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understanding the Window of Tolerance

WHAT IS THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE?

The Window of Tolerance is the optimal zone of arousal where a person is best able to function and respond to everyday stressors.

When inside this window, individuals feel balanced, connected, and in control.

Stepping outside your window of tolerance is a signal – either of past survival patterns or a present need that’s asking for a caring response.

EMOTIONAL STATES EXPLAINED



HYPERAROUSAL

(Fight or Flight)

This state occurs above the window of tolerance. It’s marked by anxiety, panic, racing thoughts, anger, or emotional overwhelm. The nervous system is in overdrive.

OPTIMAL AROUSAL ZONE

(inside the window of tolerance)

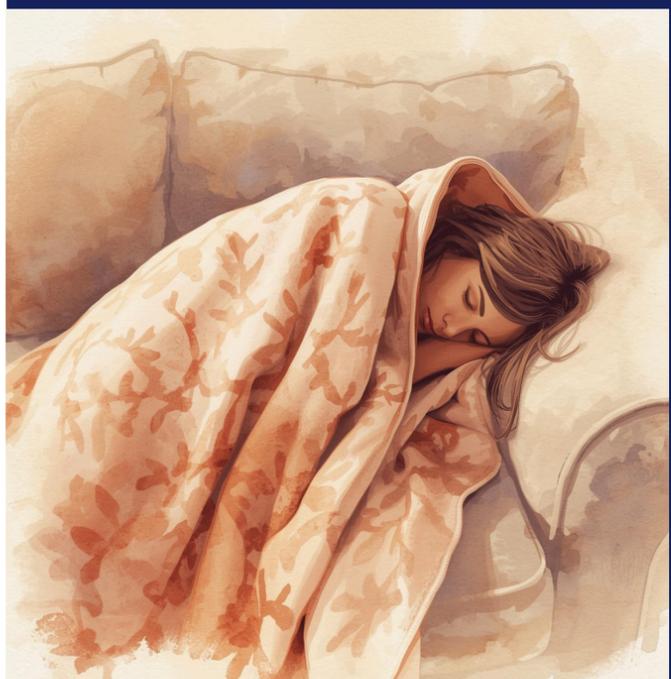
This represents a balanced state where you feel calm, focused, and engaged.



HYPOAROUSAL

(Freeze or Shutdown)

This state occurs below the window of tolerance. It’s characterized by numbness, dissociation, exhaustion, or feeling disconnected and helpless.



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Simple Steps to Changing your State

SELF-AWARENESS = STRENGTH

Step 1: Notice + Name Your State

Begin by asking : "Where am I right now?" "Am I out of my window of tolerance?"

Naming your state invites awareness, which is necessary for healing.

"My heart is racing, I'm in hyperarousal"

"I'm feeling foggy, I'm in hypoarousal"

Naming = wisdom.

SELF-COMPASSION = HEALING

Step 2: Offer Yourself Compassion

If you're outside your window of tolerance, it means your nervous system is trying to protect you.

You're not broken — you're overwhelmed.

What you need now is **care**, not judgment.

🤍 "This is hard. I deserve support right now."

REGULATION STARTS WITH CARE, NOT FIXING

When you begin with awareness and kindness, you're working with your nervous system, not against it — making every regulation strategy more grounded and effective.



Middle Way Psychotherapy

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learning Strategies for Regulation

SUPPORT FOR HYPERAROUSAL

Step 3 for Hyperarousal: Choose Soothing Strategies

Every moment of awareness and care is regulation.
Even if it's messy. Even if it takes time.

01

Ground Your Body

- Press your feet into the floor
- Hold something cool (ice, stone, damp cloth)
- Do a body scan from head to toe

02

Breathe to Soothe

Box breathing

- Inhale 4s → Hold 4s → Exhale 4s → Hold 4s
- Slow exhale: Breathe in 4, out 6
- Feel your breath move your belly, not just your chest

03

Use Your Senses

- Listen to soothing music or nature sounds
- Smell lavender or another calming scent
- Watch clouds move across the sky

04

Gently Reassure Yourself

"I've felt this before,
and it passed."

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SUPPORT FOR HYPOAROUSAL

Step 3 for Hypoarousal: Choose gentle activating strategies

Every time you notice your state and respond with care, you're regulating. Even if change takes time.

Stimulate Your Senses

01

- Hold something textured, warm, or cold
- Drink a glass of cold water or something citrusy or carbonated
- Turn on a light or open a window
- Chew minty gum or bite into something sour

02

Use Your Voice

- Hum, sing, or chant
- Speak your name aloud
- Read something aloud with emotion
- Talk to a pet or supportive person (even if briefly)

Reorient to the Present

03

- Look around and describe where you are
- Name 3 colors you see around you
- Press your feet into the ground and say: "I'm here."
- Tap your arms or legs rhythmically

04

Take Small Steps

Ask yourself, "What is one small step I can take?"

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