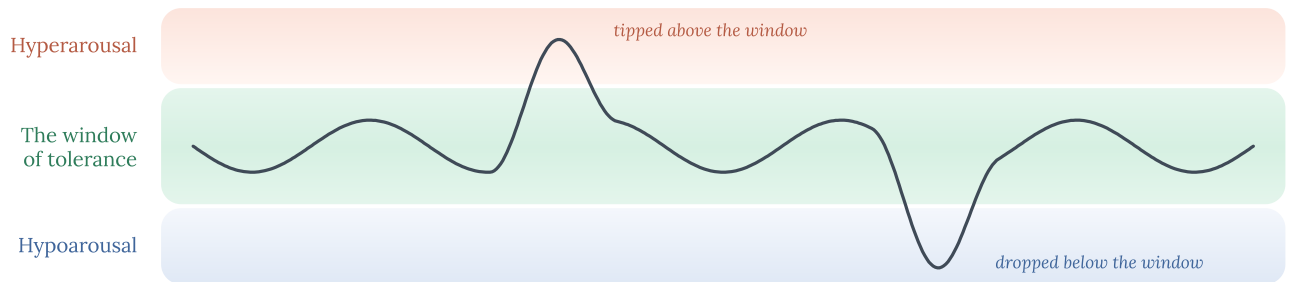


The Window of Tolerance

Understanding your zones of arousal

Our nervous system is always shifting between activation and rest. When arousal stays within a manageable range, we can think clearly, feel our feelings and respond flexibly: this is the **window of tolerance**, a term introduced by psychiatrist Dan Siegel. Outside it, the body moves into one of two protective states.



Ups and downs within the window are normal. Stress can push us above it, or drop us below it.

01 Three zones

What each can look and feel like

TOO MUCH · HIGH AROUSAL

Hyperarousal

The body mobilises for danger: fight or flight.

IN THE BODY

- Racing heart, fast breathing
- Tension, sweating, restlessness

IN THE MIND

- Racing thoughts, feeling on edge
- Panic, irritability, hard to reason

IN BEHAVIOUR

- Reactivity, anger, agitation
- An urge to escape or take control

JUST RIGHT · MANAGEABLE

The window

Alert but settled. Feelings can rise and fall without taking over.

IN THE BODY

- Steadier heart rate and breathing
- Relaxed muscles, available energy

IN THE MIND

- Clear thinking, curiosity
- Able to reflect before reacting

IN BEHAVIOUR

- Present and engaged
- Able to connect and problem-solve

TOO LITTLE · LOW AROUSAL

Hypoarousal

The body shuts down to conserve: freeze or collapse.

IN THE BODY

- Low energy, heaviness
- Numbness, reduced sensation

IN THE MIND

- Fog, blankness, emptiness
- Feeling far away or disconnected

IN BEHAVIOUR

- Withdrawing, going quiet
- Low motivation, flat mood

02 Your window can change size

It can narrow with...

stress, poor sleep, illness, hunger, reminders of past trauma, or feeling unsafe or alone. A narrow window means smaller things tip us out of it.

It can widen with...

safety, supportive relationships, rest, and regular practice of regulation skills. Therapy often works gradually at the edges of the window.

03 Finding your way back

Try what fits; notice what helps

TO SETTLE HYPERAROUSAL

- Slow breathing with a longer out-breath
- Grounding: name what you can see, hear and feel
- Cool water on your face or hands
- Movement: walk, stretch, shake out tension

TO STAY IN THE WINDOW

- Notice early signs of drifting out
- Regular sleep, meals and movement
- Time with people who feel safe
- Small daily moments of calm

TO GENTLY LIFT HYPOAROUSAL

- Gentle movement: stand, stretch, change position
- Sensory input: texture, temperature, sound, scent
- Orient to the room: name objects and colours
- Connect with a safe, familiar person or voice

04 Knowing my own window

My early signs of moving above the window...

My early signs of dropping below the window...

What helps me come back into my window...

A note on the science

You may hear these states described with polyvagal terms such as “ventral” and “dorsal vagal”. That theory is popular in therapy but its biological claims are debated by researchers (Grossman, 2023). The window of tolerance is best used as a practical map, not a precise model of the nervous system.

SOURCES

Grossman, P. (2023). Fundamental challenges and likely refutations of the five basic premises of the polyvagal theory. *Biological Psychology*, 180, 108589. · Ogden, P., & Minton, K. (2000). Sensorimotor psychotherapy: One method for processing traumatic memory. *Traumatology*, 6(3), 149–173. · Porges, S. W. (2011). *The polyvagal theory*. W. W. Norton. · Siegel, D. J. (1999). *The developing mind*. Guilford Press.