

# A note on the Window of Tolerance

**What is the window of tolerance?** Dr Dan Siegel's window of tolerance model is a way to help us understand how stress affects our brains and bodies. In every day life, there will always be things that happen that cause us to feel stressed. In many ways, these are unavoidable. We might be feeling tired, feeling as though there are too many plates to spin or our resources of patience and energy may be run dry. Every day stresses can be seemingly trivial things such as waiting in a queue through to minor disagreements with others that escalate.

When we have a large network of supportive relationships around us and a good, well-practised set of coping strategies we can develop our levels of resilience. When our levels of resilience are good we are more likely to be able to manage our emotions. It is likely that we will have been taught/shown how to do this by a significant adult in our childhood. This adult is likely to have quite a large window of tolerance; a zone of optimal arousal in which they feel balanced, calm and able to focus. When every day stresses occur, the adult is likely to have been able to absorb spikes both in their, and our levels of stress hormones which were released in reaction to events. Unfortunately, there will always be moments when we all feel our resources and resilience are running on empty and events cause our stress hormone levels to spike out of our window of tolerance. When this happens we may enter a zone of hyperarousal where our behaviour is may become agitated, aggressive, hypervigilant, panicky or anxious. Alternatively it is also possible that we may enter a state of hypo arousal where we withdraw, become numb to emotion and have poor self-care practice.

In such moments, our brains and our bodies are entering 'survival states' and triggering us to have fight, flight or freeze reactions. These can cause the behaviours described above. When operating in one of these states we may find it difficult to think rationally or reason and may need assistance in regulating our emotions to re-enter the zone of optimal arousal or the window of tolerance. See the guide to emotional regulation for more information on ways to help ground another person or child in this state.

**Traumatic Stress** If we have experienced adversity, loss or trauma either currently or in our past we are more likely to have a smaller window of tolerance. However it is important to remember that we are all unique. Some of us may have experienced trauma but also had access to a network of supportive relationships and good coping skills. Some of us may have experienced complex trauma in our childhoods and therefore may have experienced higher levels of traumatic stress and toxic levels of stress hormones such as adrenaline or cortisol. Our stress levels rise when we feel unsafe, trapped, powerless or lacking in connection to others. These emotions make us more likely to enter a 'survival state' or fight, flight, freeze response in reaction to a perceived danger or threat. Depending on our circumstances, we may not have developed coping strategies or the ability to regulate our emotions well, particularly if we haven't had the opportunity to learn these skills from a significant adult. As a result, not only may our window of tolerance be reduced in size but we are more likely to spend greater periods of time living in 'survival states' as a result of our experiences. When experiencing trauma, loss or adversity we may be more likely to behave in ways that seem 'irrational' or 'unpredictable'; in a zone of hyper or hypo arousal. In fact these behaviours are communicating that we have an unmet need for connection or safety. It may also be the case that if we had a traumatic past we are more likely to enter 'survival states' if we are reminded of these events. We may also behave in this way as this is a defence strategy that has worked previously and may therefore need support to regulate our emotions.

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