

**Basic Conflict Management Skills for Dysregulated Adults:
A Trauma-Informed, DBT-Integrated Curriculum for the Tiny House Village**

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Abstract

This paper develops a basic conflict management framework for adults whose emotion regulation capacities have been compromised by trauma, chronic stress, housing instability, and adverse early relational experiences. Drawing on a four-session curriculum delivered at the Tiny House Village in Oshkosh, Wisconsin — a transitional housing community serving residents at risk of or recovering from homelessness — together with a supplementary Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) life skills module, the paper argues that conventional conflict resolution training presumes a regulated nervous system the dysregulated learner does not have. The curriculum therefore inverts the usual sequence: awareness and physiological regulation are taught first, restorative thinking second, communication structures third, and feedback skills fourth, with crisis tolerance and interpersonal effectiveness running through the whole. The paper integrates Linehan's biosocial theory and DBT skill modules (Linehan, 1993, 2015), Siegel's window of tolerance and polyvagal theory (Porges, 2011; Siegel, 2012), Bowlby and Johnson's attachment framework (Bowlby, 1988; Johnson, 2004), Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson's Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes et al., 2012), the Thomas-Kilmann conflict modes (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974), Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg, 2003), Kahneman's (2011) dual-process model, the transformative-mediation tradition (Bush & Folger, 2005; Mayer, 2000), and restorative practice (Zehr, 2002). The paper concludes that for the dysregulated learner, conflict resolution is not first a verbal skill but a regulatory one — and that the verbal skills depend on the regulatory ones in an order conventional curricula often obscure. The four-session model and its DBT extension offer a teachable, replicable scaffolding for that work.

Keywords: conflict resolution, dysregulation, trauma-informed, DBT, attachment, window of tolerance, restorative practice, homelessness, transitional housing

Basic Conflict Management Skills for Dysregulated Adults:

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Most adult conflict resolution curricula assume a learner whose nervous system can be reached. They teach "I" statements, active listening, perspective-taking, and interest-based negotiation as if the learner, in the heat of a disagreement, can pause, think, choose, and speak. For many adults, this assumption is reasonable. For adults whose emotional regulation capacities have been compromised by trauma, chronic stress, housing instability, and adverse early relational experiences, the assumption breaks down precisely at the moment the skills are most needed. The body fires before the mind catches up. The voice rises before the breath slows. The conversation ends before the structured statement can be delivered. The conventional curriculum, in such cases, becomes a set of artifacts the learner has memorized but cannot reach.

This paper develops a basic conflict management framework explicitly designed for that population. The framework emerged from a four-session conflict resolution skills series delivered with my wife, Mellisa, at the Tiny House Village in Oshkosh, Wisconsin — a transitional housing community for adults at risk of, or recovering from, homelessness, operated under the Oshkosh Kids Foundation. A supplementary life skills session, anchored in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), was developed to address a recurring participant report: the felt impossibility of stopping a conflict mid-stream when the urge to "say everything" became overwhelming. Together, these five components constitute a working curriculum and a working theory — that for the dysregulated learner, conflict resolution is not first a verbal skill but a regulatory one, and that the verbal skills depend on the regulatory ones in a way that conventional curricula often obscure.

The paper proceeds in seven movements. It begins with the population — who the learners are, what they bring to the room, and why conventional curricula are not built for them. It then develops the theoretical foundations of the framework: the biosocial theory of emotion dysregulation, the window of tolerance and polyvagal theory, attachment theory, the dual-process model of cognition, and the conflict-style and conflict-transformation traditions. The paper then walks through the four-session curriculum: Boundaries and Restorative Thinking; Conflict Triggers and Attachment; De-Escalation and Boundaries; and Feedback and Moving Forward. A fifth section addresses the supplementary DBT life skills module — a ten-skill toolbox built around crisis tolerance, emotion understanding, and interpersonal connection. A sixth section takes up the pedagogy: what teaching this material to dysregulated adults actually requires. The paper closes with integration and discussion.

The argument is straightforward but, in my experience, easy to forget. For the dysregulated learner, conflict management skills are not techniques to be memorized; they are capacities to be built. The capacities are built in a particular order — awareness before regulation, regulation before assertion, assertion before feedback — and the order matters because each capacity depends on the one before it. A curriculum that teaches the techniques without building the capacities will produce learners who can recite the skills but cannot use them. A curriculum that builds the capacities will produce learners who, over time, can use the skills even when their nervous system is not cooperating. The Tiny House Village curriculum is an attempt to build the capacities.

The Population and the Need

Who the Learners Are

The Tiny House Village in Oshkosh is a transitional housing community for adults at risk of, or actively recovering from, homelessness. The Village operates as a closely-knit shared living environment: residents have their own small homes but share community space, common rules, and the daily proximity of neighbors. The population is heterogeneous in age, background, and trajectory. What its members tend to share is a relational and developmental history that has shaped the nervous system in particular ways. Many have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) at rates substantially above the general population (Felitti et al., 1998). Many carry diagnoses or undiagnosed patterns consistent with post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, substance use, or complex trauma. Many have histories of relational instability — disrupted attachments, foster care, intimate partner violence, incarceration, family estrangement. Many have spent significant periods of life in environments where conflict was either explosive or punished, with little exposure to the middle ground in which conflict is normal, productive, and repairable.

This relational history is not incidental to the work. It is the work. Linehan's (1993) biosocial theory describes how adults with chronic emotion regulation difficulties typically experience two things across development: a temperamental sensitivity to emotional stimuli, and an invalidating environment that systematically dismisses, minimizes, or punishes emotional expression. When those two conditions transact across years, the result is an adult who responds to emotional stimuli with disproportionate intensity, returns to baseline slowly, and lacks the internal language for what they are feeling and what they need. The Tiny House Village population is, in many cases, the adult version of that developmental trajectory. The point is not to pathologize. It is to recognize that the learners arriving in the room are not blank slates; they

are nervous systems that have been organized by their histories, and any conflict management curriculum has to begin from that fact.

Why Conventional Curricula Are Insufficient

Most adult conflict resolution curricula are descendants of two parallel traditions. The negotiation tradition, exemplified by Fisher and Ury's (2011) *Getting to Yes*, emphasizes separating people from problems, focusing on interests rather than positions, and inventing options for mutual gain. The interpersonal effectiveness tradition, exemplified by assertiveness training and "I" statement protocols developed in the human-potential and behavioral-skill movements of the 1970s and 1980s, emphasizes calm, direct expression of needs. Both traditions are valuable. Both presume a learner who, in the moment of conflict, has cognitive bandwidth available — who can think, calibrate, choose words, and modulate tone in real time.

For the dysregulated learner, that presumption fails at exactly the moment of need. Kahneman (2011) distinguishes between System 1 and System 2 cognition: System 1 is fast, automatic, and emotional; System 2 is slow, deliberate, and effortful. The conventional curriculum is, in effect, a System 2 curriculum. It teaches the learner what to do when their thinking brain is online. But the thinking brain is the first thing to go offline when arousal exceeds the window of tolerance (Siegel, 2012). In hyperarousal, the amygdala dominates and prefrontal processing becomes intermittent. In hypoarousal, the system collapses into freeze or dissociation, and processing becomes equally inaccessible. Outside the window, neither the negotiation script nor the "I" statement formula is reachable, no matter how well the learner has memorized them.

What the dysregulated learner needs, then, is not more System 2 technique. It is the capacity to recognize when they are leaving the window, to bring themselves back, and only then

to reach for the verbal skill. The curriculum described in this paper inverts the usual sequence accordingly. It begins with awareness — of conflict styles, of the body, of triggers, of attachment patterns. It builds physiological regulation skills next — breath, pause, posture, grounding. Only then does it introduce the conventional verbal skills — "I" statements, boundary language, de-escalation phrasing. And it closes with the most cognitively demanding skill of all — giving and receiving feedback. The order matters.

The Setting Constrains and Enables the Work

The shared-living context of the Tiny House Village shapes the curriculum in two ways. First, it constrains the kinds of conflicts the curriculum must address. The relevant disputes are not abstract: they are the disputes of close quarters — noise, schedules, shared kitchens, parenting overlap, money, privacy. Second, it enables a kind of practice that classroom-based training cannot. The same residents see each other daily. A skill rehearsed on Wednesday evening will encounter its first real test by Thursday morning. This proximity is itself a kind of pressure, but it is also a kind of opportunity. Restorative practice (Zehr, 2002) takes its full meaning where the parties have to keep living with one another. The Village is exactly that setting.

Theoretical Foundations

The curriculum integrates five overlapping theoretical strands. Each contributes a distinct capacity. Each is incomplete without the others. Together they constitute the framework within which the four sessions and the DBT module are designed.

The Biosocial Theory of Emotion Dysregulation

Linehan's (1993) biosocial theory holds that chronic emotion dysregulation emerges from a transactional relationship between biological vulnerability and environmental invalidation.

Biologically, certain individuals are born with heightened emotional sensitivity — they react more quickly, more intensely, and return to baseline more slowly than peers. When this temperament develops within an invalidating environment — one in which the child's emotional experiences are systematically dismissed, minimized, or punished — the result is a failure to develop adequate emotion regulation skills. The child learns neither to trust their own emotional responses nor to tolerate distress effectively. The adult who emerges from this transaction is characterized by emotional lability, identity confusion, impulsivity, and interpersonal instability (Linehan, 1993).

The biosocial theory matters for conflict management curriculum design in two ways. First, it locates the dysregulation outside the moral domain. The learner is not failing to use the skills because they are weak, undisciplined, or unwilling. They are failing because the developmental conditions that build emotion regulation skill did not happen for them. This reframe — from character to capacity — is itself an intervention. It interrupts the shame spiral in which the learner attributes their reactivity to a flaw in who they are. Second, the biosocial theory specifies what the curriculum must build: the very capacities the developmental environment did not build. Identification of emotional states. Tolerance of distress. Trust in the validity of one's own emotional experience. These are the building blocks of conflict skill, and they are exactly the things the conventional curriculum assumes the learner already has.

The Window of Tolerance and Polyvagal Theory

Siegel's (2012) window of tolerance describes the range of arousal in which integrated cortical processing remains available. Inside the window, the learner can think, feel, and respond flexibly. Outside the window — in hyperarousal (sympathetic activation) or hypoarousal (dorsal vagal collapse) — integration breaks down. The amygdala dominates in hyperarousal; the system

shuts down in hypoarousal; in either case the prefrontal cortex, which conventional conflict skills depend on, becomes intermittently or fully unavailable.

Porges' (2011) polyvagal theory adds the underlying physiology. The autonomic nervous system operates in three states: ventral vagal (social engagement, safety, connection), sympathetic (mobilization, fight-or-flight), and dorsal vagal (shutdown, freeze, collapse). Each state has a distinct relational signature. Ventral vagal activation supports the open posture, eye contact, prosodic voice, and turn-taking that conflict resolution actually depends on. Sympathetic activation produces the raised voice, the clenched jaw, the tunnel vision. Dorsal vagal activation produces the flat affect, the dissociation, the "checked out" silence. These states are not chosen; they are evoked. Trauma-affected adults have nervous systems calibrated to evoke sympathetic and dorsal responses readily, and ventral responses only with care.

For the curriculum, this framework dictates two things. First, the verbal skills must be sequenced after the regulatory skills. Asking a learner in sympathetic activation to deliver a structured "I" statement is asking them to do something their physiology has temporarily made impossible. Second, the regulatory skills themselves must be physiological, not cognitive. Cold water, paced breathing, paired muscle relaxation, intense brief exercise — these work because they reach the nervous system through a route that does not depend on the thinking brain (Linehan, 2015). The DBT TIPP skill, discussed in Section V, is precisely this kind of intervention.

Attachment Theory

Bowlby's (1969, 1988) attachment theory holds that early caregiving relationships shape the internal working model the adult brings to all subsequent close relationships. Secure attachment develops when caregivers are consistently available, responsive, and attuned.

Insecure attachment — anxious, avoidant, or disorganized — develops when caregivers are inconsistent, dismissive, or frightening. The internal working model is not a conscious belief; it is a set of nervous-system expectations about what other people will do under stress. It runs in the background of every adult interaction, especially conflictual ones.

Johnson's (2004) Emotionally Focused Therapy extends this framework into adult intimate and close relationships. Conflict, Johnson argues, is rarely about the surface issue. Beneath the dishes-in-the-sink fight is an attachment cry: Are you there for me? Do I matter to you? Will you leave me? Can I count on you? These primary attachment concerns drive the secondary protest behaviors that conflict-resolution curricula see and try to address. Treating the behaviors without naming the underlying cries leaves the conflict intact even after the verbal exchange has been managed.

The Tiny House Village population is, on average, an insecurely attached population. Many have histories of disrupted caregiving. Many have lived through romantic relationships that recapitulated those disruptions. The curriculum incorporates attachment language explicitly in Session 2 — not in clinical terms but in plain language: the brain keeps score; reactions are protective; patterns make sense; connection can heal. The framing is hopeful but accurate: attachment patterns are learned, and they can be updated, slowly, by repeated experience of safe relationship. The Village itself, at its best, becomes that experience.

The Dual-Process Model

Kahneman's (2011) dual-process model provides the cognitive grammar the curriculum borrows. System 1 — fast, automatic, intuitive, emotional — runs the moment-to-moment perception of conflict. System 2 — slow, deliberate, effortful — is what the curriculum is trying to make accessible. The trigger chain — Event → Belief → Emotion → Behavior — taught in

Session 2 is, in effect, a method for inserting System 2 between Event and Behavior. The Belief stage is where System 2 can intervene most powerfully. If the learner can pause long enough to ask "is the story I am telling myself the only possible story?" — they have used System 2 to interrupt a System 1 cascade.

This is also where Acceptance and Commitment Therapy's (ACT) cognitive defusion technique becomes useful (Hayes et al., 2012). Defusion loosens the literal grip of thoughts so they can be observed rather than obeyed. For the dysregulated learner, the thought "they don't respect me" arrives with the force of a fact. Defusion teaches the learner to notice the thought as a thought, not as the territory. The thought is a System 1 product. It need not be acted on. The capacity to notice this is the capacity the curriculum is trying to build.

Conflict Style and Conflict Transformation Traditions

Two traditions provide the conflict-specific vocabulary the curriculum uses. The conflict style tradition, traced to Thomas and Kilmann's (1974) Conflict Mode Instrument, holds that individuals develop characteristic ways of responding to conflict — competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, or compromising. Session 1 of the curriculum adapts this framework into four lay-accessible styles: Avoid, React, Accommodate, and Assert. The pedagogical purpose is not labeling but awareness. The learner who can see their own default style has, by that act, created a small gap between style and choice. In that gap, change becomes possible.

The conflict transformation tradition, developed by Lederach (2003), Mayer (2000), Bush and Folger (2005), and Cloke (2001), reframes conflict away from settlement and toward growth, recognition, and relational change. Mayer (2000) argues that mediators must understand fear, anger, identity, grief, and power dynamics, not just positions and interests. Bush and Folger's (2005) transformative mediation centers empowerment and recognition rather than agreement.

Cloke (2001) views conflict as opportunity for transformation rather than as problem to be removed. For the Tiny House Village population, this framing is essential. Many of the participants have lived in conflict for years; they cannot afford to treat conflict as an exceptional disturbance. They need a framework in which conflict is an ongoing feature of close life and skill is what makes it productive rather than destructive.

Restorative Practice

Zehr's (2002) restorative justice tradition provides the relational ethic the curriculum closes around. Restorative practice asks three questions when harm has occurred: Who was affected? What do they need? What is my role in making things right? These are different questions from the punitive tradition, which asks: What rule was broken? Who broke it? What punishment do they deserve? In a small shared-living community, the punitive logic is unworkable. People cannot punish each other and continue to share a kitchen. Restorative logic — accountability without shame, repair rather than punishment, ongoing relationship rather than expulsion — is the only logic that fits the setting. Session 1 of the curriculum introduces this frame explicitly, drawing the distinction between shame ("I am a bad person") and accountability ("I did something I can own"). The distinction is borrowed in spirit from Brown's (2012) work on shame resilience, but the underlying ethic is Zehr's.

Session One: Boundaries, Awareness, and Restorative Thinking

Session 1 establishes the conceptual frame of the entire series. It opens by normalizing conflict — "conflict isn't the problem; how we handle it is what matters" — and then introduces three foundational concepts: boundaries, conflict style, and restorative thinking. The session ends with the distinction between needs and positions, drawn from the Fisher and Ury (2011) negotiation tradition. The pedagogical logic is to move from outside in: from the normalization

of conflict, through structural awareness (what boundaries are, what they protect), into self-awareness (what your conflict style is, what shaped it), and finally into a frame for action (the distinction between what you say and what you actually need).

Reframing Conflict as Normal

The session opens with what is, for some participants, a quietly radical claim: "conflict doesn't mean something is wrong. It means people care enough to speak up." Many of the participants have lived in environments where conflict meant danger — physical violence, verbal abuse, abandonment, or the unpredictable rage of an unstable caregiver. The associative learning is that conflict equals threat. The session aims to interrupt that learning, not by denying the threats the participants have lived through, but by introducing a different category: conflict as information. Conflict, in the framework offered, is a signal that something needs attention. Whether the conflict becomes productive or destructive depends not on whether it happens but on what we do with it.

This reframe matters more for the dysregulated population than for any other audience. The conventional curriculum can take the normalization for granted because most adults have, somewhere in their experience, encountered conflict that was handled well. The Tiny House Village population often has not. The session has to do work that for other audiences is a given.

Boundaries and Responsibility

The boundaries section defines a boundary as "a line that defines what is okay and what is not okay for you." It distinguishes boundaries from walls (boundaries are guidelines for healthy relationships, not exclusion devices) and from punishment (a boundary is an act of self-respect, not a tool to control others). It introduces four boundary domains — emotional, physical, time, and communication — and illustrates each with simple example language.

The framing matters. For learners with anxious attachment patterns, the word "boundary" can land as rejection, as the thing other people erect to keep them out. The session reframes boundaries from rejection-language to self-respect-language. For learners with avoidant attachment patterns, boundaries can land as confrontation, as the thing they have learned to avoid at all costs. The session reframes boundaries from confrontation-language to clarity-language: when I know your boundaries, I know how to treat you well. Both reframings are necessary. The skill of articulating a boundary is downstream of the framework that makes the boundary feel like protection rather than aggression.

Knowing Yourself in Conflict

Session 1's third movement introduces the four conflict styles adapted from Thomas and Kilmann (1974). The session uses lay terminology — Avoid, React, Accommodate, Assert — and provides a self-assessment handout in which participants rate themselves across five everyday scenarios. The session takes care to frame the styles non-judgmentally. Each style has a strength: Avoid protects, React is honest, Accommodate values harmony, Assert is the skill the series is building toward. Each style has a watch-out: Avoid lets problems grow, React damages relationships, Accommodate breeds resentment, Assert takes energy the learner may not always have.

The point of the assessment is not to label the participant but to create a small gap between automatic behavior and reflective awareness. Most adults, when asked, can identify their default style readily. The act of identifying it is itself a System 2 act — the learner has, in that moment, stepped outside System 1 long enough to see it. The session closes by naming the factors that shape conflict style: personality, values and beliefs, stress and circumstances, past

experiences. The closing line — "Awareness is the first step. You can't change what you don't notice" — is the operating principle of the whole curriculum.

Restorative Thinking

The fourth movement introduces restorative thinking explicitly. The session asks three questions: Who was affected? What do they need? What is my role in making things right? It then draws the shame-versus-accountability distinction with paired statements:

Shame says: "I'm a bad person. I always mess things up. There's no point in trying. Everyone is against me." Accountability says: "I made a mistake, and I can own it. I can learn something from this. I can try a different approach next time. I can repair what was harmed." The closing line — "Accountability is about behavior, not identity. You are not your worst moment" — is, in pastoral terms, a small declaration of grace. In clinical terms, it is a shame-interrupting intervention drawn from the shame resilience literature (Brown, 2012). In philosophical terms, it is the assertion that being and doing are separable — that the person is not exhausted by the act.

The restorative-thinking move closes with a three-step repair sequence: Acknowledge, Take Ownership, Make It Right. Each step is described in plain language. The closing reminder — "Trust takes time to rebuild, and that's okay" — calibrates expectation. For learners whose attachment histories include repeated promises that were not kept, this calibration is essential. The session is not promising quick restoration. It is teaching a posture that, over time, makes restoration possible.

Needs Versus Positions

The final movement of Session 1 introduces the needs-versus-positions distinction from Fisher and Ury (2011). A position is what you say you want. A need is what is really driving that want. The example used in the session is the noise complaint: the position is "my neighbor needs

to stop playing music after 9 PM"; the need is "I need rest so I can get to work on time and feel safe here." When the conversation is led by position, the other person gets defensive. When the conversation is led by need, the other person can understand and a solution becomes possible.

The session closes with four questions for the learner to ask before engaging in conflict: What do I actually need? Does this align with my values? What's at stake long-term? Can I stay respectful? The session's closing line — "Getting clear before you engage helps you respond rather than react" — establishes the central distinction the entire curriculum is built around: the distinction between reactivity and responsiveness.

Session Two: Conflict Triggers and Attachment

Session 2 turns inward. Where Session 1 introduces frames, Session 2 introduces interior architecture: what triggers are, how attachment patterns shape them, how the nervous system encodes the past, and how the trigger chain (Event → Belief → Emotion → Behavior) can be interrupted. The session integrates explicit attachment-theory content, framed in plain language and trauma-informed terms, and closes with a homework reflection on family-of-origin conflict patterns.

Reframing Conflict as Information

Session 2 opens by extending the Session 1 reframe. Conflict, the session asserts, isn't the enemy — it's information. It tells us something needs attention. The session contrasts old thinking ("conflict means something is broken") with new thinking ("conflict means something needs attention"). This reframing is then concretized by distinguishing healthy conflict (focused on the issue, both people feel heard, leads to understanding) from unhealthy conflict (attacks character, one person dominates, escalates into yelling). The pedagogical move is to teach participants that the goal is not the absence of conflict but the presence of skill in handling it.

The Causes of Conflict

The session then names four common causes: unmet needs, misunderstandings and assumptions, power struggles and control, and environmental stressors. The unmet-needs framing is given particular weight: connection and belonging are named as attachment needs, the deepest kind. The session frames the typical conflict not as malicious but as need-driven, which positions the learner to ask different questions about the other party than they otherwise would.

This is, in effect, a teaching of Rosenberg's (2003) Nonviolent Communication framework in compressed form. NVC holds that behind every behavior is a feeling, and behind every feeling is a need. The conflict-as-need framing makes the same point: most conflict is not character pathology but unmet need expressing itself through suboptimal behavior. The learner who can hear the need underneath the behavior — both their own and the other party's — has access to a different kind of response than the learner who can only hear the behavior.

How the Past Shapes the Present

The session then turns to the central insight of the trauma-informed framework: the past lives in the present body. Four moves are made. First, "your brain keeps score" — if early relationships felt unsafe or unpredictable, the nervous system learned to stay on high alert. Second, "triggers are echoes" — a raised voice today may remind the nervous system of a raised voice from years ago. Third, "reactions are protective" — the patterns aren't flaws; they were survival strategies. Fourth, "awareness creates choice" — when the trigger is understood, a space opens between event and response.

Each move is drawn from van der Kolk's (2014) account of trauma's somatic encoding, Herman's (1992) account of relational trauma, and Siegel's (2012) account of the window of tolerance. The plain language preserves the clinical insight while making it accessible. "Your

patterns aren't flaws. They were survival strategies that helped you at one time. Now you can learn new ones." This sentence is doing developmental, neurobiological, and pastoral work simultaneously. It validates the past, names the adaptiveness of the response, and opens the possibility of change.

How You Learned to Connect

Session 2 includes a dedicated slide on attachment, framed in plain language. Four points are made: attachment is learned (we learn whether people are safe and reliable from how caregivers respond to us); when safety was uncertain (the nervous system adapts, staying on guard, pulling away, or both); your patterns make sense (today's relating is not a character flaw — it is a learned response); and connection can heal (every safe relationship is a chance to experience something new).

The framing is hopeful without being naïve. It does not promise that early patterns will be erased — they will not. It does promise that they can be updated, slowly, by repeated experience of safe relationship. For the Tiny House Village population specifically, the closing claim — "every safe relationship, including the ones you're building here, is a chance to experience something new: that people can show up, and that you deserve that kind of connection" — locates the Village itself within the healing project. The Village is not just housing; it is, when it works, the kind of repeated experience that updates the internal working model.

Stress Responses and the Trigger Chain

Session 2 then names the four stress responses: Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn. Each is described in lay terms, with examples. The Fawn response — over-apologizing, agreeing to things you don't mean, people-pleasing — is named explicitly because it is often missed in conflict resolution training. Many of the participants, particularly those with histories of

relational abuse, default to Fawn rather than Fight. The training acknowledges this and treats it as a stress response rather than as compliance or cooperation.

The trigger chain is then introduced: Event → Belief → Emotion → Behavior. The chain visualizes how a moment of conflict moves from external stimulus through internal interpretation to internal feeling to external action. The key insight, made explicit in the session, is that the Belief stage is where the learner has the most power. The Event is given. The Emotion follows from the Belief. The Behavior follows from the Emotion. The Belief — the story the learner tells themselves about what the Event means — is where intervention is possible. "Is there another way to see this?" is the central question the chain teaches the learner to ask.

This is a compressed teaching of cognitive-behavioral intervention, but it is also a teaching of ACT-style cognitive defusion (Hayes et al., 2012). The thought "they don't respect me" arrives with the force of fact. The chain teaches the learner that it is a Belief — a story — not the territory itself. Defusion does not require disproving the thought; it requires noticing it as a thought. That noticing alone changes what follows.

Spotting the Triggers in the Body

Session 2 closes by teaching the learner to read the body's early warning signals: tight chest, racing heart, stomach tension, clenched jaw, urge to cry or run, shame and helplessness. The session frames this as a superpower: "your body knows before your mind does. Learning to read the signals is a superpower." Body awareness is offered as the earliest possible intervention point — earlier than the Belief, even, in many cases. By the time the Belief has formed, the body has already begun to mobilize. Catching the body first creates the largest possible window for choice.

The session's homework — the Trigger Reflection Sheet — asks the learner to walk through a recent triggering moment using the chain: the situation, the belief, the emotion, the body's location of the feeling, the behavior. The reflection prompts then expand outward: when conflict happens, my first instinct is usually to... ; the feeling I have the hardest time sitting with is... ; I learned growing up that conflict means... ; when I feel triggered, the part of me that reacts is trying to... These prompts are doing developmental archeology in compact form. They invite the learner to find the inherited grammar of conflict in their own family of origin and to see how it shapes the adult they have become.

Session Three: De-Escalation and Setting Boundaries

Session 3 is the turn from awareness to action. Sessions 1 and 2 built the frame; Session 3 builds the toolbox. The session opens with a brief account of how escalation works in the body and then introduces three categories of skill: physiological regulation (breath, pause, posture), communicative skill (the "I" statement formula, assertive scripts), and structural skill (boundary statements that distinguish what the learner will do from what they want others to do). The session closes with a personal Calm Script — a written set of ready-made phrases the learner has prepared in advance for the moments when finding words is hardest.

How Escalation Happens

Session 3 opens with a simple four-stage account of escalation: Trigger → Alarm → React → Escalate. The trigger is the event that feels threatening. The alarm is the body's activation. The reaction is fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. The escalation is the consequence — louder voices, blurred boundaries, broken trust. The session names the practical implication: the goal is to interrupt the chain early, before the React stage. Once the React stage has fired, the verbal skills become much harder to reach.

The session then teaches the body's warning signs in the same compressed form Session 2 used: physical cues (tight chest, racing heart, shallow breath, hot skin) and emotional cues (sudden anger, feeling overwhelmed, urge to cry or run, shame or helplessness). The closing instruction — "close your eyes for ten seconds and notice where stress shows up in your body first" — is itself a small intervention. It asks the learner to do the thing the session is teaching, right now, in the room.

Calming the Nervous System

Three physiological tools are introduced. The 4-4-4 breath (in for four, hold for four, exhale for four) activates the parasympathetic response. The Strategic Pause — "let me think about that," "I need a minute" — buys time without ending the conversation. Grounded posture — unclenched hands, dropped shoulders, planted feet — signals safety to the learner's own nervous system and to the other party's.

The pedagogical framing matters here. The session explicitly tells the participants that they can use these tools invisibly: no one needs to know they are doing them. For learners whose histories include being mocked or punished for visible distress, the invisibility is itself part of the offer. The skill does not require the learner to expose their dysregulation to the other party. It allows them to address it privately while staying in the conversation.

Polyvagal theory (Porges, 2011) underwrites all three tools. Each tool works through the vagus nerve — directly, in the case of the long exhale; indirectly, in the case of the open posture, which signals safety bidirectionally between body and mind. The learner is not asked to think their way back into the window; they are asked to do something the body responds to, and the mind follows.

Tone, Volume, and Physical Space

Session 3 then teaches the non-verbal dimensions of de-escalation. Four moves are named: match or lower volume (resist the urge to match the other party's rising voice; lowering your own often brings theirs down); watch your tone (sarcasm, sighing, eye-rolling escalate faster than words); respect physical space (don't crowd; in tiny homes, even a few feet of distance reduces tension); and open body language (uncrossed arms, relaxed hands, eye contact without staring).

Each move is drawn from research on co-regulation and nonverbal de-escalation. The principle is that conflict is a coupled-system phenomenon. The two parties' nervous systems are reading each other constantly through tone, posture, distance, and pace. If one party can stay slightly below the temperature of the other, the coupled system tends to cool. If one party matches or escalates, the coupled system tends to heat. The skill is to be the cooler element.

Three Ways to Communicate

Session 3 introduces the passive-assertive-aggressive distinction. Passive communication avoids saying what is needed and hopes others will guess, leading to resentment. Aggressive communication demands and blames, creating fear and resentment. Assertive communication names feelings and needs clearly, respects self and others, and builds trust and understanding. The framing is presented as a continuum with assertiveness as the goal.

The pedagogical danger here is that aggressive communication often feels powerful to dysregulated learners precisely because it discharges arousal. The session does not moralize about this. It acknowledges that aggression often works in the short term and names its long-term cost: it teaches others to fear the learner, not to listen to them. Assertiveness, by contrast, is harder in the short term and more sustainable in the long term.

Building an "I" Statement

The session then teaches the three-part "I" statement formula: When [event] happens, I feel [emotion], I need [request]. The structure is borrowed from Rosenberg's (2003) NVC framework, compressed for accessibility. The session demonstrates the difference with a paired example. The aggressive version: "You're so inconsiderate with your music!" The assertive version: "When the music plays late at night, I feel exhausted because I can't sleep. I would prefer if we could agree on quiet hours after 10pm."

The participants are then asked to practice the formula on three different conflicts of their own. The activity does two things. First, it builds procedural memory — the learner cannot reach a skill in the heat of conflict that they have not rehearsed cold. Second, it externalizes the formula. The learner sees their own conflict from outside the System 1 reaction and structures it through System 2 grammar. The act of writing the formula is itself a defusion technique.

Boundaries and Standards

The session then introduces a distinction Mellisa and I added in the course of teaching: the distinction between boundaries and standards. A boundary is about what the learner will do. A standard is about who the learner chooses to be around. "If this continues, I will..." is a boundary. "I choose to surround myself with people who..." is a standard. The distinction matters because participants often misuse "boundary" language to try to control the other party. "You can't yell at me" is not a boundary; it is an attempted rule on the other party that the learner has no power to enforce. "If you yell at me, I will leave the room and come back when we can talk calmly" is a boundary; it specifies what the learner will do, which the learner does have power to enforce.

Standards run alongside. A learner whose roommate routinely violates boundaries is, over time, learning something about who they want to live with. "I will not live with people who

don't respect others' boundaries" is a standard. It does not require the roommate to change. It changes what the learner is willing to tolerate going forward. For a transitional housing population, this distinction is practically important. The learners cannot always change their current housing situation. They can, slowly, change their future housing decisions.

Assertive Scripts and the Personal Calm Script

The session closes with two practical artifacts. The first is a small library of assertive scripts for common situations: saying no respectfully, asking for help, expressing discomfort, requesting change, addressing repeated behavior. Each script is short enough to memorize. Each is repeatable. The pedagogical wager is that learners who have rehearsed phrases will reach for them under stress when constructing their own phrases would be impossible.

The second artifact is the personal Calm Script. The participant writes, in advance, what they will say in four kinds of moments: when triggered, when needing space, when needing to say no, when needing support. The Calm Script is the curriculum's clearest expression of Linehan's (2015) Cope Ahead skill — rehearsing the response before the moment arrives, so that the response is available when the moment arrives. It is a System 2 product built in calm conditions for use in System 1 conditions. The participant carries it on a card or in their phone. It is, in effect, a hand reaching across the window of tolerance to itself.

Session Four: Feedback and Moving Forward

Session 4 closes the four-session series. It addresses the most cognitively demanding skill in the curriculum: giving and receiving feedback. Feedback is the hardest because it requires the learner to remain in social engagement while the parts of the brain that fire most readily — identity threat, defensiveness, shame — are exactly what feedback evokes. The session is structured in three movements: receiving feedback without shutdown; giving feedback that

invites change rather than shame; and recognizing the growth the learner has accomplished across the four weeks. The session closes with a written communication commitment and a certificate of completion.

Why Feedback Feels Threatening

The session opens by naming four reasons feedback feels threatening: identity threat (the brain treats criticism of what we do as criticism of who we are); past experiences (if feedback was used as punishment growing up, the nervous system associates it with danger); vulnerability exposure (feedback requires us to be seen, including the parts we are not proud of); and the shame-versus-guilt distinction ("shame says I am bad; guilt says I did something I want to fix"). The session takes care to normalize the threat response. The defensive reactions — deflecting, counter-attacking, shutting down, over-apologizing, minimizing, intellectualizing — are framed as protective habits, not character flaws. Awareness of them, the session asserts, is how the learner starts choosing something new.

The shame-guilt distinction is drawn from Brown's (2012) work on shame resilience but maps closely onto the Session 1 distinction between shame and accountability. Shame attacks the self; guilt addresses the behavior. Feedback works when it can be received as guilt — "I did something I want to fix" — rather than as shame — "I am bad." The learner who can hold this distinction can receive feedback without collapse. The learner who cannot tends to either reject the feedback (rejecting it before it confirms the shame) or accept it too completely (collapsing into the shame the feedback evokes). Both responses make actual behavioral change harder.

The Five-Step Model for Receiving Feedback

The session then introduces a five-step model: Pause, Breathe, Reflect Back, Clarify, Choose What to Apply. The first two steps are physiological — they are Sessions 2 and 3 skills

repurposed for this specific moment. The third step is reflective listening: repeat what was heard to make sure it was understood. The fourth is curious inquiry: ask questions without defending. The fifth is selective integration: decide what resonates. The learner does not have to accept everything offered. The selective step matters; it preserves the learner's agency. Feedback received well is not feedback obeyed; it is feedback considered.

The structure mirrors DBT's mindful interpersonal effectiveness (Linehan, 2015) and ACT's psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 2012). What the learner is being taught is a posture: be willing to hear, be willing to ask, be willing to choose. The posture is not natural for nervous systems calibrated to threat. It is teachable, with practice.

Giving Feedback: The OIR Framework

The session then teaches the OIR framework: Observation, Impact, Request. The observation step names the specific behavior — facts only, no interpretation. The impact step shares how the behavior affected the speaker — feeling words, "I" statements. The request step asks for a specific, doable change — clear and respectful. The framework is, in effect, a structured extension of the three-part "I" statement from Session 3, with the addition of explicit attention to tone and timing. The session closes the OIR section by noting that tone and timing matter as much as words: choose a calm moment, not the heat of frustration; speak privately, not in front of others; let your tone do as much work as your phrasing.

The session then introduces the Sandwich Structure — positive, growth area, encouragement — as a way of holding the OIR conversation within an affirming frame. The growth area uses OIR; the bread on either side is genuine appreciation and belief in the relationship. The criticism here is that sandwich feedback can become formulaic and condescending if used mechanically. The session acknowledges this risk and emphasizes that the

positive must be genuine — not a softening tactic but an honest acknowledgment of what is already working.

Celebrating Growth and Reframing Setbacks

The session then turns to the participants' own growth. A side-by-side table contrasts "setback thinking" with "growth thinking." Setback thinking: "I lost my temper again — I haven't changed." Growth thinking: "I noticed faster this time. That is growth." Setback thinking: "I went back to my old patterns." Growth thinking: "Old patterns feel safe. Choosing new ones takes practice." The contrast borrows from Dweck's (2006) growth mindset work, the Restorative Thinking handout developed for Session 1, and the broader resilience literature. The point is to teach participants to read their own behavior with the same compassion the curriculum has been trying to teach them to extend to others.

The session also introduces sustained-practice scaffolding: practice daily, find an accountability partner, expect setbacks, reflect weekly, repair when needed. The repair step is particularly important. "If a conversation goes wrong, circle back. Say: I didn't handle that the way I wanted to. Can we try again?" The session is teaching the participants that one bad conversation does not end the relationship if repair is possible. For a population whose attachment histories often included terminal ruptures — abandoned, expelled, cut off — the teaching that repair is available, and is itself a skill, is consequential.

The Communication Commitment

The session closes with a one-line written commitment: "My communication goal for the next month is..." The commitment is written on a small card, signed, dated, and kept by the participant. The pedagogical logic is implementation intention research (Gollwitzer, 1999): a specific, written, time-bound intention substantially increases the probability of follow-through

over an abstract resolution. The commitment is shared with a partner if the participant chooses. The certificate of completion that closes the session names the participant and the work they have done. For learners whose lives have not produced many certificates, this artifact is not incidental. It is a piece of evidence that the work happened, that they did it, and that they can claim it.

The DBT Life Skills Module: A Toolbox for the Hardest Moments

In the course of teaching the four-session series, a recurring participant report shaped the development of a supplementary module. The report was, in plain language: "I know I should stop. I know it's getting worse. But I feel like if I walk away right now, nothing will ever get resolved — and that feeling is too strong to ignore." The four-session curriculum addresses much of what produces this state — triggers, attachment patterns, body awareness, communication structure — but does not always give the learner the precise tools needed to survive the flood itself. The DBT module was developed to fill that gap.

The module teaches ten skills drawn from Linehan's (2015) Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Training Manual, organized into three categories: crisis tools (for when the learner is already flooded), emotion tools (for understanding what is driving the feeling), and connection tools (for staying in relationship while saying what needs to be said). The module names what the participant report describes: an Emotion Mind takeover in which the thinking brain has gone offline, a flooding state in which logic and skills are nearly impossible to reach, and a fear underneath the compulsion — "if I stop now, this will never get fixed" — that is real but is a feeling, not a fact.

Crisis Tools: STOP, TIPP, Urge Surfing

The STOP skill (Stop, Take a step back, Observe, Proceed wisely) is the emergency brake. Four letters, four seconds, just enough space to make a different choice. The skill is simple enough to be reachable when nothing else is. The Stop step asks the learner to freeze — not to speak, not to act. The Take-a-step-back step asks for physical separation: leave the room, sit down, turn away. The Observe step asks the learner to notice what they are feeling, where in the body, and what the other person seems to feel — without judgment. The Proceed-wisely step asks: what do I actually want here, right now and long-term? Then act, or wait.

The TIPP skill (Temperature, Intense exercise, Paced breathing, Paired muscle relaxation) is the body-first intervention for the moment when thinking has gone offline. Cold water on the face or ice held for thirty seconds activates the mammalian dive reflex and physically slows the heart rate. Sixty seconds of jumping jacks burns off adrenaline. Paced breathing — four counts in, six to eight counts out — activates the parasympathetic calming response. Paired muscle relaxation tenses and releases muscle groups in sequence. Each of the four reaches the nervous system through a route that does not depend on the prefrontal cortex. They are, in Linehan's (2015) phrase, distress tolerance skills — they do not solve the problem; they keep the learner safe enough to address the problem when the flood passes.

Urge Surfing teaches the learner to treat an intense urge as a wave: it builds, peaks, and subsides whether or not the learner acts on it. The four steps — Name it, Locate it in the body, Rate it 0 to 10, Ride it — reframe the urge as a physiological event that will pass. The reframe matters because the urge presents itself as a command ("keep talking, do not stop, push until they understand"). The reframe says: an urge is not a command. The urge will go down whether or not it is obeyed. The learner who learns to surf urges has gained a kind of internal degree of freedom previously unavailable.

Emotion Tools: Check the Facts, Opposite Action, Cope Ahead

Check the Facts asks the learner to separate the story from the verifiable situation. The skill walks through seven questions: What emotion am I feeling, and how intense (0-100)? What is the situation, in facts only? What am I assuming that I haven't confirmed? What is the worst realistic thing that could happen, and how likely? What does the situation actually mean? Does the intensity of my emotion fit the actual facts? What action would I take if I responded to the facts rather than the story? The skill is a structured application of cognitive-behavioral disputation, but it is also an act of cognitive defusion (Hayes et al., 2012): the learner steps back from the thought far enough to see it as a thought.

Opposite Action teaches the learner that every emotion has an action urge — and that, when the emotion does not fit the facts, doing the opposite of the urge, all the way, is the skillful response. In the conflict context, the urge is to keep talking; Opposite Action says stop. The urge is to push for resolution now; Opposite Action says trust that the conversation can continue another time. The skill is paired carefully with Check the Facts: Opposite Action is only applied when the emotion does not fit the facts. If the emotion does fit the facts — if the threat is real — then acting on the urge may be the right response.

Cope Ahead is the rehearsal skill. The learner identifies an upcoming situation likely to trigger a flood, names the thoughts and emotions that will arise, decides exactly what they will do, and mentally rehearses the scene in vivid detail. The skill borrows from the implementation intention research (Gollwitzer, 1999) but goes further: the learner walks through the scene with the eyes closed, sees themselves using the skill, and ends the rehearsal calm. The neural groove is built before it is needed. When the moment arrives, the learner's brain has a script.

Connection Tools: DEAR MAN, GIVE, Chain Analysis, Parking Lot

DEAR MAN is Linehan's (2015) interpersonal effectiveness framework for asking for what is needed: Describe (facts only), Express (I-statements about feelings), Assert (ask clearly, don't hint), Reinforce (explain the benefit to the other party), Mindful (stay on topic), Appear Confident (steady voice, open posture), Negotiate (be willing to give a little to get a little). The framework gives structure to the moment when the learner needs to make a request. A flooded monologue gets defended against. A structured, calm statement gets heard.

GIVE is the relationship-preserving counterpart: Gentle (no attacks, threats, or contempt), Interested (listen to understand, not to wait for your turn), Validate (acknowledge their feelings even when you disagree), Easy manner (a little warmth, a soft tone). The skill recognizes that being right is not the same as being effective. Validation — the V — is named as the most powerful de-escalation move available. When people feel understood, they stop fighting to be heard. Validation does not require agreement. It requires acknowledgment: "that makes sense given what happened between us."

Chain Analysis is the retrospective skill. After a flood has happened, the learner walks back through the chain: vulnerability factors (sleep, stress, earlier pain), trigger (the exact moment, not "we argued"), the links (each step: thought → feeling → body → action), flood point (the moment the learner could no longer stop), aftermath (short-term: did it help? long-term: what was the cost?). The key question is where, in that chain, the earliest possible skill intervention would have been. The skill is not about blame. It is about curiosity. Each chain analyzed builds a small library of personal pattern data the learner can use to intervene earlier next time.

The Parking Lot Protocol addresses the specific fear underneath the compulsion to say everything: "if I stop, everything I need to say will disappear." The skill removes that fear.

Before or during a difficult conversation, the learner writes everything down — every concern, every feeling, every point they are afraid will be lost. The list is kept nearby. When the urge to say it all spikes, the learner reminds themselves: it is in the Parking Lot. Nothing will be lost. The pause is now safe to take. When the conversation resumes, the list is an agenda — not a script — and the learner brings the one or two items that matter most.

Together, the ten skills constitute the most operational expression of the curriculum's central claim. Conflict skills, for the dysregulated learner, are not techniques to be memorized; they are capacities to be built. The DBT module is the capacity-building toolkit in compressed form. Each skill is small enough to teach in a single segment. Each is concrete enough to practice between sessions. The toolkit, taken together, is what makes the four-session curriculum reachable in the moments when reach is hardest.

Pedagogy: Teaching the Curriculum to Dysregulated Learners

The content of the curriculum is, in some ways, the easy part. The harder part is delivering it in a way the participants can actually receive. Three pedagogical principles have emerged across the deliveries of this material at the Tiny House Village. Each is worth naming, because each runs counter to assumptions teachers often bring to adult learning.

Begin Below the Cognitive Line

Most adult learning frameworks (Knowles, 1980) emphasize the learner's prior knowledge, self-direction, and motivation. These are real and useful. But for dysregulated learners, learning begins below the cognitive line. If the learner is not in the window of tolerance when the session begins, no amount of well-designed content will reach them. The opening minutes of each session therefore do regulatory work first: a warm welcome, low lighting, soft beverages, predictable structure, named ground rules. The session is teaching the body it is safe

before it teaches the mind anything. This is not warm-up; it is the precondition of any learning at all.

The cost is time. Sessions that prioritize regulation cannot pack as much content into ninety minutes as sessions that race through skills. The trade is worth it. Content delivered to a closed nervous system is not learned. Content delivered to an open nervous system is learned. The session that contains less is, in many cases, the session that teaches more.

Use Language That Honors the History

The language of clinical psychology is precise but often alienating. "Dysregulation," "complex trauma," "insecure attachment," "hyperarousal" — these terms do real conceptual work but can land, for the learner, as further labels in a life that has been densely labeled. The curriculum therefore uses lay language where possible and reserves clinical terms for moments when the precision matters. "Your brain keeps score." "Your patterns made sense." "This is what protection looks like." Each plain-language sentence does the work of a clinical concept while honoring the learner as a person, not a case.

The honoring is not cosmetic. It is part of the intervention. Many of the participants have spent significant time in systems — clinical, carceral, governmental — that addressed them in dehumanizing language. The curriculum is, among other things, an exercise in being addressed differently. The language signals what the relationship is: not expert-to-case but person-to-person, with the facilitator's expertise serving the participant's growth rather than displaying itself.

Co-Regulate, Don't Just Instruct

Polyvagal theory (Porges, 2011) implies a pedagogical commitment: the facilitator's nervous system is itself an instrument of the curriculum. The facilitator who is regulated, present,

and warm signals safety to the participants' nervous systems. The facilitator who is anxious, rushed, or performatively calm signals the opposite, regardless of what the slides say. Co-regulation is the technical name for this. In practice, it means the facilitator's own preparation — physical, emotional, spiritual — is part of the curriculum delivery, not a separate matter.

For Mellisa and me, this has meant arriving early, eating before the session, leaving worries from the day at the door, and entering the room with the intention to be present rather than to deliver. It has meant slowing down when the room slows down. It has meant being willing to abandon the slide deck when the conversation requires it. It has meant noticing our own activation and using the skills we are teaching in real time, sometimes visibly. The pedagogy is not separable from the practice. The facilitator who has never used the skills under stress will teach them in ways the participants will sense as hollow. The facilitator who uses them daily will teach them in ways the participants will sense as earned.

Integration and Discussion

The curriculum described in this paper sits at the intersection of several traditions that are not often brought into a single training: clinical psychology (DBT, ACT, attachment theory, trauma-informed care), conflict resolution (Thomas-Kilmann styles, NVC, conflict transformation), restorative practice (Zehr), and adult learning theory. Each tradition contributes something the others lack. DBT contributes the precise emotion-regulation toolkit. ACT contributes the cognitive defusion stance. Attachment theory contributes the relational developmental account. Conflict resolution contributes the structural vocabulary of needs, positions, and assertive communication. Restorative practice contributes the relational ethic that holds the whole together. Adult learning theory contributes the pedagogical commitment to learners as adults who bring lived experience to the room.

What the integration produces is something none of the traditions, taken alone, would. A four-session curriculum that begins below the cognitive line, builds awareness before regulation and regulation before assertion, treats the body as the primary entry point to skill, and closes with the meta-skill of receiving and giving feedback — this is not a DBT curriculum, not a conflict resolution curriculum, and not a restorative justice curriculum. It is a basic conflict management curriculum for dysregulated learners, designed with the specific population's nervous systems and relational histories in mind.

Several limitations are worth naming. First, the curriculum has been delivered at the Tiny House Village over a relatively short period. Longitudinal data on skill retention and behavioral change has not been collected systematically. Second, the curriculum has been designed for a particular setting — small shared-living community of adults — and may require adaptation for other dysregulated populations (incarcerated learners, adolescents, intimate partner contexts). Third, the curriculum assumes facilitators capable of co-regulation. Less experienced facilitators may deliver the content faithfully and still produce different outcomes. Fourth, the curriculum is psychoeducational; it is not therapy, and participants with active clinical needs should be referred for clinical support. The curriculum is best understood as one input among many in a participant's life — useful, in many cases significantly so, but not sufficient by itself for the deepest healing some participants need.

Several questions remain for further development. How does the curriculum interact with cultural and ethnic identity? Conflict styles vary across cultures; family-of-origin patterns vary across communities; some of the curriculum's framings may need cultural translation. How does it interact with explicit faith traditions? Many of the participants hold religious commitments, and the restorative-thinking ethic in particular has natural bridges to Christian, Jewish, Muslim,

and other traditions of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation; the curriculum has remained intentionally secular in its primary framing, but pastoral applications are worth exploring. How does the curriculum perform when delivered in different formats — single-session, weekly, residential, online? Each of these variations is plausible and would expand the curriculum's reach.

Conclusion

For the dysregulated learner, conflict management is not first a verbal skill. It is a regulatory one. The body has to be reachable before the words are reachable. The window of tolerance has to be opened before the script can be delivered. The capacity to notice the body, to slow the breath, to recognize the trigger, to defuse the thought, to surf the urge, to deliver the structured request, to receive feedback without collapse — these are sequential capacities, and they have to be built in order.

The four-session curriculum at the Tiny House Village builds them in order. Session 1 establishes the frame: conflict as normal, boundaries as self-respect, restorative thinking as the relational ethic. Session 2 turns inward: triggers, attachment, the trigger chain, the body's early warning signs. Session 3 builds the toolkit: breath, pause, posture, the "I" statement formula, the personal Calm Script. Session 4 closes with the hardest skill: giving and receiving feedback within ongoing relationship. The supplementary DBT module fills the gap that becomes visible in the moments when the four-session content is not enough — the moments when the flood is too high to think, and what is needed is a precise emergency-tolerance toolkit.

The curriculum makes no claims of cure. The participants who arrive at the Village arrive with histories that will not be undone in four Wednesday evenings. What the curriculum offers is the start of a different relationship with conflict — the recognition that the patterns are learned

and can be updated, the experience of being addressed as a person rather than a case, the toolkit of small skills that, practiced over time, become available in the moments that matter, and the demonstration that one safe relationship can be the start of others. For learners whose lives have not produced many such demonstrations, that start is consequential.

The work has been a privilege to do. Mellisa and I have learned from the participants at least as much as we have taught. The curriculum continues to evolve. What is offered here is one snapshot of it, in the hope that other practitioners working with similar populations might find some of it useful, and that the work of teaching dysregulated adults to navigate conflict with confidence — and with self-respect — might continue in more places than the Village alone.

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