Axon VR

Community Engagement Training (CET)

Crisis De-Escalation

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE



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FACILITATOR'S GUIDE OVERVIEW & USAGE TIPS

This Facilitator's Guide is customizable, enabling you to adapt it to your specific needs for tracking trainee progress, preparing for and conducting training sessions, and debriefing and assessing trainees after they complete the CET scenario in-headset.

TRAINING SESSION PREPARATION	
NOTE: Trainers should complete the scenario in-headset at least once prior to facilitating this CET module with trainees.	
LESSON PLAN	Review the lesson plan, which provides a comprehensive overview of the CET module, including its purpose, scenario overview, trainer preparation guidance, references, and links to additional resources.
LEARNING OBJECTIVES	Review the CET module's learning objectives, identify additional learning objective skills to assess trainees on during the scenario, and add any agency-specific learning objective skills to assess.
AGENCY RESOURCES	Add agency-specific notes, including local and state resources, best practices, and pertinent guidelines tailored to your agency and community.
TRAINEE PRE-WORK HANDOUT	Provide the trainee with the pre-work handout, which offers an overview of the CET topic. The trainee should review this handout before completing the scenario in headset.
SCENARIO FLOW & DECISION POINTS	Refer to the one-page flowchart outlining the scenario's decision points and corresponding branches as needed.

TRAINEE EVALUATION	
Use the trainee evaluation form to track trainee completion and document notes on their scenario decisions. Conduct a debriefing with the trainee by asking debriefing questions and questions in the scenario assessment rubric. Print copies for each trainee and add the trainee's name, ID, and position at the top of each evaluation form to use as a training record. **NOTE**: If facilitating this CET with multiple trainees at once, use the group debriefing and group Scenario Assessment Rubric questions in the group evaluation section to debrief the group. Axon also recommends screen casting the in-headset experience for the group to observe.	
DEBRIEFING QUESTIONS	After the trainee completes the scenario in-headset, conduct a debriefing with them to provide feedback, discuss their choices and the scenario's outcome. Use the provided debriefing questions for guidance and incorporate any agency-specific debriefing questions.
SCENARIO ASSESSMENT RUBRIC	Conduct an assessment of the scenario topic with the trainee based on the CET module's learning objectives. Use the provided assessment questions for support as needed. Your assessment should also include a discussion about agency policy and a review of any pertinent local and state resources.

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LESSON PLAN

COURSE OVERVIEW	In this CET, trainees will respond to a mental health crisis using de-escalation strategies grounded in Crisis Intervention Training (CIT). Trainees engage with an unarmed individual in distress and apply verbal and non-verbal techniques to reduce tension, slow the pace, and make safe, informed decisions. The scenario reinforces agency-aligned approaches to empathy, trauma-informed communication, and tactical patience to help officers navigate complex, high-stakes situations. After completing the experience, the trainer will conduct a debriefing with the trainee. The trainee must score 100% on the scenario assessment rubric.
IN-HEADSET VR EXPERIENCE	Trainees will begin the in-headset experience responding to a call involving a resident in crisis at a rooming house. As the scenario progresses, trainees will be asked to make decisions in real time by selecting from multiple on-screen options. The trainees will see the scenario play out based on their selections. No VR Controllers are required; trainees will use head movements to aim a crosshair to proceed through the scenario in headset. See the scenario flow and decision points flowchart for an overview of the VR scenario and decision points branching.
LEARNING OBJECTIVES	Given a scenario depicting an officer responding to a call involving an individual in crisis, the trainee will complete the following with their agency trainer and score 100% on the scenario assessment rubric: • Identify the guidelines aligned with agency policy for de-escalating a potential crisis situation. • Describe effective crisis de-escalation techniques aligned with agency policy to establish rapport, build trust, and defuse tension. • Describe why showing empathy is a critical crisis de-escalation skill. • Explain how to use an empathy-based approach demonstrating trauma-informed communication aligned with agency policy during crisis de-escalation interactions.
INSTRUCTIONAL GOAL	As a responding officer, the trainee will apply de-escalation strategies grounded in Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) to engage with an unarmed individual in crisis, demonstrating trauma-informed communication, tactical patience, and empathy based on agency policy.

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REQUIRED MATERIALS	Available on the VR training materials page on Axon Help: • Facilitator's Guide (with lesson plan, trainee pre-work handout, and scenario assessment rubric) • Sample course roster (optional for collecting trainee names and email addresses and tracking completion)
PREREQUISITES	None
EQUIPMENT	• Axon VR headset • Samsung VR tablet *(optional, but recommended for trainer observation through Miracast)*
DATE CET MODULE RELEASED	August 2025
FACILITATOR'S GUIDE UPDATES	N/A
COURSE LENGTH	30 minutes (in-person instructor-led training)
COURSE CREDIT HOURS	30 minutes
FACILITY LOCATION	The Training Space will be identified by the agency and must contain a virtual boundary to keep trainees safe. Training Spaces should be kept clear of objects, pets, live weapons, and other people.
TESTING / CERTIFICATION	The trainee must score 100% on the scenario assessment rubric to pass the training. **NOTE**: This curriculum is certified by the International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards & Training (IADLEST) through the National Certification Program (NCP). This certification may be eligible for POST continuing education hours. To adhere to IADLEST certification requirements, trainers must use a tablet or casting device to enhance their trainee assessment capabilities. For an overview of the required steps for fulfilling the IADLEST certified curriculum requirements, see the IADLEST Overview on the VR training materials page on Axon Help.

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TARGET GROUP	Public safety and law enforcement officers
INSTRUCTORS	Any agency-identified VR trainer
GROUP RATIO	This curriculum is designed for a trainer-to-trainee ratio of 1:1. **NOTE**: If facilitating this module with multiple trainees at the same time, Axon recommends screen casting a trainee's in-headset experience for the group to observe. Use the group debriefing questions and the group scenario assessment rubric to guide your debriefing with the group.
TRAINER PRE-WORK	1. Create a VR Training Space. This is a 360° video experience that is best viewed while seated. 2. Open the CET application and download the module to the Library if it's not already present. 3. Once downloaded, complete the module in-headset at least once prior to facilitating this CET. View the scenario more than once to experience the different possible outcomes.
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES	• For assistance facilitating this CET or setting up Axon VR equipment, see the Virtual reality training page on Axon Help • For assistance screen casting the in-headset experience, see the Screen cast options article

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- California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training. *De-Escalation: Strategies and Techniques.* https://post.ca.gov/Portals/0/post_docs/publications/DeEscalation.pdf.
- Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. *De-escalation for CLS Professionals.* 2024, https://dhhs-dbhtraining.unl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/PowerPoint.pdf.
- International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP). *Responding to Persons Experiencing a Mental Health Crisis: Model Policy, Concepts & Issues Paper.* Law Enforcement Policy Center, Aug. 2018 (updated), Alexandria, VA, https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/MentalIllnessBinder2018.pdf.

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ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

Download the following optional materials from the VR training materials page on Axon Help.

SAMPLE COURSE ROSTER	Print the sample course roster to use while facilitating training to collect the names and email addresses of trainees and track completion.
CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION	Print and provide the trainee with the certificate of completion upon successfully completing the training requirements. Based on agency policy, inform the trainee to provide a copy of the certificate to the training department for possible in-service credit.

SAMPLE COURSE SCHEDULE

0800-0810	Trainee reviews the pre-work handout
0810-0820	Trainee completes VR scenario in-headset
0820-0830	Trainer conducts assessment debriefing with the trainee using the debriefing questions and scenario assessment rubric

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Given a scenario depicting an officer responding to a call involving an individual in crisis, the trainee will complete the following with their agency trainer and must achieve a score of 100% on the scenario assessment rubric:

- Identify the guidelines aligned with agency policy for de-escalating a potential crisis situation.
- Describe effective crisis de-escalation techniques aligned with agency policy to establish rapport, build trust, and defuse tension.
- Describe why showing empathy is a critical crisis de-escalation skill.
- Explain how to use an empathy-based approach demonstrating trauma-informed communication aligned with agency policy during crisis de-escalation interactions.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE SKILLS

Select additional learning objective skills to assess trainees on in this module:

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS & OBSERVATION

- ☐ 360º awareness
- ☐ Observation: Whole body, hands, beltline, demeanor (immediate area)
- ☐ Subject proximity
- ☐ Vehicle proximity

TASER ENERGY WEAPON DEPLOYMENT

- ☐ Post deployment activity (Supervisor; Medical; other)
- ☐ Probe deployment: Clothing consideration

ADMINISTRATIVE

- ☐ Court preparation
- ☐ Report writing
- ☐ Resource identification

DE-ESCALATION & COMMUNICATION

- ☐ Communication with partner
- ☐ Communication with subject/individual
- ☐ Cuffing under power
- ☐ Dispatch disparity (caller perception, bias, etc.)
- ☐ Duty to intervene
- ☐ Family intervention
- ☐ Non-verbal communication
- ☐ Third party considerations/bias

TACTICS & MOVEMENT

- ☐ Interview stance
- ☐ Reactionary gap
- ☐ Cover
- ☐ Concealment
- ☐ Distance management

AGENCY-SPECIFIC LEARNING OBJECTIVE SKILLS

Add any additional agency-specific learning objective skills you would like to assess trainees on as a part of this scenario:

☐ ☐

☐ ☐

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AGENCY RESOURCES

This training is best augmented with agency-specific resources. Axon does not make any recommendations on agency policies.

In alignment with agency policy, consider creating a supplemental guide (or use the space below to add agency-specific notes) to share with trainees that includes the local and state resources available that are specific to your agency and community, best practices, and agency-specific guidelines.

AGENCY-SPECIFIC NOTES

TRAINEE EVALUATION (INDIVIDUAL)

After the trainee completes the VR scenario in-headset, conduct a debriefing with them to provide feedback and discuss their choices and the scenario outcome using the provided questions as a guide. Then, complete the scenario assessment rubric with the trainee.

You can use the trainee evaluation form with the debriefing questions and scenario assessment rubric as a training record to record performance notes and track individual trainee evaluations. Simply print copies for each trainee.

NOTE: If facilitating this CET with multiple trainees at once, use the group debriefing and scenario assessment rubric questions in the group evaluation section to conduct a debriefing with the group.

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TRAINEE EVALUATION: CRISIS DE-ESCALATION

TRAINEE NAME	TRAINEE ID	TYPE
		☐ Recruit ☐ Officer

DEBRIEFING QUESTIONS (INDIVIDUAL)

- ☐ What behavioral or physical cues did you notice that signaled escalation during the scenario?
- ☐ How did your understanding of our agency policy inform your approach to scene safety, tactical positioning, and decision-making?
- ☐ Did you reassess the situation as it progressed? If so, what changes influenced your decisions?
- ☐ What actions did you take to avoid escalating the situation, and how did those align with de-escalation principles?
- ☐ What verbal techniques did you use to build rapport? What seemed to work well or not as well?
- ☐ Were you able to identify and use any "hooks" or avoid known or observed triggers? What effect did that have?
- ☐ How would you assess whether the individual was understanding or complying with your communication?
- ☐ What did empathy look or sound like in your response to the individual in crisis?
- ☐ What reflective or empathetic statements were used in the scenario? What was the individual's response to those efforts?
- ☐ How did your ability (or struggle) to connect emotionally with the individual influence the interaction?

AGENCY-SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

- ☐
- ☐
- ☐

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SCENARIO ASSESSMENT RUBRIC (INDIVIDUAL)

Given a scenario depicting an officer responding to an individual in crisis, the trainee will now describe how to engage with an unarmed individual in distress and apply de-escalation strategies grounded in Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) to reduce tension, slow the pace, and make safe, informed decisions in discussion with their agency trainer, and score 100% on the scenario assessment rubric questions below.

NOTE: As part of the assessment rubric, Axon recommends discussing agency policy and reviewing local and state resources with the trainee.

Review the following example scenario with the trainee:

ASSESSMENT SCENARIO

You are dispatched to a city park in response to a call from a concerned bystander who reports a disoriented individual sitting on a bench, talking loudly to themselves and appearing distressed. The caller believes the individual may be experiencing a mental health crisis.

Upon arrival, you observe a middle-aged man pacing back and forth, flailing his arms, and shouting intermittently. He appears unarmed. Several park-goers are nearby, watching from a distance. Your partner is present but waiting for your lead.

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Q1: As a responding officer, what steps should you take to assess the situation and begin de-escalation, according to our agency policy?	
☐ **PASSING RESPONSE**	The trainee clearly articulates at least two of the following steps: • Keeps their distance • Observes behavioral cues • Gathers relevant information from witnesses and their partner
☐ **FAILING RESPONSE**	The trainee fails to articulate any of the signs and symptoms above or conveys answers similar to the following: • Immediately approaches the individual and demands that they calm down and sit on the bench • Approaches silently and attempts to grab the individual's attention by tapping them on the shoulder • Orders the individual to stop shouting and asks if they are under the influence

TRAINER NOTES

Officers should prioritize situational awareness, observe signs of escalation, and begin planning a safe, informed approach in accordance with agency de-escalation policies.

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Q2: Which combination of verbal and non-verbal techniques is most appropriate to establish rapport and reduce tension with this individual according to our agency policy?	
☐ **PASSING RESPONSE**	The trainee clearly articulates at least three of the following techniques: • Introduces themselves calmly, stating their name and role to establish trust and set a professional tone • Asks for the individual's name • Uses open body language • Uses an empathetic tone • Asks open-ended questions • Mirrors the individual's pacing without mimicking • Summarizes and actively listens to show understanding and help to ensure clarity
☐ **FAILING RESPONSE**	The trainee fails to articulate any of the techniques to establish rapport and reduce tension or conveys the opposite of the passing techniques, for example: • Uses firm commands • Asserts control over the situation • Uses a loud voice to establish authority • Makes direct statements • Moves quickly to resolve the situation

TRAINER NOTES

Effective de-escalation relies on calm, clear verbal communication and non-threatening non-verbal cues that signal empathy and build trust, as outlined in CIT best practices.

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Q3: During your interaction, the individual yells, "Nobody listens to me! Everyone thinks I'm crazy!" What is the most empathetic and effective way to respond according to our agency policy?	

☐ **PASSING RESPONSE**	The trainee clearly describes an empathetic and effective way to respond, for example:
	• Says statements such as:
	  ○ *"It seems like you're feeling really frustrated. I want to understand. Can you tell me more about what's going on?"*
	  ○ *"It sounds like you're feeling overwhelmed right now. I'm here to listen and help however I can."*
	  ○ *"I can hear that you're upset; it's okay to feel that way. I want to understand what's going on from your perspective."*
	• Acknowledges their overwhelmed emotional state
	• Expresses support without judgment
	• Uses calm, compassionate language to promote rapport and reduce distress
	• Validates their emotions without minimizing them
	• Normalizes their feelings *("It's okay to feel that way")*
	• Invites collaboration and self-expression by asking to understand their point of view

☐ **FAILING RESPONSE**	The trainee fails to describe an empathetic and effective way to respond, saying statements such as: • *"Calm down. You're not making any sense right now."* • *"You're not crazy. Let's try to stay calm."* • *"If you keep yelling, I won't be able to help you."*
TRAINER NOTES	
Empathy involves validating the individual's emotional state and using reflective listening to reduce agitation and build rapport. Use reflective statements and invite dialogue.	

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Q4: Which actions best reflect an empathy-based response that demonstrates trauma-informed communication, in alignment with our agency's policy, during this interaction?	
☐ **PASSING RESPONSE**	The trainee clearly identifies at least two of the following approaches: • Reduces stimuli by moving the individual away from the crowd • Clearly explains their actions and intentions • Avoids sudden movements • Considers potential triggers
☐ **FAILING RESPONSE**	The trainee fails to identify the correct approaches or conveys the opposite of the passing approaches, for example: • Ignores the individual's behavior and focus solely on controlling the scene • Immediately asks about their mental health history and past trauma experiences • Uses physical presence to assert dominance and discourages further escalation
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TRAINEE EVALUATION (GROUP)

If facilitating this CET with multiple trainees at once, use these group questions to conduct a debriefing with the group. Add additional questions as needed.

DEBRIEFING QUESTIONS (GROUP)

- [ ] What signs of escalation stood out to you, and how did you interpret those behaviors in the moment?
- [ ] What verbal and non-verbal techniques seemed most effective in building trust with the individual in crisis? Why do you think they worked?
- [ ] How did you assess whether the individual was understanding and tracking what was being said? What indicators did you look for?
- [ ] Can anyone share a specific moment when an empathetic statement or response had a visible effect? What did you notice?
- [ ] Were there any statements or tones that unintentionally escalated the situation? How could they be reframed with more empathy?

AGENCY-SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

- [ ]
- [ ]

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SCENARIO ASSESSMENT RUBRIC (GROUP)

- [ ] How would you assess the individual's behavior and environmental risks to decide on a safe, policy-aligned de-escalation strategy?
- [ ] What specific verbal and non-verbal techniques would you use to build rapport and defuse tension, and how do you think they would influence the individual's response?
- [ ] How would you demonstrate empathy during the interaction, and what impact do you think it would have on the individual's level of agitation or willingness to cooperate?

AGENCY-SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

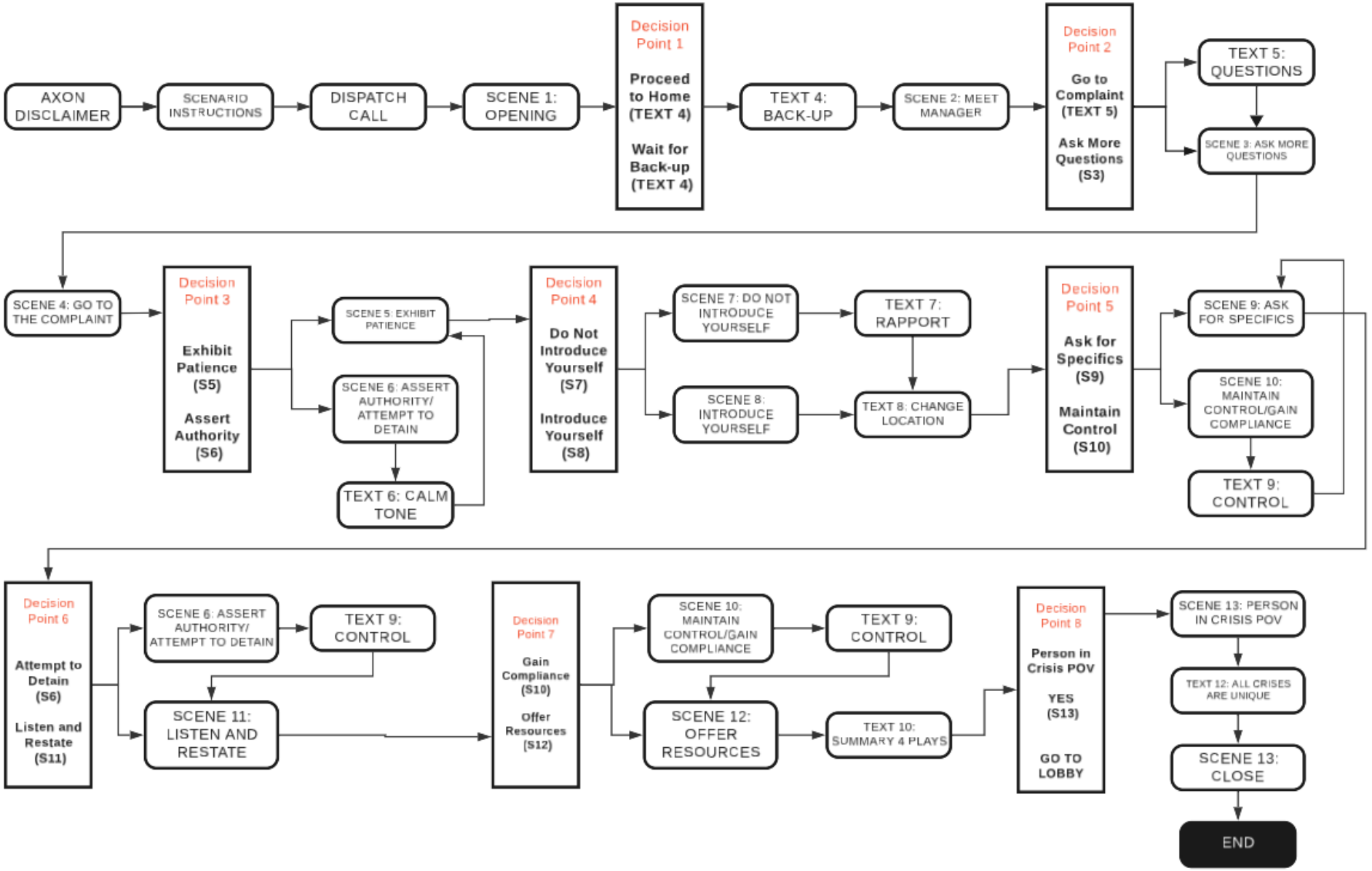
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SCENARIO FLOW & DECISION POINTS

The flowchart below displays the trainee decision points and their respective branches in the scenario.



TRAINEE PRE-WORK HANDOUT: CRISIS DE-ESCALATION

Purpose: This handout introduces the foundational principles for responding to mental health crises using de-escalation strategies grounded in Crisis Intervention Training (CIT). It outlines agency-approved approaches that emphasize empathy, trauma-informed communication, and tactical patience. These concepts are designed to help trainees safely and effectively navigate complex, high-stakes situations while aligning their actions with agency policy.

Review this handout prior to completing the VR scenario in-headset

GUIDELINES FOR CRISIS DE-ESCALATION

RECOGNIZE SIGNS OF ESCALATION

- **Behavioral signs**: Increased agitation, verbal aggression, yelling, threats, irrational speech, hyper-focusing, defiance, irrational beliefs
- **Physical cues**: Pacing, raised or clenched fists, trembling, flushed face, aggressive posturing, threatening gestures
- **Potential triggers**: Feeling ignored or disrespected, being crowded or touched, frustration, intoxication, overstimulation from mental health issues

DESCRIBE DE-ESCALATION

- Strategic use of time, space, and cover
- Requires ongoing practice and skill development to build confidence
- Aims to provide a thoughtful, effective response while minimizing harm to all
- Validates appropriate timing and degree of force

DE-ESCALATION GUIDELINES *(follow agency policy)*

- Prioritize safety of officers, individuals, and community members
- Develop situational awareness: behavior, environment, access to weapons
- Evaluate intervention urgency, and follow agency policy for requesting backup
- Plan response strategies (lead role, course of action, etc.)
- Maintain a safe distance
- Use a non-confrontational approach to communicate calmly

ASSESS THREAT LEVEL, USE OF FORCE, & DE-ESCALATION TECHNIQUES

- Review prior calls, ask bystanders for relevant info
- Observe body language: posturing, clenched fists, pacing
- Evaluate verbal cues: threats, disorganized speech
- Consider context, history, mental health status, and substance use
- Maintain strategic positioning, request assistance, and continually reassess

POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF DE-ESCALATION

- Increased safety for all parties on scene
- De-escalation of interactions which could require a use of force
- Reduction in future criminal justice involvement

EMPATHY IN DE-ESCALATION

WHAT IS EMPATHY?

- Empathy is the ability to recognize, understand, and share the thoughts and feelings of another person
- Focus on how it feels for them, and communicate that you understand their feelings, making them feel supported and help create a connection

DEMONSTRATE EMPATHY

- Reflect the individual's emotional state
- Validate what they're feeling: *"That sounds really overwhelming."*
- Respond with care and presence to reduce their agitation and anxiety

USE EMPATHETIC LISTENING & RESPONSES

- Use "empathetic stems" (short phrases) that acknowledge their feelings: (*"It seems like you might feel..." or "I wonder if this is really frustrating..."*)
- Express empathy and understanding verbally and through body language
- Avoid interrupting or problem-solving too early

EMPATHY-BASED & TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH

UNDERSTAND THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF TRAUMA

- Trauma may result in heightened reactions, hypervigilance, or emotional detachment
- Responses may seem aggressive or irrational but reflect survival patterns

IDENTIFY ELEMENTS OF TRAUMA-INFORMED COMMUNICATION

- **Safety**: Focus on their physical, emotional, and psychological safety
- **Trustworthiness & transparency**: Clearly explain actions and intentions
- **Cultural & gender sensitivity**: Recognize how identity & history shape responses
- **Understanding trauma**: Avoid labeling or escalating trauma-based behaviors

APPLY TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

- Speak clearly, calmly, and without sudden movement
- Explain what you're doing before acting
- Understand that aggressive behavior may stem from a trauma response
- Consider potential triggers

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DE-ESCALATION TECHNIQUES TO ESTABLISH RAPPORT, BUILD TRUST & DIFFUSE TENSION

USE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

- Open body language, relaxed posture, intermittent eye contact, mirror their body language subtly
- Neutral stance and soft facial expressions that convey empathy and understanding (for example, nodding or softening your expression when they share something emotional)
- Avoid abrupt gestures (such as pointing fingers) or closed-off body language (for example, crossed arms)

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

- Follow the four "key play" performance skills of verbal de-escalation to build a connection, reduce tension, and guide the individual toward a safer, more cooperative resolution:
    - **Introduce yourself**: Begin by calmly stating your name and role to establish trust and set a professional tone. Be respectful and polite. Keep your greeting and introduction simple.
    - **Ask for their name**: Show respect and build rapport by addressing them personally.
    - **Acknowledge emotions**: Use clear, non-judgmental observations to demonstrate awareness and validate their emotions by providing reflective statements on the emotions that you see.
    - **Summarize and actively listen** (demonstrate "parroting"): Reflect back what they've shared to show understanding and ensure clarity.
- Use short, simple phrases without jargon
- Avoid triggers such as *"Calm down," "You should,"* or *"I understand"*

ACTIVE LISTENING

- Use reflective listening: mirror emotions and paraphrase their words to demonstrate attentiveness and convey interest
- Summarize key points they shared and restate small facts
- Ask open-ended questions; use minimal encouragers *("uh-huh," "go on")*
- Practice silence and demonstrate patience

USE CALMING TECHNIQUES

- Build rapport and trust before problem-solving
- Reduce environmental stressors and distractions from the scene when possible
- Slow the interaction down to reduce the intensity of the situation
- Allow "stimming" (rocking back and forth, making repetitive hand movements, looking down) if not dangerous
- Continue offering reassurances and expressing concerns about their safety: *"I want you to be safe"*
- Be sensitive to their point of view, even if you disagree with them
- Normalize their emotions: *"Anyone might feel that way"*

OFFER CHOICES AND CONTROL

- Empower individuals with reasonable options
- Preserve dignity while maintaining officer control
- Help them regain a sense of personal agency

USE HOOKS & AVOID TRIGGERS

- **Hooks**: Connect positively via shared interests (sports, music, comfort items)
- **Triggers**: Avoid escalation by recognizing and avoiding triggers that may cause reactions and avoid sensitive subjects or tones; re-direct attention from emotionally intense topics

CONTINUALLY ASSESS COMPREHENSION & COMPLIANCE

- Compliance can include nonverbal cues or indirect speech
- Understand that disorganized thinking may still be communicative
- Measure engagement through responsiveness, even if atypical (for example, if they turn away and speak bizarre words)

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