



Your Window of Tolerance, Explained Simply

An explainer and one-week tracker · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
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At a glance

- Everyone has a "window" where stress feels manageable.
- Outside it, the body shifts into "too much" (hyperarousal) or "too little" (hypoarousal).
- Leaving your window is a nervous system response, not a character flaw. And your window can grow.

What is the window of tolerance?

Psychiatrist Dr. Daniel Siegel coined the term "window of tolerance" to describe the zone where you can experience stress and emotion and still think clearly. Inside your window, you can feel upset and still respond. You can listen, make decisions, and stay connected to the people around you.

When stress builds faster than you can process it, the nervous system moves you out of the window. This isn't a choice. It's your body trying to protect you.

HYPERAROUSAL · "Too much"

Racing thoughts, panic, anger, feeling flooded,
restless, on edge, can't sleep

YOUR WINDOW OF TOLERANCE · "I can handle this"

Present, curious, able to think and feel at the same time,
connected to others, able to problem-solve

HYPOAROUSAL · "Too little"

Numb, shut down, foggy, exhausted, disconnected,
frozen, "checked out"

The three zones

Zone	What it can feel like	What tends to help
Hyperarousal ("too much")	Racing heart, panic, anger, overthinking, feeling flooded, can't sit still or sleep	Slowing down: long exhales, cold water on hands, slow walking, lowering stimulation
Window of tolerance	Present, curious, able to feel and think at the same time, open to others	Protecting what keeps you here: rest, routine, connection, movement
Hypoarousal ("too little")	Numb, foggy, exhausted, frozen, disconnected, "checked out," hard to start anything	Gently energizing: stand up, stretch, name five things you see, music, a warm drink, reaching out

Notice that the two zones outside the window need opposite strategies. Telling someone who is shut down to "just relax" doesn't help. Neither does telling someone in panic to "push through."

Why some people's windows feel narrow

Your window isn't fixed. It can shrink during chronic stress, poor sleep, illness, grief, or burnout, and it is often narrower for people who have experienced trauma. Small things then tip you out of your window more easily. With support and practice, the window can widen again.

What the research says

Siegel introduced the window of tolerance concept to describe optimal arousal for processing experience (Siegel, 1999).

Trauma-focused approaches such as sensorimotor psychotherapy use the window to help clients notice and regulate arousal through the body (Ogden, Minton & Pain, 2006).

Slow breathing with longer exhales is associated with reduced physiological arousal and improved mood, even in brief daily practice (Balban et al., 2023).

Tool: My Window of Tolerance Tracker

For one week, check in three times a day. Mark where you are: H (hyperarousal), W (in my window), or L (hypoarousal). Then note what moved you and what helped.

Day	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	What moved me out?	What helped me return?
Mon					
Tue					
Wed					
Thu					
Fri					
Sat					
Sun					

My personal window guide

My early signs that I'm moving into "too much":

My early signs that I'm moving into "too little":

Things that bring me back when I'm in "too much":

Things that bring me back when I'm in "too little":

Things that widen my window over time (sleep, people, places, routines):

When to reach out for support

If you leave your window often, stay outside it for long periods, or past experiences keep pulling you out, therapy can help you understand your patterns and safely widen your window.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Balban, M. Y., et al. (2023). Brief structured respiration practices enhance mood and reduce physiological arousal. *Cell Reports Medicine*, 4(1), 100895.

Ogden, P., Minton, K., & Pain, C. (2006). *Trauma and the body: A sensorimotor approach to psychotherapy*. W. W. Norton.

Siegel, D. J. (1999). *The developing mind: Toward a neurobiology of interpersonal experience*. Guilford Press.

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