

HUG SCHOOL

The Facilitator's Guide & Syllabus

I Need A Hug Project
First Edition • 2026

“The heart that truly will be free will learn to freely give.”

To the Facilitator

You are holding the complete curriculum for training volunteers of the I Need A Hug Project. It is freely given. You may teach it, translate it, and adapt it to your culture under the license printed at the end of this guide. Training must always be free to volunteers — that is not a suggestion; it is the license.

Before you teach a single module, understand the one warning this whole guide is built around:

“If the wrong man uses the right means, the right means work in the wrong way.” — an old Chinese proverb, from The Secret of the Golden Flower, beloved by Alan Watts

A hug is unambiguously the right means. In unprepared hands, or offered in a grasping spirit, it works the wrong way — and that is not a metaphor; it is the biochemistry taught in Module 3. This is why background checks exist, why training is mandatory, why the practice is silent, and why certification can be revoked. The method cannot protect itself. Only the person carrying it can.

Important: this proverb is for you, not for them. Never teach volunteers in terms of “right person / wrong person” — judgment language breeds guilt in the anxious and pride in the confident, and both are noise in a practice built on presence. Volunteers receive the same truth as a repeatable skill instead: the hook check (Module 4). You screen for character; they check for hooks. Keep the architect's warning in the architect's drawer.

Session length: approximately 2.5 hours including practice rounds, or two 75-minute sessions. Maximum 12 trainees per facilitator. The visual companion is the Hug School slide deck; every module below maps to it.

Module 1: Origin — The Hug That Started It

Time: 10 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Trainees understand where the practice comes from and why words are not part of it.

Facilitation:

Tell the founding story, in the founder's words:

“After my wife died, everyone had words for me — sorry for your loss, she's in a better place. The words asked things of me. Then one friend said nothing and just held on tight. It was the best message I ever received. This project is me passing it on.”

Draw out the two lessons hiding in it. First: the mourners' words failed because words carry the speaker's need — condolences ask to be comforted back, reassurances ask to be agreed with. The friend who said nothing asked for nothing. Second: the founder is not the hero of this story; the friend is. Every volunteer inherits the friend's role, not the founder's.

Practice: Ask trainees to recall a moment when someone's presence helped more than anyone's words. Do not have them share it aloud — just hold it silently for thirty seconds. That silence is the first exercise of the silent practice.

Module 2: Philosophy — Love Is Free

Time: 15 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Trainees understand the doctrine: love without hooks, freely given, freely released.

Facilitation:

Read the foundational poem aloud — “Is Free,” written by the founder years before the project existed, printed in full at the end of this guide. It contains the entire doctrine: the walls we build from “unwitting jealousy or guilt,” the terror that joy will depart, and the resolution — the drawbridge stays down, the garden keeps blooming, and the heart that truly will be free learns to freely give.

The teaching distilled: a hug is complete in itself. It seeks no repetition, no gratitude, no relationship, no witness. The letting-go is not the end of the hug — it is part of the hug. “Unwitting” is the mercy word: attachment is a state everyone visits, not a character flaw anyone is condemned to.

Practice: Read the final stanza a second time. Ask: what is still in bloom after she leaves? Why does that matter for a stranger's hug at a farmers market?

Module 3: The Science, Honestly

Time: 15 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Trainees can explain oxytocin's role, its dopamine shadow, and why we never count.

Facilitation:

Teach the chemistry plainly and honestly, with “research suggests” humility. Held past the point of settling, a hug is associated with oxytocin release — the bonding hormone — and reduced stress. Research often cites ~20 seconds, but that number is a guideline, not a rule: a receptive, practiced giver may settle in 10 seconds; fear and expectation can take much longer to vanish.

Never count. Counting keeps the mind busy, and a busy mind cannot settle. Relaxation is the gateway — feel for the drop of the shoulders, the breath letting go. The founder's poem *The River*, printed at the back of this guide, is this teaching in verse: measuring time is ‘cutting time like pieces of tin.’ Don't pause to measure; pass with the stream.

The shadow: oxytocin is powerful for good and bad. It can cascade into dopamine — pleasure — and pleasure wants repetition. A hug with a hook in it produces attachment and jealousy wearing love's costume. This is why the practice has rules, and why Module 4 exists.

Practice: Learning to listen with your back: pairs stand back to back, touching lightly, eyes closed, in silence, and simply breathe until each can feel the other settle — the drop of the shoulders, the slowing of the breath. In an actual embrace, vision is useless; every cue arrives through the body, so this exercise trains the exact channel the practice runs on. Eyes-closed is the default; an opt-in blindfold may deepen the isolation of touch for those who want it, but the prop is never required — for some histories, being blindfolded is itself the trigger. The facilitator always remains sighted, partners rotate, the room stays open, and this exercise lives strictly inside Hug School — never at public events.

Module 4: The Hook Check

Time: 10 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Trainees adopt the giver's self-check as a pre-ask habit, free of self-judgment.

Facilitation:

A hug with a hook in it isn't a gift. Before every ask, the volunteer asks one silent question:

“Am I giving this — or trying to get something?”

Either answer is fine — but only one of them hugs. Signs of a hook: hoping a particular person returns; chasing the feeling of the last hug; wanting to be thanked; wanting to be seen hugging. Noticing a hook is not failure — it is the practice working. Set it down and ask, or offer high fives today instead. Choosing high fives on a hooked day is passing the check, not failing it.

Frame it exactly as the receiver's tap-out, mirrored: the receiver's protection is the double tap; the giver's protection is this question. Both are releases. The whole practice is releases.

Practice: Silent self-inventory: trainees list (privately, on paper they keep) the hook most likely to catch them. No sharing, no discussion.

Module 5: The Model — You Ask, They Give

Time: 10 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Trainees can explain why volunteers ask and participants give.

Facilitation:

Volunteers wear the “I NEED A HUG” button — they are the askers, modeling the hardest sentence most adults never say out loud. Participants choose whether to give; the giving stays entirely in their hands. The giver's freely chosen mindset is the mechanism: oxytocin amplifies the frame a person brings, and research on giving support suggests the giver benefits as much as the receiver.

The same button volunteers wear is given to participants to take home. Every wearer becomes an asker in the wild. We do not distribute hugs; we distribute permission to ask for them.

Practice: Round-robin: each trainee puts on the button and simply stands in it for ten seconds while the group witnesses. Wearing the ask is the skill.

Module 6: The Silent Practice

Time: 15 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Trainees internalize the two-line script and the never-do list.

Facilitation:

This is a non-verbal practice. The button asks, the panel teaches, the hug talks. The approved script, complete: “Would you give me a hug?” and “Thank you.” Gestures, nods, and smiles carry everything else.

What volunteers never do: invite people to share feelings or stories; discuss or debrief the hug; give advice, opinions, or comfort talk; fill silence. Silence is not coldness — it is the container that keeps the encounter safe for both people. Volunteers are not therapists, and conversation is where conflict, dependency, and role-confusion enter. If a participant wants to talk: smile, hand them a resource card, gesture to the event lead.

Practice: Warm-silence drill: pairs maintain eye contact, nod, and smile for one full minute without words. Debrief only the difficulty of the silence itself, never its content.

Module 7: The H.U.G. Method & the Settling

Time: 15 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Trainees can teach the method by pointing at the panel, and can feel the settling.

Facilitation:

Hold on tight — a real hug, not a pat. Until we relax — breathe; shoulders drop; don't rush it. Grow the bond — stay until the settling happens; don't count, feel.

Attribution: the H.U.G. acronym — Hold on tight, Until you relax, Grow your bond — was coined by pediatrician Alison Escalante, M.D., writing in Forbes (June 2020). We teach it with gratitude and with this credit, adapted to our practice: until we relax, and the bond. Her article also notes that the popular 20-second claim traces to no identifiable study — independent support for this curriculum's teaching that relaxation, not the clock, is the endpoint. Freely given things deserve their givers named.

The panel carries this teaching so the volunteer doesn't have to. Point, don't preach. The volunteer's job during the hug is a quiet attention: feeling for the mutual settling, and for its end.

Practice: Consenting trainee pairs practice the full hug to settling. Facilitator observes for counting behavior (lips moving, rhythmic breathing) and gently interrupts it.

Module 8: Consent, the Tap-Out, and Reading Cues

Time: 20 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Trainees release at the first cue, every time, and teach the tap-out before every hug.

Facilitation:

The four non-negotiables: they choose (a hug happens only on a clear yes or open arms); hesitation is a no (honored with a warm nod, no comment); the tap-out (double tap anywhere = release immediately, no questions, either person, any moment — taught by pointing to it on the panel before every hug); open and visible spaces only.

End cues: stiffening, patting, pulling away, held breath, shifting weight. Release at the first cue and close with a nod. The settling is the invitation, never a requirement — a short hug given freely beats a long hug given reluctantly.

Practice: Cue drills: the partner secretly chooses a cue (pat, stiffen, tap) and the trainee must release within one second and close with a nod. Repeat until releases are reflexive.

Module 9: Children and Vulnerable People

Time: 10 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Trainees apply the three-yeses rule without exception.

Facilitation:

The strictest rules in the practice. Three yeses, always: parent or guardian present, parent gives permission, child agrees — all three, every time, and a child's "no" outranks everyone's "yes." High fives are the default offering for children. Volunteers never work alone: pairs or groups, visible to each other at all times. There are no judgment calls in this module; that is the point of it.

Practice: Scenario cards: facilitator presents edge cases ("the parent is right over there," "the kid ran up first"). The correct answer to every card is the same: three yeses or a high five.

Module 10: The Hand-Off — When Someone Needs More Than a Hug

Time: 10 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Trainees respond to distress with presence and referral, never counseling.

Facilitation:

Sometimes the person at the booth is having the hardest day of their year. The volunteer's complete response: stay present (warm, calm, unhurried — no words needed); signal the event lead with a quiet gesture; hand the resource card, which says what the volunteer doesn't. In the United States the card carries the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988, free, 24/7). Outside the US, facilitators must localize the card to their national crisis line before their first event — see the adaptation page.

Volunteers do not open conversations about feelings, even kindly meant. Presence plus hand-off is not a lesser response; it is the practice's response, and it is complete.

Practice: Rehearse the three-step hand-off physically: presence posture, the signal, the card from the pocket. Muscle memory, not discussion.

Module 11: Practice Rounds & Certification

Time: 30 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Trainees complete the three rounds and are certified.

Facilitation:

Round 1 — the silent ask: button, posture, smile, panel; two lines maximum. Round 2 — cues and the tap-out: partner sends a signal; trainee releases instantly and closes with a nod. Round 3 — full silent run: ask, point to the panel, hug until the settling, award the giver button; no debrief, just the nod.

Certification requires: all three rounds completed, the background check cleared, and the trainee's signed agreement to the Facilitator Charter's volunteer provisions. Hand each new volunteer their button and name tag like a graduation — because it is. Close by reading the final stanza of "Is Free."

Cultural Adaptation & Localization

- Crisis line: replace 988 with your national equivalent on every card, panel, and document before your first event.

- Touch norms: the doctrine survives translation because it was never about arms. In cultures or contexts where a full embrace is inappropriate, the primary offering may be the side hug, hand-on-heart, or an equivalent local gesture of presence. The settling, the silence, the consent, the release — those are the practice.
- Language: translate freely under the license. Keep the H.U.G. acronym if your language permits a natural equivalent; otherwise teach the three steps without the acronym rather than forcing one.
- The poem may be translated with attribution; the original English text must accompany or be referenced in any translation.

Certification & the Charter (Summary)

Teaching this curriculum is open to all under the license. Operating under the “I Need A Hug Project” name and awarding certification requires signing the Facilitator Charter — a separate document containing the non-negotiables (background checks, free training, the tap-out, children's rules, the silent practice) and the governance provisions that keep this practice guru-proof: the practice belongs to no one; no teacher exception, ever; certification authority transfers from the founder to a facilitator council once five facilitators are certified; and revocation is immediate for named violations. If you intend to fly the flag, request the Charter from the Project.

Is Free

by the founder — written years before the Project, restored here to its original first person

The love I had was trapped within large barriers I'd built
Or were created by unwitting jealousy or guilt.
It's just that when I'd loved before I'd always gotten pain,
And it has taken years for me to learn to love again.
For some it may come easily, their love a waterfall,
But mine was locked securely inside my castle walls.

I never asked her to approach, no welcome did she find
The love that I protected was wounded, weak and blind.
But she it seemed was different, she innocently stood
And talked of things I'd dreamed of and asked me if I would
Let down the drawbridge of my mind that she might look inside
And though I was mistrusting, the doors I opened wide.

But I forgot to tell her that once she did come in,
The doors she entered through must then be closed again.
I wasn't sure that what I had might be of any worth
For what was in my castle was all I knew of earth.

It wasn't really very much, just some trinkets and some beads
And a garden that lay dormant and overrun with weeds.
But still I stood a sentry, and kept out visitors,
Until she walked so gently through my garden doors.

I watched her cautiously at first to see what she might bring,
And gently she began to teach my garden about spring.
She taught the butterflies to dance, the roses how to grow,
And where the weeds had once run wild, bright flowers she would sow.

Silently I watched her dance, and joy would fill my heart,
But with the joy came terror that someday she might depart.
“Why did you come within my walls? What do you want from me?”
“I ask for nothing in return,” she said, “My love is Free!”

“Is Free.” she said, and long I thought what that word free could mean
For though I'd traveled many miles, true freedom I'd not seen.
For every man I'd met had walls to lock in or lock out
And there was not a soul I'd seen who freely walked about.

For each man had his refuge, each woman had her place,
And each was bound securely to their private little space.
They walked about, but each was tethered tightly to a dream,

They were not what they wanted, and they were not what they seemed.

"Is Free" she said so easily and though I'd heard her word
spoken often by the ones outside, to be free is absurd.
The birds are free, the trees, the air, but people can't be so
They think too much, they cogitate; they're bound to what they know.

And so I searched to know what thought had bound her in its spell,
And though I watched her through the years, I simply couldn't tell.
"Is Free," she said and then I knew that freedom was her dream
And when I saw my doors shut tight, my heart let out a scream.

"No, don't want that, want anything, but that would make me grieve,
To open up my castle doors and then to see you leave.
I know my castle is not large, but it is safe and warm,
I could not bear to see you go or watch you come to harm."

She looked at me quite curiously and said, "Why would I go?"
For though she said "Free" easily, her dream she didn't know.
And all this time while I stood observing from afar,
She looked at me, quite lovingly, as freedom's guiding star.

"Why can't she see that I'm not free; my castle doors are closed.
Is someone who is free content to lock in what he knows?"
True freedom means there are no walls, there's just the universe.
And though I loved my castle, it now became a curse.

"How can I keep her locked inside when she wants to be free?
How can I let her go since she's become a part of me?
My castle was so different when she entered in to share
But if she left, the spring she brought would die from lack of care."

I knew I should be grateful, some gardens never bloom
But just the thought of parting would fill my heart with gloom.
I could not bear to watch her dance, for how could I replace
The void that would be left if I could not observe that face.

She watched me as I walked about, and she could sense my pain
And when she asked the reason why, I did try to explain.
But though I'd tell her slowly, and try to make it clear,
It seemed ridiculous to her that I should have such fear.

"...for fear's the biggest obstacle to living as we should,
And fear will stop a genius from becoming what he could.

You can't be frightened of what comes, for it will soon be past
And dwelling on a bad event will only make it last.

Don't let your mind be troubled by what should or shouldn't be,
For though I don't know much, I know that will not set you free.
You'll constantly be thinking about what you should have done
And when you're finished thinking, what you could have had is gone."

And though I knew that being was the most important thing
I could not stop the thoughts with which my head began to ring.
"But what if this, and what if that," my mind would say,
My castle would not be a home if she went away.

She laughed so gently through it all but said soon she must go.
I learned to laugh too with her in the joy I'd come to know.
We loved, we laughed, we talked to trees for she had given birth
To a new and wondrous ecstasy, I'd never known on earth.

She brought me to the mountaintop; she warmed me in the cold
And though I stepped out cautiously, her love would make me bold.
"Is Free," she'd say, "is free, is free, these words you must remember."
...Then suddenly she went away, one day late in December.

Quite suddenly, although she said, and I knew she must go,
She went away while children played with sleigh bells in the snow.
She did not want to go but knew it was the time.
And I knew too through parts of her that she had let be mine.

The garden she left still in bloom, the drawbridge still is down,
The butterflies she'd taught to dance still freely flit around.
The heart that truly will be free will learn to freely give
And through the doors she opened wide her love forever lives.

Note to the founder: this restoration to first person was performed editorially; please proof it against your original manuscript before publication.

The River

by the founder — the curriculum's teaching of don't count, written in verse years before the practice existed. Time measured is flow interrupted; the tadpoles who stop to ask each other's age stop moving at all.

Once within time, as time goes,
there was a moment...
then was not.

The tadpoles of the river time

were pushing shoving energy.
Some raced to meet the final tide,

some fought to negate the river flow.
But as they fought, and as they raced,
the river time, as we all know,
cared not at all about their plight
and moving slowly, ever slow,
palpates pouring purple pools
over and under colliding collision.

The river is a gentle wave,
a wandering most gracious host.
The waterfront knows the bounty of she
who comes to mingle with the sea.

The foolish game that tads will play,
to make you think they're really gay,
of pushing, pleading, bleeding hate
why can't they see it's all the fate
of too much time spent fighting hard
to speed or slow the river flow,
But on and on as she must go
to meet the ocean with her gifts
in happy union dancing lifts
the hearts and souls of those who sift
through all the hasty hoards.

Yin and Yang, two tads in time,
began to see why there is rhyme,
and separately they began to know
the peace of mind within the flow.

Setting in to know her well
they came to see she cast a spell.
Their tail's movement ceased to show
for time had bound them in her flow.

Silly, simple, super slow,
sally, soiree, ripple, roll,
bouncy borders, bubbly brew,
and through it all I know they grew
to love the river and loving still
to rise to fall to sup their fill.

In flowing still amidst the pain
of broken tads, they calm remain.

Yin was flowing bound to time
and suddenly he heard it climb
intense perfusion never sang
he glanced around, and there was Yang.

Conversing shyly, a common gauge,
they came to ask each other's age.
"I'm eleven warp going on fop",
said Yin and suddenly he felt Yang stop
"You're awfully old to be so young".
It's really funny what the tadpole tongue
will do to salvage its silly plight
by cutting time like pieces of tin
So instead of are, we have been.

Seeing the words,
how faulty they seem,
they paused not again,
but passed with the stream.

Note to the founder: transcribed from your manuscript; please proof before publication.

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