

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# The Window of Tolerance: Learning to Regulate Yourself

### AGENDA

- Welcome and reflections on previous session
- Homework discussion
- Break
- Topic: The Window of Tolerance: Learning to Regulate Yourself
  - Introduction
  - The Window of Tolerance for Arousal
  - Experiencing Too Much: Hyperarousal
  - Tips for Coping With Experiencing Too Much
  - Experiencing Too Little: Hypoarousal
  - Tips for Coping With Experiencing Too Little
- Homework
  - Reread the chapter.
  - Complete Homework Sheet 18.1, Learning About Your Window of Tolerance.
  - Complete Homework Sheet 18.2, Your Tips for Coping With Feeling Too Much or Too Little.

### Introduction

As we noted in the previous chapter, emotion regulation is an essential part of healing. However, many people with a dissociative disorder tend to experience too much or too little in many different areas of life, not only with emotions. They may feel every little ache and pain or change in their body (too much), or they may not feel pain when injured or feel physically numb all over (too little).

They may seek out experiences that may be risky (thrill seeking) or avoid new life experiences altogether. They may overthink and be unable to turn off their thoughts, while others may be unable to think much at all and feel blank. Some are highly sensitive to changes in their surroundings, noticing every little thing such that it becomes hard to concentrate, while others are very inattentive to their surroundings. And of course, dissociative parts intrude into the present with unregulated experiences, contributing to feeling too much or too little.

Feeling too much and too little are actually two sides of the same coin: Both indicate difficulties with regulation of physiological arousal. Your arousal level simply indicates how physically and emotionally responsive or even reactive you, or certain parts of you, are to certain stimuli. In particular, you may become dysregulated when you react to stimuli that are especially emotional or stressful for you, such as learning a difficult new skill, having an argument with your partner or friend, driving in traffic, having an unpleasant feeling, or remembering something painful. In order to function at our best, we all need an optimal arousal level—not too high and not too low, depending on the level needed for the current circumstance. In this chapter you will begin to learn how to regulate or modulate your arousal to manageable levels.

## **The Window of Tolerance for Arousal**

A major goal in therapy is to support you, and all parts of yourself, to learn how to experience “enough,” rather than too much or too little. This range of optimal arousal is called your *window of tolerance* (Ogden et al., 2006; Siegel, 1999; Van der Hart et al., 2006) (see figure 18.1). It is the range of experiential intensity that is tolerable for each part of you and within which you can learn, have an inner sense of safety, and be engaged with life. You may know from experience that you learn most effectively and feel most comfortable when you are not too agitated or anxious, nor too tired, sleepy, or shut down emotionally. This is true for all parts of you.

When you, or other parts of yourself, are outside your window of tolerance, you experience too much arousal, termed *hyperarousal*, or not enough, termed *hypoarousal*. Sometimes your window of tolerance might be quite small, like a window that is barely cracked open. Then you, or some parts of yourself, can be

overwhelmed quickly and feel out of control or even completely shut down. In that case, your task is to widen your window of tolerance a little bit at a time until it is sufficient for coping with daily life.

Each of us has our rather unique range of what we can tolerate; our window of tolerance is to some degree defined by our inborn temperament and natural level of physiological reactivity. But it is also defined by experiences. When you have been chronically overwhelmed, your ability to regulate your physiological arousal is eventually compromised.

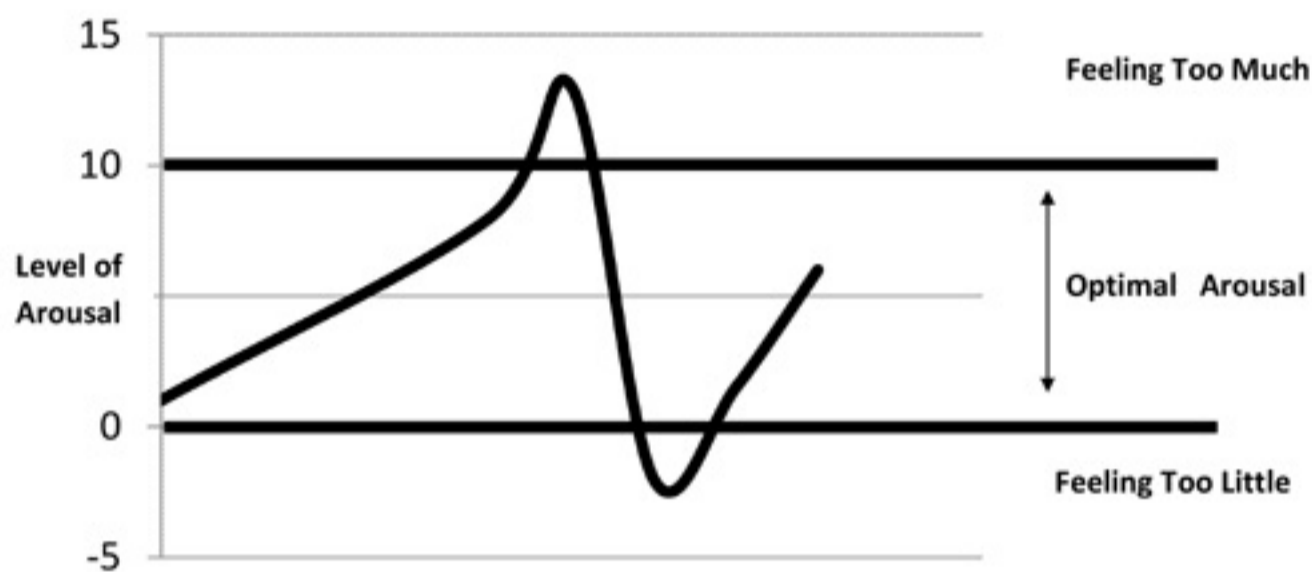


Figure 18.1. Window of Tolerance. Adapted from Ogden et al., 2006; Siegel, 1999; and Van der Hart et al., 2006.

### *Auto- and Relational Regulation*

People regulate themselves by using a combination of relational and self-regulation. The first is referred to as *interactive regulation*, and the second, *auto-regulation* (Schoore, 2001). Early caregivers ideally help soothe and regulate an infant or young child by nurturing, encouraging, attending to emotional and physical needs, and comforting. This lays the groundwork for individuals to be able to regulate themselves as they grow and develop. As adults, we call upon others to support us when we are upset, because it can be comforting to have another person present, and he or she helps us view our problems from other helpful perspectives. And at times, others are not available or needed. Then we are able to regulate ourselves by reassuring ourselves, slowing down to reflect, practicing calming exercises, or doing things that help ourselves feel better.

The ability to employ a balance of auto- and relational regulation is important. However, some people find it hard to rely

on others for any kind of support, that is, they do not use relational regulation. Others find it hard to rely on themselves, that is, they do not use auto-regulation. Both groups are at a significant disadvantage, since we all encounter situations in which one way of regulating is not sufficient or appropriate. We will discuss more about auto- and relational regulation in [chapter 29](#) on resolving relational conflicts.

### *Lack of Reflection*

A major difficulty in emotional dysregulation is that you are, at times, unable to reflect on what you are feeling, but instead are just “in” the feeling, acting blindly and not able to think clearly. You may find that emotions from dissociative parts of yourself intrude into your awareness. You may not always know where these emotions are coming from, as though they are “out of the blue,” and this adds to how overwhelming and frightening they can feel.

### *Avoidance of Emotion*

Most people with complex dissociative disorders are very adept at avoiding emotions. And there are certainly times when it is important to focus on the task at hand and wait to deal with your emotions until a later time. Although avoiding overwhelming or intense feelings may help you function in daily life in the short run, it also leaves you and other parts of you devoid of rich and meaningful connections to yourself, to safe others, and to experiences that make life worth living. And you also have little ability to resolve painful or traumatic experiences.

Perhaps only certain experiences, such as having flashbacks, or the threat of losing a relationship, push you, or some parts of you, out of your optimal level of arousal. But the more afraid or ashamed you are of your inner experiences, the more avoidant of inner parts of yourself, the less ability to reflect, and the more unresolved conflicts or traumatic memories you have, the harder it is to stay within your window of tolerance. Thus, being able to reflect is of prime importance in helping yourself learn to cope with your emotions (review [chapter 6](#) on learning to reflect).

As a first step, you need to find your window of tolerance and learn to stay within it more consistently, and then gradually learn to widen your tolerance level, like fully opening a window that had only been cracked open previously. Each part of you will need to

learn to become more regulated. Once your tolerance level as a whole person is wider, you can have a much broader range of experiences that do not overload you. Overwhelmed parts of yourself can feel calmer and more focused, while numb or avoidant parts feel more capable of tolerating emotions and other inner experiences. Thus, all parts of you gradually learn how to regulate emotions and arousal levels, and each part of you can learn to help other parts so that you, as a whole person, learn to deal with emotions and all other experiences in ways that are more constructive and adaptive. And as you learn not to judge your emotions and other inner experiences and are able to reflect on them without so much avoidance, you will find your window of tolerance will increase, that is, you have more tolerance for a wider range of experiential intensity.

A number of exercises in earlier sessions are actually designed to help with emotion regulation and forming a healthy window of tolerance, such as learning to reflect ([chapter 6](#)) and creating an inner sense of safety for all parts of yourself ([chapter 8](#)). The chapter on sleep ([chapter 9](#)) contains methods to soothe yourself when you wake up feeling anxious or scared during the night. The relaxation kit ([chapter 11](#)) furnishes you with a list of activities and ways that help you and all parts of you feel more pleasant and relaxed.

Next we explore some of the problems and solutions for experiencing too much and too little.

## **Experiencing Too Much: Hyperarousal**

Typically, some dissociative parts of yourself chronically experience too much, that is, are hyperaroused, because they are stuck in traumatic experiences and feel overwhelmed by fear, pain, shame, and so forth. Or perhaps you, as a whole person, generally feel so sensitive and edgy that it is very easy for you to become overwhelmed and upset in daily life, even when you are not bothered by traumatic memories. You, or some parts of you, might be upset by situations that generally are of little consequence to others, particularly small relational upsets or conflicts, or a last minute change of plans. Once you are upset—agitated, anxious, scared, or angry—it might be hard to calm yourself down (auto-regulation). Time may seem slowed down as though you will be

upset forever, and you cannot remember being calm. This makes you even more upset and urgent to stop what you are feeling.

When you are overwhelmed, your judgment is not at its best and you, or another part of you, may impulsively try to stop the intensity of your feelings by acting in ways that may not be in your own best interest in the long run. For instance, people may drink, use drugs, harm themselves physically, get into fights, say things they later regret, or isolate from others. You may find yourself puzzled about why you are so upset and cannot seem to understand what happened: This sometimes occurs when a dissociative part of you has become triggered without your awareness.

## **Tips for Coping With Experiencing Too Much**

There are a number of ways to help yourself when you are feeling overwhelmed. You can temporarily distract yourself and all parts of yourself. You can contain particular feelings or memories or parts of yourself in a safe place. You can express your emotions appropriately. You can reassure and soothe parts of yourself. And you can practice grounding exercises to help keep you in the present.

You will receive the most benefit from the following tips when you are able to reflect on what has evoked your hyperarousal and begin to develop awareness of the struggles of various parts of you that contribute to feeling too much. Empathic understanding of your inner struggles and a willingness to seek out healthy coping strategies to help all parts of yourself are essential to your healing. Without inner awareness and empathy, most coping strategies are not very effective.

### ***Distraction***

Temporary distractions help everyone who is feeling overwhelmed from time to time. But it is important for all parts of you to understand that conscious and voluntary distraction as a temporary coping strategy is *not* the same as persistently avoiding the needs of parts of you. Temporary distraction is just a way to slow down your hyperarousal, like using a “reset” button. It gives you some time where you can take a deep breath and rest, so you feel more able and ready to cope with your feelings. An apt analogy is staying busy to take your mind off of a strained muscle while you continue

to do the right things to help it heal, since focusing on the pain will not alleviate it and will often make it seem worse. You do not ignore the need to tend to your injury, but once you have done all you can, you may distract yourself as you heal.

Distract yourself with healthy activities and support all parts of yourself to refocus on something other than what you are feeling. However, avoid working too much or engaging in other compulsive distractions that will further stress you. When you distract yourself, always make a promise to yourself that you will return later to what is overwhelming, as soon as you are able.

What works for distraction may vary according to the way in which you are feeling overwhelmed. For example, if you feel overwhelmed with anger you might find a physical activity like walking, running, or gardening helpful. But if you, or parts of you, feel intensely sad, you might chose a soothing activity like watching a nice movie, reading a (children's) book, listening to calm music, or going to your safe inner place. Try choosing activities that match what you are feeling and that are agreeable to all parts of you. Following are additional suggestions for distracting activities.

- Exercise or take a brisk walk; changing your physiology can change how you feel. Encourage all parts of yourself to experience the walk.
- Listen to music while singing the lyrics.
- Do something pleasant or fun that all parts of you can enjoy.
- Call a friend and get together. Talking with another person (not about the problem that is overwhelming you) can take your mind of yourself for a while.
- Engage in an activity that requires concentration, for example, a hobby, a crossword puzzle, or a computer game. Try to encourage all parts of yourself to concentrate on the same thing at the same time.
- Read an interesting or nice book that is not upsetting to any part of you.
- Watch a comedy program or read a funny book. Again, encourage all parts of you to focus on the same activity at the same time. Laughter is a great distracter, and it helps you feel better, too.

## *Containment*

Contain, but do not ignore, feelings and parts of yourself. Containment is entirely different from “getting rid” of your feelings. When you contain a feeling or memory, and thus often a dissociative part of yourself, you are saying to yourself, “*Not now, but I will return to this later.*” You are making a promise to all parts of yourself to make the time and energy to deal with it in the right place at the right time. Be sure to take the time to check for internal agreement among parts to contain an experience temporarily.

You can use countless containment images: a bank vault, floating up in a balloon floating high in the air, a submarine, a computer file, a video, and so on. Use your own images that fit for you or parts of you.

A different way to contain is to write or to use art to express what you are experiencing. If this evokes too much for you, there are other ways to contain. But some people find it helps to put their experience on paper or canvas and then leave it there for later. You may allow some parts of you to use this method if it is helpful, while other parts need not be present, for example, by staying in their inner safe place. You can put away these writings or drawings or take them to your therapy appointments to help you move forward in your healing.

## *Calming and Soothing Yourself*

When you soothe and reassure yourself, you are not telling yourself to stop having negative feelings, for example, “*Shut up and don’t cry. Put your happy face on.*” This critical approach does not really make any part of you feel better, even though it may be a long-standing habit. Soothing and reassurance are much more effective in calming all parts of you. Soothing includes an empathic acknowledgement of the feeling, for example:

I am feeling sad and angry, and that is a hard combination. I am doing my best to deal with these difficult feelings. It is in the best interest of all parts for me to focus on what I am doing right now and then deal with them when I get to therapy. That way I feel good about how I function in life and also have support to work on these feelings.

This empathic acceptance also includes supporting all parts of yourself, for example:

Since I am feeling so bad, I will do something nice for myself that all parts can enjoy. It is OK for any part of me to have feelings, but I don’t want them



to overwhelm any part of myself. I will take care of all parts of me.

Following are some tips that help you to calm and soothe all parts of yourself:

- Listen to all parts of yourself and try to reassure and comfort any parts that may be anxious or upset; a little inner communication and empathy go a long way.
- Practice calming, deep breathing exercises. Imagine that all parts of you are breathing together, in perfect synchronization in your safe place.
- Invite upset parts of yourself to go to a quiet, undisturbed safe space where they can be soothed and helped, while promising you will return to what is bothering them as soon as you are able.
- It may also be helpful for you to take a short “time-out” to rest.
- Ask a helpful inner part of yourself to support parts that are anxious or upset.
- Try to slow your thoughts down and each time you notice you are thinking about the problem, shift your thoughts to something else. Help parts of you share thoughts at a reasonable pace.
- Get some rest. Encourage all parts of yourself to rest. If parts are critical, for example, “You are lazy and need to be doing more,” try to negotiate with those parts of yourself for a period of rest to see if it actually helps calm you down.
- Listen to soothing music and take into consideration what all parts of you might find calming.

### *Grounding and Reassurance*

- Use all five senses to ground yourself and be aware of the present moment. Say out loud to yourself what you notice with your senses.
- Try just noticing the experience of being overwhelmed, slow your breathing down, and each time you feel the urge to do something about the experience, allow that feeling or thought to pass through your mind, like a train that does not stop at the train station.
- Remind all parts of you that feelings are normal, a part of

- life, and that it is safe to feel intensely in the present.
- Remind all parts of you that all experiences, no matter how unpleasant or intense have a beginning, middle, and an end.
  - Notice what was happening when you began to feel overwhelmed. This may help you determine what triggered you (see [chapters 14](#) and [15](#) on triggers). It also reminds you that the feeling had a beginning, and before which you were feeling something else.
  - Recall times in the past when the feeling finally passed, that is, remember its ending, as a reminder that this feeling will also end in time.
  - Ask your therapist to help you with additional ways to cope.
  - Talk to people you know and become curious about how they handle intense emotions and what they do to calm themselves down. You can learn from their experiences.

## **Experiencing Too Little: Hypoarousal**

To avoid feeling the kind of intense hyperarousal described earlier, you, or some parts of yourself, may cope through avoidance and numbing; thus, you experience too little at times. This is called hypoarousal. You, or avoidant parts of you, may evade situations that would evoke too much feeling, which often means you avoid being too close to people, since relationships evoke some of our most intense feelings, positive and negative. Sometimes a part of you may completely shut down for brief periods, going to sleep or being unable to think. Some people may even become unresponsive, unable to hear or respond to someone speaking with them. You might tend to avoid thinking about anything painful or unpleasant, which means you are not able to resolve issues that involve pain and conflict.

Dissociative parts of yourself that feel numb and detached may have little to no empathy for, or even awareness of, other parts of yourself that very much need support and help with feeling too much. It becomes easy for these parts to label certain feelings or experiences as “bad,” and thus to be avoided (see [chapters 16](#) and [17](#)). Such avoidance strongly maintains dissociation and prevents healing.

## Tips for Coping With Experiencing Too Little

- Because shutting down is often the result of feeling overwhelmed, most of the interventions used for feeling too much are also appropriate.
- You, or a part of you, may tend toward hypoarousal when you are stressed. A major solution is to first become physically and then mentally active. If you, or a part of you, feel sleepy when you are faced with something overwhelming, try to get up and get moving. You must resist the tendency to become more and more still.
- Help inner parts feel safer in the present by reassuring, calming, and orienting.
- Try a brief, vigorous activity to get your heart pumping and your energy level up, for example, jumping jacks, push-ups, or running in place.
- Do not allow your eyes to focus in one place, or you will trance out. Notice your environment. Use all five senses and name the things you notice out loud, in order to ground yourself in the present. If a part of you tends to trance out, you may try putting a little temporary distance between you and that part of yourself, for example, imagining actual physical distance between you or allowing that part of you to go to a safe space.
- Use mental stimulation to get your brain more engaged and active, for example, count backward from 100 by threes or sevens, or go outside and count trees or cars.
- If you have a feeling of being paralyzed, ask inside whether a part of yourself can help you move. You can start with a very small movement, such as moving your little finger just a bit, blinking your eyes, or twitching your nose. Next try to make other small movements in another part of your body. Focus on moving as much as possible. Think of someone whom you may trust—a friend, your therapist, your partner—and imagine that person helping you. Sometimes a particular part of you is immobilized and other parts of you can help by tending respectfully and empathically to that part, giving orienting information, comfort, and safety.
- If you feel cold or freezing (a common experience in hypoarousal), try a warm bath or shower (not too hot). Or

wrap yourself in a blanket and place a hot water bottle or heating pad on your stomach to warm your core. Then imagine soothing inner parts as you warm up, using some of the other resources available to you.

- If you, or a part of you, have physical numbness, note where in your body it begins and ends, or whether you are completely numb. Many people have at least small areas of their body where they can feel. If you have such a place (for example, your forearm), touch it gently and intentionally, saying to yourself, "*I am touching my forearm.*" Scratch your back with a soft, long brush; rub up against the door frame as a bear rubs up against a tree; or wrap in a blanket to feel your skin.
- If you are emotionally numb, notice whether you can feel just a little bit of emotion, perhaps a 1 or 2 on a scale of 10. Concentrate on the feeling, say it out loud, and draw the attention of all parts of yourself to it. Remind yourself that emotions can be safe; they are merely signals.
- You might ask whether any part of you could "share" a little emotion with you, no more than you think you can tolerate, for example, a teaspoon, a cup, or 5%. Also set a time limit, so you can feel a little of the emotion just for a moment, say to the count of 5, or 10 seconds or 30 seconds. As you feel more able, you can increase both the amount and time you experience an emotion. Notice as much of your inner experience during this time as possible: what you think, feel, sense, what you predict.
- If you are aware of certain parts of yourself that are severely shut down, see if you can become more curious about what they might need in order to be less shut down, and how you might provide for some of those needs. Sometimes merely the reassurance that you are really interested in tending to them is enough to help these parts become more present and alert.



## Homework Sheet 18.2

### Your Tips for Coping With Feeling Too Much or Too Little

Make your own list of tips for dealing with too little feeling and dealing with too much. Try to include all parts of yourself in this exercise. You might be pleasantly surprised to find that you are already using some skills or that some parts of you might have some helpful ideas.

#### *Helpful Tips for When I Am Feeling Too Much*

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

#### *Helpful Tips for When I Am Feeling Too Little*

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.