The Window of Tolerance

PSYCHOEDUCATION & SELF-REFLECTION · AROUSAL, REGULATION AND CAPACITY

The zone where we can think, feel and respond, and what happens at its edges

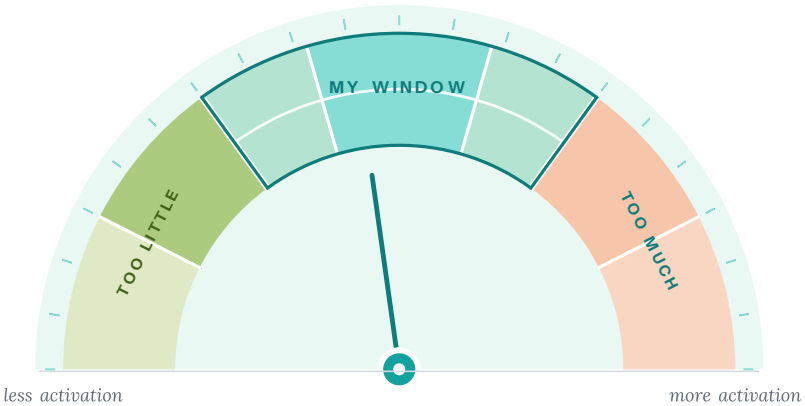
Psychiatrist Daniel Siegel described a "window" of arousal in which we can feel strong emotions and still think clearly and respond in ways that fit the situation. When we're pushed beyond it, the body may shift into too much activation or too little. It is a widely used clinical model rather than a precisely measured system: a map for noticing, not a test.

BELOW THE WINDOW

Hypoarousal

the system turns down

- numb, flat or far away
- foggy, hard to think
- heavy, slowed, low energy
- withdrawing, going quiet



ABOVE THE WINDOW

Hyperarousal

the system turns up

- racing heart and thoughts
- on edge, scanning for danger
- anxious, angry, overwhelmed
- can't settle or switch off

Within the window: able to think, feel and respond

emotions can be strong, and still bearable

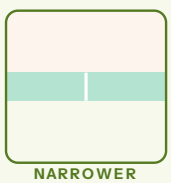
01 What each zone can feel like

everyone's signs are a little different

	BELOW THE WINDOW Too little	WITHIN THE WINDOW Manageable	ABOVE THE WINDOW Too much
BODY	Heavy, numb, slowed down, low energy, feeling far away	Breathing steady enough; able to rest, move and act	Racing heart, fast breathing, tense muscles, feeling hot, shaky or restless
THOUGHTS	Foggy or blank; hard to concentrate or find words	Able to think things through, reflect and stay curious	Racing or scattered; on high alert; scanning for danger
FEELINGS	Flat, empty, cut off or disconnected	Emotions can be strong, but feel bearable	Anxious, panicky, angry, overwhelmed
ACTIONS	Withdrawing, going quiet, freezing, "spacing out"	Connected and flexible; responding rather than reacting	Snapping, arguing, wanting to escape, unable to settle

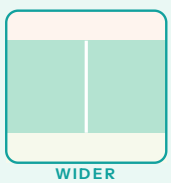
02 The window can change size

it isn't fixed, and it isn't a measure of strength



What may narrow it

- Poor sleep, hunger, illness or pain
- Ongoing stress or feeling unsafe
- Reminders of difficult past experiences
- Feeling alone or unsupported



What may widen it over time

- Rest, routine and regular meals
- Supportive, safe relationships
- Practising settling skills when calm
- Treating yourself with patience

A note on the evidence

The model draws on research into stress and arousal, but the window itself hasn't been directly measured. Use it as a guide alongside your own experience.

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Fill in what feels manageable; you can pause, skip anything, or come back to it later.

03 My window map

what I notice in each zone, and what helps

ABOVE Too much *hyperarousal*	When I'm here, I notice…	What helps me come down…
WITHIN Manageable *my window*	When I'm here, I notice…	What helps me stay here…
BELOW Too little *hypoarousal*	When I'm here, I notice…	What helps me come back up…

04 My early warning signs

the sooner I notice, the more choice I have

The first signs I'm moving up

The first signs I'm moving down

05 Ideas to try

tick any you'd like to experiment with

If I'm above the window: settling down

- ○ a slower, longer out-breath
- ○ feet on the floor
- ○ naming five things I can see
- ○ cool water on my hands
- ○ a short walk or stretch
- ○ stepping away for a moment

If I'm below the window: gently waking up

- ○ standing up and moving
- ○ changing my posture
- ○ noticing colours and sounds
- ○ a fresh taste or smell
- ○ fresh air
- ○ a message to someone safe

Practise when you're feeling fairly settled, so these come more easily later. What helps varies from person to person, and from day to day.

06 My week

where was I, most of the time?

○ above ○ within ○ below

DAY	MORNING	AFTERNOON	EVENING	WHAT WAS HAPPENING
Mon	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	
Tue	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	
Wed	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	
Thu	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	
Fri	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	
Sat	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	
Sun	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	

07 Reflecting

at the end of the week

What seemed to widen my window this week

What I'd like to talk about

SOURCES

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