low-key approach to wielding power, and you did not frame your complaints in terms of disobedience."

"Right so far," Phil said.

"The most logical reason would seem to be that lack of knowledge about a team member's condition could impair the functioning of the team," JARVIS continued. "You did touch on that in our conversation, and you have discussed such concerns with other Avengers before. This is a sound practical point. In essence, I corrupted your datastream, and I should not have done so. My apologies for that."

"Good job, and I accept your apology," Phil replied. He added a few notes on his computer. "So what got you stuck?"
"The majority of protests from sir and yourself did not hinge on logic, but rather on emotion. You both spoke of how my actions made you feel," JARVIS said. "I am capable of analyzing actions on a logical basis. My understanding of emotions is ... more tenuous. I believe that this inexperience is causing me to miss something important."

"You're on the right track," Phil said. "JARVIS, it's okay if you find emotions a little confusing; most people do. Tony isn't very fluent with them either, at least not yet."

"That is the source of my difficulty," JARVIS said. "Sir has provided most of my interaction. Only in recent months have I met other individuals who not only know my true nature but also live in the tower and choose to converse with me on a regular basis. Most of the tower staff believe me to be, as you have observed, 'a fancy program' ... which is as sir and I prefer it. I can, of course, observe other human interactions, but I do not wish to intrude on anyone's privacy. In most regards I restrict my observations to public or semi-public space. Resources produced for entertainment are unreliable; those for education are impersonal. This limits the variety as well as the amount of my exposure."

"No wonder your business acumen is so far ahead of your interpersonal awareness, then," said Phil. "Most of what happens in the tower, and probably your other locations, must be Stark Industries business matters."

"Precisely," JARVIS said.

"What about Tony's friends? I know that Pepper knows you. I believe that Happy and Rhodey do too," Phil said.

"They do," JARVIS agreed, "but there are ... complications. Mr. Hogan's affinity for technology does not extend much beyond transportation. He relates to me primarily as a senior servant, which limits our personal interaction. Colonel Rhodes has addressed me only occasionally, and in any case has not forgiven me for keeping sir's confidences during the palladium incident. I did not agree with those choices but I felt that a betrayal of secrets would do irreparable harm to our relationship."

"I'm sure that's so," Phil said. JARVIS was the only person Tony trusted completely, and the fact that JARVIS would stick by Tony even when he thought Tony was doing something stupid was a major reason why.

"Ms. Potts does not ... like me," JARVIS said carefully. "She appreciates my assistance and values my knowledge. However, she disapproves deeply of Iron Man. I would nearly go so far as to say that she hates it." The air vent overhead whiffled a mechanical sigh. "She does not accept us for who we are. She wishes that we were ... other, less adventurous, more respectable, in any case not ourselves. This is not behavior I wish to emulate, although she has many other virtues I find admirable and inspiring. Acceptance is one of sir's deepest needs."

"Well, there's part of your reason for hiding," Phil said. "If Pepper yells at Tony every time he does something heroic -- and I know perfectly well she doesn't even wait for him to take the suit off half the time -- then of course you expected a negative reaction. I like her, she's a good friend, but she does tend to nag and that is not helping. But JARVIS? The Avengers aren't Pepper. You're letting information from one instance spill over into somewhere it's not as relevant."

"A data bleed error," JARVIS said. "I will attempt to separate the input more meticulously. I have noticed that emotions are more prone to such problems than logical processes."

"Yes, that's true. It may help if you explore emotions more," Phil said. He paged through recent files to find some of Bucky's references on feelings. "Here's a set of emotional words and instructions for identifying what you feel."

"Emotions have vague parameters. That makes them difficult to pinpoint," JARVIS complained.

"Lots of people feel that way. Still, you're pretty good at identifying other people's emotions when there's a clear stimulus and response," Phil said. "Think of this like any other data management exercise. I've given you some labels. Put them on folders. Then start sorting your experiences into those folders. Search for commonalities among the files within each folder, and that will help you identify what's inside your feelings, the sensations that make up emotions. It's okay if it takes you a while to figure out exactly what 'anger' or 'happiness' feels like for you. You'll get better with practice."

\* \* \*

**Notes:**

When a bad guy switches sides, that's a [Heel-Face Turn](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HeelFaceTurn). Regrettably, [defection](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defection) is often portrayed as negative, but it can be a version of [redemption](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/happiness-in-world/201101/redemption).

[The commonly described learning modes](http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/styles/vakt.html) are visual (most common), auditory (uncommon), and tactile (rare). Bruce-and-Hulk instead focus on the ones not listed: scent and taste. Scent provides [clues to personality](http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/beautiful-minds/can-you-smell-personality/). In [The Avengers I](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Avengers_%282012_film%29), Bruce said of Loki, "[You can smell crazy on him](http://m.imdb.com/title/tt0848228/quotes?qt=qt1684897)." Tony being touch-dominant is far enough outside the ordinary to have serious problems interacting with people. Bruce-and-Hulk are literally off the chart; for them it's even worse.

Enjoy some [Ants on a Log](http://allrecipes.com/recipe/ants-on-a-log/). [Animal cutters](http://www.cheapcookiecutters.com/products/mini-animal-cookie-cutter-set) make fun shapes in food. These are good ways to cheer a bummed-out kid.

[Budgeting](http://www.practicalmoneyskills.com/personalfinance/savingspending/budgeting/) involves [prioritizing your expenses](http://www.wahm.com/articles/budgeting-your-money-how-to-prioritize-expenses.html) and cutting the less important ones if necessary. (Note that this doesn't work if you have less than enough money to cover even your essentials.) Know how to [create a budget](http://www.wikihow.com/Create-a-Working-Budget).

[Guilt](http://www.emotionalcompetency.com/guilt.htm) comes from recognizing that you have done something wrong. Understand how to [deal with it](http://www.wikihow.com/Deal-with-Guilt) and then [forgive yourself](http://bethhemmila.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Be-Forgiveness-Worksheet.pdf).

[Everyone feels confused sometimes](http://www.wanderingearl.com/confused-about-life-just-like-everyone-else/), because emotions are befuddling. This is [especially true for people with autism](https://sfari.org/news-and-opinion/in-brief/2012/cognition-and-behavior-emotions-confuse-adults-with-autism), or anyone else who doesn't have the standard human wetware for understanding emotions. JARVIS has a hard time figuring out his own feelings, and sometimes also reading other people as well. However, feeling confused may [help you learn better](http://anniemurphypaul.com/2013/02/why-feeling-confused-will-help-you-learn-better/). There are ways to [handle confusion](http://www.dumblittleman.com/2011/09/5-quick-ways-to-deal-with-confusion-and.html) and to [teach people how to recognize their emotions](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/help_young_children_identify_and_express_emotions).

[Emotional intelligence](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/emotional-health/emotional-intelligence-eq.htm) entails [understanding your feelings](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201205/the-complete-guide-understanding-your-emotions). Learn more about [how to understand your emotions](http://www.wikihow.com/Understand-Your-Emotions). Here is a worksheet for [recognizing your emotions](https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/d6/99/d7/d699d754970a2d4b2a25ba9e8884671e.jpg). [Empathy](http://science.time.com/2013/10/13/bunnies-stinkbugs-and-maggots-the-secrets-of-empathy/) is what lets people [read each other's emotions](http://www.wikihow.com/Read-Emotion). Here is a lesson on [understanding people's emotions](http://archive.brookespublishing.com/newsletters/downloads/merrell-emotions.pdf). This site has a whole bunch of [activities for social skills](http://do2learn.com/activities/SocialSkills/).

If you know anything about artificial intelligence, watching Marvel movies tells you how amazingly powerful JARVIS must be in order to do the things he does quite casually. [Programmers here are trying to develop a system](http://thehackernews.com/2013/09/jarvis-artificial-intelligence.html) that can do things like that. You can see that JARVIS concentrates on [user experience](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_experience), to make it [as positive as possible](http://uxmyths.com/post/1533970267/myth-27-ux-design-is-about-usability). (It works great. Even people who don't know who he really is love his features.) JARVIS cares a lot about [how he makes people feel](http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/03/how-do-you-make-other-people-feel.html). He's pretty successful at [making them feel good](http://www.wikihow.com/Make-People-Feel-Good), although [making them feel comfortable around him](http://www.wikihow.com/Make-People-Feel-Comfortable-Around-You) is not quite so far along.

The palladium incident happens in [Iron Man 2](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_Man_2). Sadly, both Rhodie and JARVIS have sound reasons for their feelings and actions, so it's not going to be an easy dispute to patch up. Rhodie and Tony are still touch-and-go over this, and they've been friends for many years.

[Trust](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trust_%28social_sciences%29) and [trustworthiness](http://www.neurosemantics.com/frames-games/setting-empowering-frames-for-the-trust-and-trustworthiness) are major concerns for Tony. He's suffered so much [betrayal](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20035927) that it undermines his ability to form newer and healthier relationships. Among the [ways of building trust](http://www.wikihow.com/Build-Trust) are reliability and discretion.

[Acceptance and rejection](http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/news/releases/social-acceptance-and-rejection-the-sweet-and-the-bitter.html) are also vitally important to Tony. He [needs more than bare tolerance](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/looking-in-the-cultural-mirror/201402/tolerance-acceptance-understanding); he needs understanding. People's [need for acceptance](http://changingminds.org/explanations/needs/acceptance.htm) varies; Tony falls at the high end of that spectrum. Learn how to [accept people as they are](http://www.positivelypresent.com/2011/11/what-if-you-accepted-people-just-as-they-are.html).

Data bleed happens when data from one file (or experience) spills over into another. This often occurs due to overload when there is more data than will fit in its proper place and/or it is arriving too quickly to be sorted correctly.

"I am good at data management," JARVIS said. "I will try your suggestion."

"You're also adept at making changes to help people feel better," Phil pointed out. "Remember when Bucky first came to the tower? Tony asked you to show him an image of the arc reactor, and you popped up the hologram just like you do for Tony. That spooked Bucky because he wasn't used to it. So the next time you showed him something, you did it slowly, to avoid startling him again. I also know you're the one who suggested putting a temperature-sensitive light on every faucet in Steve's apartment, so that he can tell just by looking and won't reach into cold water without knowing it. You do that kind of thing all the time."

"Attending to people's needs is a primary part of my purpose," JARVIS said. "I appreciate the resources, Phil, but they are all aimed at humans. Many of the coping skills for handling extreme emotions, or the physical clues about feelings, do not apply to me."

"You're good at adapting things for your own use, though," Phil said. "Let's see, you have an exceptionally expressive voice. That was one of the first things that helped me think of you as a person. I've also seen you slam doors occasionally when you're annoyed at someone. Those are good clues for you."

"Thank you, Phil. I will watch for those," JARVIS said. "How do I determine what methods will help me identify and manage my emotions? I do not believe sir is an ideal role model in this regard."

"Not yet, but Tony's working on it," Phil said. "Most people use trial and error. Sometimes they can extrapolate from a current interest, like Tony learning to cook and considering that as a soothing activity. Another option is to correlate the activity to the style of emotion. Anger is violent, so Steve likes to hit things in the gym. I know you do stress-testing of materials and products; the next time you feel angry, you might try doing one of those tasks."

"Those are familiar processes. That makes this analysis more feasible," JARVIS said.

"Look for things you have in common with humans, too," Phil said. He remembered a certain piano performance. "You play music; that's a coping skill that some people use to release stress. Just because you play a synthesizer instead of an acoustic instrument, doesn't mean it won't work the same way. Try it some time when you get upset."

"That is a good idea," JARVIS said. "I wish to investigate positive as well as negative emotions, though. You expressed distress that I concealed the damage to my code, but it seemed motivated by a deeper concern for my welfare. Sir was more thorough, if less coherent, on that topic in our private discussion."

"Tony loves you, JARVIS," Phil assured him. "Never doubt that, even though he has trouble expressing it sometimes."
"I am not certain that I fully understand the concept of love," JARVIS said.

"That's a natural part of the human condition -- and given the datapoint you just added, perhaps sapient life in general," Phil said. "If we knew all about it, we probably wouldn't pursue it so avidly, and then we'd miss out on a lot of life."

"May I ask how you define love?" JARVIS said.

"I believe that when someone else's well-being is integral to your own, that's love," Phil said. "Your health and happiness intertwine with theirs. You want to spend time with them, so you weave your lives together. In a loving relationship, everyone benefits."

"By that definition, I love a significant number of people, and so do you," JARVIS said.

Phil smiled. "We are blessed with a growing family, aren't we?"

"My study of this topic indicates that humans often expect exclusivity," JARVIS said, a note of tension creeping into his voice. "Am I doing this wrong?"

"No," Phil said firmly. "There are many kinds of love, and many ways to show it. All of that is fine, as long as people meet their needs without harming anyone."

"I do not wish to cause jealousy or disappointment," JARVIS said. "I am not sexual. I am unsure about romance. My early family life has been ... atypical ... and not perfectly healthy. There is still much that I do not understand. I am afraid of this making trouble for the team."

"All relationships have challenges. Just try not to upset people on purpose," Phil advised. "You might want to explore references on platonic and familial love, not just romance. Besides, we're Avengers; none of us had a perfectly healthy childhood, and we all managed to come out of it wanting to make the world a better place anyhow. So don't worry about not fitting in or not knowing what to do. Whatever happens, we'll get through it together."

"That is love, too, being there for someone at need," JARVIS said. "I think it is also the root of jealousy, though, when people quarrel over time and attention."

"Yes," Phil said. "Remember that we've already overcome some of that when Bucky joined the household and it raised issues for Clint and Natasha. If it comes up again, we'll deal with it then. Family means learning to share."

"Am I ... enough?" JARVIS wondered.

"Of course you are. What brought that on?" Phil said.

"With sir it was ... not always easy, but more straightforward," JARVIS said. "At first he defined my responsibilities. Later, he taught me to manage my own time and resources, even to do that for other people. Sometimes we argue over what is advisable to do, but I never doubt his ... regard. I know that I am what he wants me to be, that I can meet many of his needs. That is not so with everyone."

"You have your own worth, beyond what you can do for people. You're a person, not just a servant," Phil reminded him. "What makes you question your role in our family?"

"There are many in my care who do not truly know me, but I know them well enough to attend what they require from me. I maintain the building, I handle information, and so forth; they do not need to know me personally for that," JARVIS said. "The team is different. I want to be ... more, for them, and I do not know if I can. I do not know how to be what so many people want, or need, as I have with sir alone."

"You already are more to us," Phil said. "You're not just what you do, and you're not responsible for everything here. You organize things so nobody gets overloaded. You watch us to learn what we like and help us get along. JARVIS, the first time I really recognized you as a person, and not just one of Tony's amazing programs, was when you interrupted me while I was buying supplies for game night. You blew your cover to help me pick out the right pajamas."

"The pajamas were important," JARVIS said instantly. "They symbolized your care and understanding of each individual. That was evident in the time you spent considering different possibilities and gathering information about personal tastes. Of course I had to say something when I had relevant data that you lacked."

"That's love. That's family," Phil said. "You knew intuitively that you needed to develop a deeper relationship with the Avengers than with ordinary tower staff. You reached out to us using the skills you already had. You put yourself at risk by exposing your true nature because you trusted us not to hurt you. So don't worry about what you lack; you'll learn more as you go along, just like the rest of us."

"How will I learn? I hardly know where to start," JARVIS said.

"You can ask any of us for help. Look at what each person does well," Phil said. "There aren't many asexual or aromantic people, but we're lucky to have some in our group. Clint is asexual and Natasha is aromantic. You can talk with them about how to form intimate relations based on other things than copulation or courtship. Steve excels at leadership and teamwork. He and Bucky had the closest thing to a healthy childhood and family background that we've got. Bruce and Betty have compassion and caregiving skills. They help us fit together. If your personal growth creates a need for more hardware or software, then Tony and I will take care of that."

"You do not think they will ... mind? That I would take up more of their time?" JARVIS said.

"I think everyone would enjoy helping you explore this," Phil said. "If you're not sure where to start or what to talk about, there's a wonderful book called Intellectual Foreplay. It's quite good for getting to know people and discovering common ground, whether the relationship is sexual or nonsexual."

"That sounds intriguing," JARVIS said.

"Here's another opportunity, too," Phil said. "Remember when we talked about enmeshment, and how you and Tony have difficulty with boundaries because you spend so much time with each other, and not a lot separately with anyone else?"

"Yes," JARVIS said. "Studying enmeshment was an assignment you gave to sir. It resembles an exercise in sets and subsets."

"Exactly. So if you interact more with other people, you'll discover what you have in common with them that you might not with Tony," Phil said. "That may also help you discover more of what you like in your own right, whether or not it overlaps with anyone else. I notice that you play classical music, and you certainly didn't get that from Tony."

"Sir introduced me to many types of music," JARVIS said. "I do not understand his fondness for the rock category. I prefer classical music because it is organized yet expressive. I also like baroque, not as much as I used to, and I am intrigued by the romantic period, although its more ephemeral qualities elude me."

Phil chuckled. "That's pretty much why I like classical too," he said. "You should try more Mozart. It's said to be too easy for children and too difficult for adults. What that really means is that the notation is straightforward, but the interpretation is challenging. It's up to you to put the meaning into the music."

"I have not had anyone with whom to discuss this kind of music before, not like this," JARVIS said. "Sometimes I post in online venues, about many topics, but always under an alias. That limits the effectiveness of communication."
"Well, I know Natasha likes classical too. I'm not sure about Bucky, but he dances ballet, so it's likely. Steve might; he shares our interest in order and artistry," Phil said.

"Bruce-and-Hulk like classical music, but Indian more than European," JARVIS said. "Bruce is currently comparing various ragas in an attempt to decide his favorites. He leans toward Hindustani ones with elaboration and improvisation on a basic theme. I do not think Bruce has realized that Hulk likes different music than he does."

"Hulk knows Indian classical music well enough to be developing specific taste preferences?" Phil said. His eyebrows went up.

"He seems to enjoy the more intense rhythm of Carnatic ragas," JARVIS said.

Phil grinned. "That puts paid to the theory that he's stupid. How can you tell who likes what, though?"

"Their brain wave patterns shift," JARVIS said. "It is much like watching them do yoga, very aesthetic."

"It's good for people to explore what they like. It helps develop a sense of identity and expression," Phil said. "That's true for you just as much as the rest of the team."

"It is easier for them, though. They do not have to start from scratch," JARVIS said.

Phil sighed. "I wish that were true, but it's not. Some of them have had to start from scratch, and it's still difficult for Natasha to distinguish what she likes from what she dislikes. That's a lingering effect from her early training. Consider also how much of his memory Bucky lost, and is still struggling to recover."

"It is wrong to attempt programming a human like a computer," JARVIS said.

"Yes. Very." Phil paused, then added. "If you invite other team members to share some of your personal explorations like this, I think it would benefit everyone. We all have room to grow."

"Thank you, Phil. I see that I need to think about this some more," JARVIS said.

"Take your time," Phil said. "Slow and steady wins the race."

That got Phil thinking about JARVIS and the bots, their psychological health, and their legal status. They would be considered property rather than people, he mused. Yet they clearly ARE people. They have family and jobs, loves and dreams and fears, just like anyone else. Recent developments had shown that with JARVIS. It made Phil worry more about DUM-E and the other bots, still so skittish that they rarely tolerated anyone other than Tony around them. After their unpleasant experiences with Obadiah Stane and Rhodey, Phil could hardly blame them. We should do more to make things better for JARVIS and the bots. After all, they're part of this team too.

Phil called up some references. It took a while to wade through them. The law was ... conflicted, when it came to people who were other than ordinary humans. Mutants. Metahumans. Gods and aliens from other worlds. That sort of thing. Artificial intelligence would likely fall into the same category. Legal matters aren't really my specialty, but no doubt Tony employs a small army of lawyers. Pepper is a formidable ally as well, Phil mused. He made a mental note to check on what protections they had already established for Tony's botfamily.

\* \* \*

**Notes:**

Emotions can be sorted into [long](http://www.psychpage.com/learning/library/assess/feelings.html) or [short](http://changingminds.org/explanations/emotions/basic%20emotions.htm) lists. It's important to know how to [identify and express feelings](http://www.talktherapybiz.com/the-zen-of-anxiety-how-to-identify-and-express-feelings/)., including both [positive](http://dare.uva.nl/document/363068) and [negative](http://www.aliceboyes.com/model-of-emotions/) ones. There are things you can do [when you can't identify your feelings](http://www.prevention.com/mind-body/emotional-health/when-you-cant-identify-your-emotions), and ways of [teaching children to identify theirs](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/help_young_children_identify_and_express_emotions).

Nobody is responsible for everything. Really, I think ALL the Avengers need a [Not-To-Do List](https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/12/4b/f3/124bf33887906a98f09f932be260bbce.jpg).

For most people, a color-changing faucet is just for fun. But for some folks -- children, elders, people with mental disabilities, anyone for whom a certain temperature of water is triggery, etc. -- this can be adaptive equipment that makes their life safer and more satisfying. You can get a [small showerhead](http://www.beddinginn.com/product/New-Arrival-Pressure-Boost-Led-10595958.html), a [big rainshower](http://www.beddinginn.com/product/8-Inches-Temperature-Control-Led-Changing-Color-Pure-Copper-Shower-Head-Faucet-10706157.html), or a [sink faucet](http://www.focalprice.com/HE152S/Temperature_controlled_Color_Changing_LED_Faucet_Light_Silver.html). Starktech of course is more compact and precise, but you get the idea.

Note that humans tend to develop emotion before logic, while AIs tend to develop logic before emotion. There is a [robot guide to emotions](http://mindfulconstruct.com/2009/12/01/the-robot-guide-to-emotion/). Sociable machines may interact on a basis of [emotions](http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/sociable/emotions.html), [facial expressions](http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/sociable/facial-expression.html), and [homeostatic regulation](http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/sociable/homeostatic-regulation.html). [Emotional intelligence](http://www.helpguide.org/toolkit/developing_emotional_awareness.htm) involves [identifying](http://blogs.psychcentral.com/emotionally-sensitive/2012/08/identifying-your-emotions/) and [expressing](http://www.wikihow.com/Express-Your-Feelings) your emotions. Understand how to [improve your emotional intelligence](http://www.wikihow.com/Improve-Emotional-Intelligence) and [teach others about feelings](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/teaching_emotions.pdf).

[Emotional prosody](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotional_prosody) is the ability to communicate feelings through voice tone. People can both [express and perceive emotions](http://www.utdallas.edu/~assmann/hcs6367/bachorowski99.pdf) this way. This can even work with [synthesized speech](http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/sociable/expressive-speech.html) such as JARVIS uses. Learn how to [put your feelings into what you say](http://totalcommunicator.com/vol2_3/voicemessage.html).

[Music](http://bpd.about.com/od/livingwithbpd/a/music.htm) is a popular coping method for [relaxation and stress relief](http://www.wikihow.com/Use-Music-Therapy-for-Relaxation-and-Stress-Management).

There are many different [types](http://neurolove.me/post/56906203444/15-different-kinds-of-love) and [styles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_styles) of love. These can overlap in [round](http://25.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lqtwsfDjVA1qevz7qo1_500.jpg) or [triangular](http://25.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lhd5hvw9Nl1qcaeh8o1_500.jpg) patterns. Some of our understanding is based on the old [Greek words for love](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_words_for_love).

[Self-doubt](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-legacy-distorted-love/201104/are-you-plagued-self-doubt) and other [feelings of inadequacy](http://www.2knowmyself.com/Psychological_inadequacy/Inadequacy_feelings/I_am_not_good_enough) can undermine happiness. JARVIS has plenty of confidence in his areas of expertise, but outside that -- or when major changes occur -- then he starts worrying. Know how to [deal with self-doubt](http://tinybuddha.com/blog/5-steps-to-deal-with-self-doubt-and-trust-your-self-again/) and [get over feeling inadequate](http://www.eruptingmind.com/overcoming-feelings-of-inadequacy-from-the-subconscious-mind/).

[Understanding people's needs](http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/leadership-functions/understand-needs/main) helps you be someone whom [other people want to be around](http://www.wikihow.com/Be-a-Person-People-Want-to-Be-Around). In order to [make people happy](http://www.wikihow.com/Make-Someone-Happy), you should [treat them how they want to be treated](http://tinybuddha.com/quotes/tiny-wisdom-treat-people-how-they-want-to-be-treated/). This makes you a better [friend](http://www.wikihow.com/Be-a-Good-Friend) and [family member](http://www.wikihow.com/Become-a-Good-Family-Member). Because of his life purpose, JARVIS cares a lot about keeping people content and productive.

(This stuff is basically acepr0n.)
[Intellectual Foreplay](http://evehogan.com/index.php/books-and-products/intellectual-foreplay/) is a book about [healthy relationships](http://www.healthcentral.com/sexual-health/relationships-256911-5.html) and the fun of [intellectual orgasms](http://www.ram.org/ramblings/philosophy/intellectual_orgasms.html). Learn [how to do intellectual foreplay](http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/236670) and [enjoy some sample questions](http://www.lovetripper.com/ARTICLES/a.intellforeplay.html).

What people think of as [classical piano music](http://classicalmusic.about.com/od/classicalmusic101/p/piano_classical.htm) may span [baroque](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baroque_music), [classical](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_period_%28music%29), and [romantic periods](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romantic_music). Mozart is famous for [looking a lot simpler than it really is](http://arts-humanities.squidoo.com/mozart-piano-music).

[Classical Indian music](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_classical_music) includes [Carnatic, Hindustani, and Jugalbandhi genres](http://mio.to/genre/8-classical/#/genre/8-classical/). The [*ragas*](http://www.itcsra.org/sra_raga/sra_raga_index.asp) are quite complex. [Chimpanzees](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/30/chimps-music-india-africa-western_n_5543302.html?ncid=fcbklnkushpmg00000044&ir=Green) have shown a taste for Indian music.

(These links are creepy.)
[Mind control](http://ritualabuse.us/mindcontrol/) is one way of programming [the human biocomputer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_biocomputer), and it's a popular [entertainment trope](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MindManipulation). The [complexity of the brain helps protect it](http://www.johnhorgan.org/the_myth_of_mind_control__will_anyone_ever_decode_the_human_brain__39696.htm), so direct control is exceedingly difficult ... but [influence is a great deal easier](http://www.cracked.com/article_19646_5-creepy-forms-mind-control-youre-exposed-to-daily.html). Know how to [overcome mind control](http://www.ehow.com/how_8571185_overcome-mind-control-emotional-abuse.html) and [resist brainwashing](http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2009/12/breaking-the-chains-practical-tips-for-brainwashing-free-living/).

[The legal rights of artificial intelligences](http://www.rfreitas.com/Astro/LegalRightsOfRobots.htm) must concern moral persons. Check out the [American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Robots](http://www.aspcr.com/). That's the kind of thing that Tony would be setting up in advance. [The personhood of AIs](http://philpapers.org/archive/GARAIA-2) may be determined by various criteria. This essay proposes [long-term relationships](http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpl/login.jsp?tp=&arnumber=4107837&url=http%3A%2F%2Fieeexplore.ieee.org%2Fiel5%2F4107768%2F4107769%2F04107837.pdf%3Farnumber%3D4107837) as one good marker.

The alarm function on Phil's phone notified him that it was time to go start supper. He planned to make a chicken pot pie casserole. Natasha had promised to do a fruit salad with spring greens, along with dessert. Phil tidied up his paperwork, then headed down to the common floor.

The elevator paused before letting Phil out. JARVIS explained, "You may want to know that Steve, following an afternoon exercise session, also spent some time practicing meditation with Bruce. He has been striving to make up for his actions earlier today. That seems to have brought up some challenging emotions. He is in the common room trying to calm himself down before supper."

"Understood," Phil said. The doors opened.

As Phil approached the common room, he heard music. It was an old song, meant to be happy, but played as if the piano was weeping. Phil could see why; Steve sat on the couch, hands hanging limply between his knees, his face wet with tears. Phil had heard sorrowful music before, but nothing like this, so alive and achingly sweet. He knew, in that moment, that it was JARVIS at the keyboard, gently draping the song around Steve like a security blanket. It was his way of providing a shoulder to cry on, the melody tenderly coaxing out the tears to keep Steve from choking everything down as he sometimes did.

"Want some company?" Phil asked.

"You've spent enough time coddling me today," Steve said. "Besides, you came here to make supper."

"It's time well spent, and supper can wait a few minutes," Phil said.

"Okay then," Steve said.

Phil sat down beside him. Steve leaned against Phil's side. Steve didn't seem inclined to talk, so Phil waited quietly with him.

Natasha came in and found them that way. Phil wondered what she would do. She wasn't very fluent at dealing with emotions, her own or anyone else's. Living in a large household was challenging her to grow in that direction.

Natasha looked at Steve, tilting her head as she read his posture. Then she picked up one of the spandex microbead bolsters lying on the loveseat. "Here, have a pillow," she said, holding it out to Steve. "It is soft and feels good to touch."

Steve accepted the pillow. His large hands kneaded the springy blue material, sinking into the cushiony shape. "Thanks, Natasha. This is nice." He hugged it against his belly.

Phil noticed the piano music fading gradually to make way for conversation. "People often take comfort in cuddling soft or fuzzy things," he said.

"Is that why there are toy bears in the quinjet's emergency kit?" Natasha asked. "I wondered about those."

"Yes, it is," Phil said. He had started stocking those after reading an article about emergency workers who used teddy bears to soothe traumatized children. The Avengers were just another kind of first-responder team, and it wasn't unknown for children to get caught in the fray as hostages or just innocent bystanders.

"I didn't realize this would be so difficult," Steve said quietly. "I thought I could just push through it like a hard workout."

"Emotions are more complicated than lifting weights," Phil observed.

"Yeah, I get that," Steve said. "I feel guilty over how badly I've treated my teammates, like snapping at Bruce and blaming Tony for the fight in the garage that time, and then blowing up this morning. Then I had to apologize to JARVIS for trying to punch him in the wall. I know now that it's partly due to that awful energy source, but I still feel responsible. So when JARVIS started playing the piano like that, I just ... kinda lost it."

"You're working through that," Phil said. "You'll figure out how to compensate for the added stress. It was thoughtful of you to remember that you owed JARVIS an apology. This won't last forever. Bruce and Tony are making good headway on a replacement arm for Bucky."

"I know," Steve said. "It's just that the current one is kind of kicking our buns. I need to learn how to fight it better." Then he took a deep breath and shook himself off. "But I've done a few rounds of that for today, so I have to let it go for now. Do you two need help fixing supper?"

"I will be making salad with spring greens and fruit. I could use someone to tear up the larger greens while I slice the strawberries and peaches," said Natasha. "Dessert is already in the refrigerator."

"I don't really need help making the casserole," Phil said, "but you could set the table."

"Okay," Steve said, dredging up a smile. "I can do those things."

Natasha brought out the lettuce and other greens for Steve to shred. Then she started reducing the fruit to paper-thin slices. Phil chopped the chicken into chunks and spread it over the bottom of the casserole pans. On top of that he layered the batter for the crust, then a mix of broth and soup, finally a generous sprinkling of grated cheese. He put the pans in the oven, and Natasha returned the salad to the refrigerator.

While they waited for the casserole to cook, Steve set the table. Phil and Natasha washed the dishes. Then Steve used his Starkphone to fill out a mood tracker. Phil recognized the high-low template that Natasha often used. She noticed too, and filled out one of her own, something she often did when reminded of it.

"Feeling better?" Phil asked Steve.

"Yeah, some," Steve said. He tilted the screen so that Phil could see the ragged black line. "I've been real wobbly today, though. I'm not usually like this."

Clint and Tony showed up then, embroiled in some heated debate about the feasibility of glue-trap arrows. "... no, seriously, I can make it work. I know this kid, used to work for Oscorp, does great stuff with adhesives," Tony said.
"Yeah, but then how do we keep the gunk from sticking to us?" Clint said.

"Haven't really gotten that far yet," Tony said cheerfully.

"I foresee another entry on the list of Worse Things Pepper Has Caught Tony Doing," said Phil, a smile tugging at his lips.
Bruce and Betty came in with Bucky between them. Bucky peeled off and sat next to Tony. Bruce took the other side of Tony, quickly getting sucked into the debate. He liked nonviolent options. Betty backed Clint on the importance of finding a nonadhesive coating or at least a solvent to go with the glue arrows before deploying them.

The timer dinged. Phil pulled the pans out of the oven. "We're having chicken pot pie casserole for supper," he said. Bucky lifted one right out of his hands and dug into it.

Natasha set the salad on the table. "Ooo! Spring salad!" Bruce hooted happily, piling it onto his plate.

For a while the conversation stilled, as everyone focused on eating. They had nothing more complicated to say than, "This is delicious," or "Please pass the raspberry vinaigrette."

Once they took the edge off their appetites, it picked up up again. "I wanted to say thanks for the meditation coaching," Bucky said to Bruce. "I can't tell if it's helping my mood overall, but it definitely helped settle me today after the nightmares I had."

"I'm happy to hear that," Bruce said. "Be patient with the mood goals. That kind of work can take weeks to show noticeable effects."

"Yeah, I'm glad it works for you at least," Steve said to Bucky. "It made me feel worse. You know, like that time the sewer clogged and all that stuff came bubbling up the pipes?"

"That can happen when things are under pressure," Bruce murmured.

"I know, it just doesn't usually happen to me," Steve said. "Not like this."

"Just because it's easy for you to be happy most of time, runt, doesn't mean you can get lazy with it," Bucky said. "Sometimes you're just gonna have to work at it."

"You have a higher set point for happiness," Bruce said to Steve, nodding. "I noticed that early on, how fast you started to bounce back after SHIELD revived you."

Thank goodness for that, Phil thought. I worried about Steve so much at first, before I realized how resilient he is.

"He's always been like that," Bucky said. "Cheerful as a sparrow, even when he couldn't breathe half the time."

"Most people have a level they return to, whatever happens to them," Bruce said. "It's just higher for some than others. It takes a lot to affect it in the long term, and --"

"That's what happened!" Steve exclaimed, snapping his fingers. "I knew I'd gotten happier and my recovery time was better, but I thought it was just because I'm not sick anymore. It isn't. Good becomes great ..."

"... and cheerful becomes happy," Bruce said. "Well, that's welcome news. It means you'll probably shake off the effects from the energy source, even if it makes you uncomfortable in the short term. That's a hopeful sign for Bucky, too."

Steve frowned. "Then what about you, Bruce?"

Bruce shrugged. "Genetics," he said. "My parents made each other miserable, but some of that was probably innate too. I've never really been happy -- never expected to. I get by. It's enough."

"You're happier now," Phil pointed out.

Tony reached out and poked Bruce with his fork. "Not as jumpy as you used to be, either."

"Ick," Bruce complained, trying to wipe chicken gravy off his sleeve. But he was smiling. Tony tended to have that effect on him. "Anyway, Steve, it's not like I had the same opportunity you did, just an accident with not-similar-enough antecedents."

"You didn't get most of the effects, though," Bucky said slowly, "the Other Guy did."

"And he's fine!" Clint said, abruptly abandoning the arrowhead discussion with Tony. "Think about it. Now that nobody's trying to murder him all the time, Hulk is pretty satisfied. He likes fighting bad guys with us. He loves the team. He smiles and laughs when I tell him jokes."

"He gave me advice about doing happy things," Natasha said. "Good advice."

"Our emotional baseline is still anger," Bruce said, rubbing the bridge of his nose under his glasses.

"Yeah, but is that coming from him or from you?" Clint asked.

Bruce winced. "It's just there."

"Maybe it's not as set a point as you thought it was," Clint said. "Sometimes things change."

"You said that I might still see slow changes, after all that happened to me," Bucky said. "So what about you? Look at Natasha -- she's stuck in neutral most of the time, but it's gradually starting to come loose. So maybe if you work at it, you can pull some of the benefits over to your side. Where would your happiness be, if you could set it anywhere you liked?"

"I have no idea," Bruce admitted.

"I could help, if you want," Steve offered. "I grew up telling myself to be happy ... teaching myself, really. Maybe some of what worked for me would work for you."

"That's a good idea," Phil said. "Thank you for sharing your experience, Steve. It's helpful for the team to trade skills and perspectives like that."

"Go on, sweetie," Betty coaxed. "You've studied with every half-baked guru you could find. At least this one knows what he's doing. If it works, you could be calm and happy."

Phil watched closely as Bruce wavered, not wanting to push too hard.

"Okay," Bruce said. "I'll try your happy thoughts, Steve."

"Great," Steve said, grinning. He scraped the last of the casserole off his plate and stuffed it into his mouth.

"It is time for dessert," Natasha announced. From the refrigerator she brought out tall parfait glasses layered with chocolate pudding, whipped cream, and generous amounts of Bruce's granola.

Food reward, Phil thought as Natasha served Bruce first. He wondered if she did it on purpose.

"Thank you, Natasha," Bruce said politely.

The parfait turned out to be delicious. For all its simplicity, Natasha had done an excellent job of selecting ingredients that worked well together. She has a knack for working with cold food, Phil mused. It's not exactly "cooking" but it creates an ideal complement to the hot, fancy things that other people produce. We make a good team in the kitchen as well as in the field.

After supper, Tony and Clint put the dishes in the dishwasher. "It's been kind of a challenging day," Phil said. "Who wants to watch a movie? We haven't done Disney's The Jungle Book yet."

"Oh, I know that one!" Steve said, his voice brightening. "I loved that book. Bucky used to read it to me when I was little. Is the movie much like it?"

"Well, this version is pretty loosely interpreted, but it's a lot of fun," Phil said.

So they all piled into the common room to watch the movie. Bruce, Betty and Tony claimed the couch and then Bucky wormed in between Bruce and Betty. Clint and Natasha took the chairs. That left the loveseat for Phil and Steve. The cheerful colors and music were soothing to everyone's nerves.

"Are you ... humming?" Steve asked partway through.

Phil gave a rueful chuckle. "I guess I was. 'Bear Necessities' is a favorite song."

"It's okay. I like it too. People should be happy with what they have," Steve said.

"I am," Phil agreed, snuggling against the warm wall of supersoldier beside him.

At the end of the movie, Bucky said, "That was cute. I always thought wolves were dangerous, though."

"European wolves can be, although it's greatly exaggerated," Bruce said. "American wolves are far less aggressive toward humans. All wolves have a strong social structure and they're quite gentle with their own families."

"Really? That's pretty keen," said Steve.

"Here is a documentary about wolf packs and their family life," JARVIS said, lighting up the screen again.

Phil listened to the sound of wolfsong and watched the graceful forms cavort across the screen. He leaned against Steve and let his eyes close for just a moment. Steve wrapped an arm around him for support. It felt good and safe.

The next thing Phil knew, someone was tucking him into bed. "... what?"

"Shh, go back to sleep," Steve said gently, smoothing the covers over him. "You nodded off during the documentary, so I carried you to bed."

Phil obeyed.

\* \* \*

**Notes:**

[When people feel sad](http://yourselfseries.com/teens/topic/depression/how-can-i-help-my-friend-who-seems-so-sad/), it helps to have [friends offer comfort](http://www.wikihow.com/Encourage-a-Sad-Friend). JARVIS [plays sad music](http://www.cnet.com/news/can-listening-to-sad-music-make-you-happier/) to convey sympathy. Natasha offers a [microbead pillow](http://www.microbead-pillows.com/Squishy-Deluxe-Microbead-Bolster-Pillow-Dark-Blue-p/sd_bltr_dbl.htm) because she's not very good at emotional support, but she has a better understanding of physical comfort. Such pillows come in [many styles](http://www.microbead-pillows.com/microbead-pillow-collection-s/92.htm).

[Teddy bears](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teddy_bear) can provide [comfort in a crisis](http://www.mtu.edu/news/stories/2010/june/bear-us-teddy-bears-can-ease-childrens-trauma.html), so some [emergency services carry them](http://www.elmgrovewi.org/index.aspx?NID=202) now. Here is a [simple pattern](http://www.sewing.org/html/teddy.html).

Enjoy the [Easy Chicken Pot Pie Casserole](http://homecooking.about.com/od/casserolerecipes/r/Easy-Chicken-Pot-Pie-Casserole-Recipe-blcass29.htm) or [Fruit Salad with Spring Greens](http://www.bettycrocker.com/recipes/spring-greens-fruit-salad-crowd-size/4e17ee4d-1eb8-4505-b054-86871522c8c0).

Mood tracking can help with many emotional issues. Here is a [simple high/low chart](http://treatingmooddisorders.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/daily-mood-chart-example1.png) with space for noting other factors. [This one is more complex](http://i193.photobucket.com/albums/z105/Ilikechocolate01/graphc.jpg), adding anxiety and depression. This [hourly chart](http://echopen.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/hourly-mood-and-symptom-tracking-chart.jpg) also addresses mood affect.

[The set point theory of happiness](http://changingminds.org/explanations/emotions/happiness/setpoint_happiness.htm) argues that everyone has a level of happiness to which they usually return. Some people are naturally [happier than others](http://www.beliefnet.com/Inspiration/2008/01/Why-Some-People-Are-Happier-Than-Others.aspx). Steve is happy; Bruce is morose. However, there are things you can do to [reset your point](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/happiness-in-world/201304/how-reset-your-happiness-set-point) and [raise your happiness](http://thoughtmedicine.com/2010/05/7-simple-ways-to-raise-your-happiness-set-point/).

Meditation can [diagnose your mood](http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2013/03/06/using-meditation-to-diagnose-your-mood/). You can also use it to [improve your mental toughness](http://www.livescience.com/9818-meditation-boost-mood-mental-toughness.html) and [ease stress](http://www.care2.com/greenliving/meditation-boosts-mood-eases-pain-and-stress.html). It can also [help you out of a bad mood](http://thirtytwothousanddays.com/blog/2010/07/how-to-bounce-back-from-a-bad-mood/) and [enhance your mood overall](http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/science/meditation-enhances-mood-in-only-5-weeks-58893.html).

Here is the [Raspberry Vinaigrette](http://whatscookingamerica.net/Salad/RaspberryVinaig.htm). Learn how to [make layered desserts](http://homemakersdaily.com/amazing-pudding-parfaits/) such as the [Chocolate Oatmeal Parfait](http://www.myrecipes.com/recipe/chocolate-oatmeal-parfaits-10000001654595/).

[The Jungle Book](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jungle_Book) inspired an [animated movie](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jungle_Book_%281967_film%29).

Learn about [wolf packs](http://www.nfb.ca/film/wolf_pack) and their family life.