

# Understanding the Window of Tolerance

## Objective

To expand your window of tolerance and identify ways to manage hyperarousal and hypoarousal.

## What to Know

You can more easily cope with stressors and triggers when you can manage your emotions. If you struggle to manage the anxiety, anger, or pain brought on by everyday stressors, it is helpful to understand “the window of tolerance,” a concept originally developed by Dr. Dan Siegel. This refers to the optimal zone of arousal for you to function in a healthy manner day-to-day. If you learn to successfully operate within this window, you can begin to effectively manage and cope with emotions.

If you have a history of trauma, it can be even more difficult to stay present and calm – and you may have a very narrow window of tolerance. Daily stressors and triggers may frequently push you out of your window of tolerance. Minor stressors may cause you to get angry, numb out, or feel anxious – leading to hyperarousal or hypoarousal. Your window of tolerance might close altogether when you are:

- hungry or dehydrated
- exhausted
- feeling lonely or isolated
- in physical pain
- threatened
- scared
- reminded of painful memories

**What is Hyperarousal?** Known as the “fight, flight, or freeze response,” it is a heightened state of activation and energy. Your nervous system kicks into high alert even when there is no danger. You may be triggered by a perceived threat, traumatic memories, or certain emotions. Check off any of the following symptoms of hyperarousal you have experienced.

\_\_\_ angry outbursts

\_\_\_ feeling out of control

\_\_\_ impulsive or risky behavior

\_\_\_ overwhelming anxiety

\_\_\_ problems sleeping

\_\_\_ inability to focus or concentrate

\_\_\_ racing thoughts

- emotional overwhelm
- feeling unsafe
- panic
- tight or tense muscles
- defensiveness
- inability to make meaningful connections with others
- desire to run away
- lashing out at others
- other? \_\_\_\_\_

When do you find yourself hyperaroused?

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**What is Hypoarousal?** Known as the “shutdown” or “collapse” response, this state can be triggered by feeling threatened, recalling traumatic memories, or experiencing emotions associated with past trauma. Check off any of the following symptoms of hypoarousal you have experienced.

- binge watching shows
- depression
- lack of feelings, energy, and feeling “dead” inside
- feeling disconnected
- inability to say “no”
- ashamed
- binge eating episodes
- numbness or emptiness
- spacing out
- inability to be present or stay present with your feelings
- excessive drug or alcohol use
- staring blankly

\_\_\_\_ inability to speak

\_\_\_\_ feeling like you are outside your body or that your surroundings are “unreal”

\_\_\_\_ socially withdrawn

\_\_\_\_ other? \_\_\_\_\_

When do you find yourself hypoaroused?

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When you are in your window of tolerance, you may feel pressure or stress, but it does not bother you. You will know you are in your window when you can:

- effectively cope with what is happening in the moment.
- control your impulses.
- connect with others.
- tolerate your emotions.
- self-soothe in healthy ways.
- think and feel at the same time.
- adjust your reactions to fit situations.
- learn and process new information.

When do you find yourself in your window of tolerance?

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Depending on whether you are experiencing hypo- or hyperarousal, you can use different strategies to suit your needs.

When you are hypoaroused, try:

- physical movement.
- describing three things you see in your surroundings in full detail.
- smelling essential oils or other strong aromas.
- painting, drawing, or engaging in other artistic activities.
- mindfully eating crunchy food.
- stretching or doing yoga.
- using a heavy weighted blanket.
- doing any activity that fully engages your senses.

When you are hyperaroused, try:

- using diaphragmatic breathing (slow, deep breaths).
- shaking or stomping out excess energy.
- doing heavy work like lifting objects or pushups.
- exercising.
- playing a team sport.
- drinking from a straw.
- meditating.
- using any healthy strategy to release anger.

To expand your window of tolerance and increase your capacity to experience emotions, you first must recognize when you are experiencing emotions outside your tolerable zone. Then you can identify how you feel and how your emotions impact your body. You can begin to manage your window of tolerance by:

- becoming aware of how you feel and symptoms you are experiencing.
- learning techniques for regulating intense emotions.
- using strategies to tolerate discomfort and distress.

## **What to Do**

Over the next two weeks, use the following techniques (or any of the strategies described above) when you find yourself outside your window of tolerance.

- Breathwork
- Guided Imagery – imagine yourself on a swing, paying attention to the feeling of movement
- Positive Containment Imagery – place the intrusive thoughts or images in a chest or other container and lock it securely until you are ready to process them
- Safe Place Imagery – imagine yourself in a real or imaginary place where you feel calm and content

Note the date and whether you were hyper- or hypoaroused. Use a rating scale from 0-10 to rate your level of hyper/hypoarousal before and after you use a tool or technique, where 0 = extremely hypoaroused, and 10 = extremely hyperaroused. Describe your feelings and how they are impacting your physical body. Describe the technique you use or activity you engage in to move back into your window of tolerance. Finally, describe whether the technique or tool was effective.

Date	Hyper- or hypoaroused?	Feelings	Impact on body	Level before	Technique used	Effective? Y / N	Level after

Did this exercise help you expand your window of tolerance and identify ways to manage hyperarousal and hypoarousal? Why or why not?

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**Reflections on This Exercise**

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_  
 (1 = not very helpful, to 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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