



Equipping Leaders

A Leader's Guide to Building Resilient Airmen Through Reintegration



BRIDGECHAT

DISCUSSION GUIDE

In the fog of war, where chaos prevails, **be their lighthouse**. Returning from a demanding deployment is a **transition, not just an arrival**. Your steady, confident presence sets the tone for recovery and readiness – and it begins with leading yourself.

PROVIDE STABILITY, DIRECTION AND CONFIDENCE

STABILITY

Be the Anchor

- ★ Be visible and present.
- ★ Communicate clearly and effectively.

DIRECTION

Be the Compass

- ★ Be decisive – stress impairs decision-making.
- ★ Be a credible, reliable source of information.
- ★ Establish a way forward, cut through the chaos.
- ★ Direct energy toward purposeful short-term goals.

CONFIDENCE

Be the Lighthouse

- ★ Lead with a positive “we can do this” message.
- ★ Celebrate pride in your Airmen – they completed the mission!

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-LEADERSHIP

- ✓ **Self-Awareness:** Know your strengths, weaknesses, values, and experiences. Your beliefs and experiences matter – trauma, past deployments, asking for help.
 - ✓ **Self-Regulation:** Manage emotions, behaviors, and thoughts to align with long-term goals. Tools: *journaling, deep breathing, thought reframing*.
- Self-Motivation:** Cultivate personal and professional drive without external motivators.

Long-term goal: Foster resilient Airmen who can bounce back from adversity.

BEWARE THE EMOTIONAL CONTAGION EFFECT

Emotions spread through unconscious mimicry – our first form of communication. As **emotional amplifiers**, leaders profoundly shape the team's climate. To manage it:

- ✓ Model calmness, empathy, and optimism.
- ✓ Manage rumors – communicate transparently.
- ✓ Guard against “Us vs. Them” – foster inclusivity.
- ✓ Avoid blame – focus on solutions, not fault.
- ✓ Prioritize leader self-care – prevent burnout.

TWO PRACTICAL SKILLS FOR YOU AND YOUR AIRMEN

iSPARK – lead emotional contagion on purpose

Emotional contagion happens whether you want it to or not. **iSPARK** helps you use it to meet your goals:

- I** – Identify your own emotions
- S** – Start with the feelings you want
- P** – Position your body (posture and facial expression)
- A** – Adjust your speech
- R** – Recognize the feelings your team is having
- K** – Keep yourself on track (shift gears if needed)

5, 5, 5 – put setbacks in perspective

When something goes wrong, ask: **How will I feel about this in 5 weeks? 5 years?** In 5 weeks you likely won't think of it as often; in 5 months, even less; in 5 years, you may not remember it at all. Great for a tasking change, a mistake, or an interpersonal conflict – share it with your team and family.

FOSTERING POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

The positive psychological transformation that can follow trauma:

- ✓ Increased sense of personal strength and fortitude.
- ✓ Stronger, more meaningful relationships.
- ✓ Greater desire to advocate for and mentor others.
- ✓ A deeper appreciation for life.

Believe in the human's innate ability to recover.

- The average person experiences **3-4 traumas** in a lifetime.
- Only **10-20%** of those with severe trauma develop PTSD.
- **Avoid pathologizing** normal reactions to trauma.

Supporting the Transition Home

What to Expect, the Healing Timeframe, When to Reach Out, and Resources

Airmen carry home hard-won strengths and natural readjustment reactions. The goal isn't to "fix" anyone – it's to **support a natural process and know when to connect someone to more help.**

WHAT'S NORMAL TO EXPECT EARLY ON

Most reactions in the first weeks are **common, expected, and temporary.** Reassure Airmen these do not mean something is wrong with them.

Thoughts	Emotions	Actions/Behaviors
"It's hard to slow down."	Irritability or being on edge	Trouble sleeping or relaxing
"Home feels different."	Feeling distant or detached	Avoiding crowds or noise
Difficulty concentrating	Worry, sadness, restlessness	Easily startled/staying alert
Replaying deployment events	Feeling keyed-up or numb	Pulling back from family/social time

Leader Talking Point: "These reactions reflect how big the experience was – not weakness. Most people find they ease with time, routine, and support."

THE NATURAL HEALING TIMEFRAME

Recovery is **gradual and uneven** – expect good days and harder days. As routine, rest, and connection return, most reactions naturally decrease over the **first several weeks to a few months.**

- ✓ Aim for "more good days than bad days" over time.
- ✓ Setbacks around reminders or stress are normal.
- ✓ Encourage patience, sleep, self-care, and reconnection.

Early stages of healing: Talking with trusted friends or family is often the best "medicine." Caution against **premature clinical intervention** – pushing to clinical resources too soon can disrupt natural healing.

WHEN TO REACH OUT FOR MORE SUPPORT

Encourage professional help when reactions **significantly impact daily life and are NOT improving** (or worsening) after several weeks:

- ✓ Reactions that intensify rather than ease.
- ✓ Withdrawal, hopelessness, persistent sadness.
- ✓ Increased alcohol or substance use to cope.
- ✓ Trouble functioning at home, work, or with family.
- ✓ **Any thoughts of self-harm – act immediately.**

RESOURCES

☎ **Military/Veterans Crisis Line:** Dial 988, then Press 1 | Text 838255

☎ **Military OneSource:** 1-800-342-9647 (free, confidential, 24/7)

☎ **Chaplains & Mental Health** within your wing/squadron

☎ **Military & Family Readiness Center** and embedded support
Reaching out is a sign of strength and good leadership of self.

STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE GAINED THROUGH DEPLOYMENT

This deployment didn't just present challenges – it **built capabilities.** Acknowledge and celebrate the growth your Airmen bring home:

- ✓ Proven ability to perform under pressure and adapt to change.
- ✓ Deepened teamwork, trust, and reliance on one another.
- ✓ Strengthened problem-solving, confidence, and self-discipline.
- ✓ Greater perspective, maturity, and appreciation for what matters.

Leader Talking Point: "You've handled hard things and grown from them. That same resilience is exactly what will carry you through this transition – and we're here with you."