

Window of Tolerance Handout & Self-Regulation Tools

The Window of Tolerance

Hyperarousal State	Window of Tolerance Optimal State	Hypoarousal State
<p>Becoming too aroused</p> <p>Physical Signs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Shakiness ➤ Impulsivity <p>Emotional Signs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Rage ➤ Feeling unsafe ➤ Defensiveness ➤ Overwhelmed <p>Cognitive Signs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Racing thoughts ➤ Obsessive thoughts ➤ Intrusive imagery 	<p>Natural fluctuation in arousal in response to environmental cues</p> <p>Physical, emotional and cognitive responses are tolerable and congruent with the present</p>	<p>Shutting down or having too little arousal</p> <p>Physical Signs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Physical Immobilization ➤ Lethargy ➤ Passivity <p>Emotional Signs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Feeling numb ➤ Feeling disconnected <p>Cognitive Signs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Scattered Thoughts ➤ Inability to think clearly
<p>Extreme ◀ Stress Reaction</p>		<p>Extreme Stress ▶ Reaction</p>

Techniques using the Power of Movement

When we talk about a wound, we can be propelled into that situation as if we are back there again. These are commonly called flashbacks and these can cause us to be re-traumatized. To prevent this occurrence, we want to practice staying in the present. The strategies below can help us do this. It is recommended that you practice these regularly just as you would regularly engage in an exercise routine. This regularity will help the tool to be more effective when using to stay in the present and within the optimal window of tolerance.

- Active Orienting Exercise**
When you feel yourself getting stuck in the past, immediately pause from thinking about your past trauma and look around the room (wherever you are) and find 4 objects that are the same color. Name those objects out loud. This tool will help you to slow down your automatic unhelpful response and bring you back into the Window of Tolerance.
- Senses Orienting Exercise**
To stop both hypo and hyperarousal responses, stand up and walk around the room. As you walk, focus your awareness on the movement of your legs and on your capacity to move toward and away from objects in the room. With each step, speak aloud exactly what you are doing (e.g. "I am now moving toward the desk, I can feel my knees bending and the soles of my feet as they push into the floor, etc."). This tool will help you to regain awareness and control of your body and counterbalance feeling out of control.
- Posture Orienting Exercise**
Focusing on your posture can be helpful in regaining your feeling of identity and control. This exercise can be done from a sitting position or a standing position. First, focus on straightening your neck so that your head is perfectly aligned with the spine. Be sure that your chin is not jutting forward. Second, stiffen your spine so that it stretches and straightens out. Third, whether sitting or standing, position your feet directly beneath the pelvis area and push flat into the floor. The end result should feel as if you are being lifted upward by the crown of your head while keeping your feet planted firmly on the floor.

Techniques using the Power of Breathing

When we talk about a wound, we can immediately move to hyperarousal emotions (feeling too much - feeling rage, feeling unsafe, racing thoughts, shaking, etc.) or hypoarousal (feeling too little - feeling numb, disconnected, scattered thought, etc.). When this happens, we need to use the power of our breathing to get us back into the optimal state (feeling safe, able to tolerate our feelings, connected to the present, etc.). Practice these breathing exercises at home until you get really good at them and then use them whenever you feel too much or feel too little.

- Simple Breathing Exercise**
Take four or five deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose and exhale through your mouth, focusing on the exhaled breath. This exercise will activate the parasympathetic nervous system and is helpful in countering the hyperarousal state. This exercise can be repeated several times.
- Circle Breathing Exercise**
Inhale a breath while raising your arms from your sides to over your head. Exhale while lowering your arms back to your sides. Repeat 5 to 10 times. This exercise is most effective if practiced regularly.
- Prayer Breathing Exercise**
This exercise combines breathing and prayer with God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or Your Higher Power. Inhale deeply and then exhale, pushing all the air out of your body. Repeat with your eyes closed as you meditate on a prayer such as "God, I know you are with me now and I choose to think of your goodness and beauty", or on a favorite passage such as a scripture passage from the Bible – Psalm 23:4 "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." This exercise can be repeated as many times as desired.

Ogden, Pat, Kekuni Minton, and Clair Pain. (2006). *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

Van der Kolk, Bessel A. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.