

Living Within The Window of Tolerance: The Different Zones of Arousal

HYPERAROUSAL ZONE



Sympathetic “Fight or Flight Response”
(Too much arousal)

SIGNS YOU ARE HERE:

- Tension, shaking
- Emotional reactivity
- Defensiveness
- Racing thoughts
- Intrusive imagery
- Emotional overwhelm
- Feeling unsafe
- Obsessive/ cyclical cognitive processing
- Hypervigilance
- Impulsivity
- Anger/ Rage

OPTIMAL AROUSAL ZONE

Ventral Vagal “Window of Tolerance”

SIGNS YOU ARE HERE:

- Feel and think simultaneously
- Experience empathy
- Feelings are tolerable
- Present moment awareness - “Right here, right now”
- Feel open and curious versus judgmental and defensive
- Awareness of boundaries (yours & others)
- Reactions adapt to fit the situation
- Feel safe

HYPOAROUSAL ZONE



Parasympathetic “Immobilization Response”
(Too little arousal)

SIGNS YOU ARE HERE:

- Relative absence of sensation
- Feeling ‘dead’
- No energy
- “Not there”
- Can’t defend oneself
- Disabled cognitive processing/ “can’t think”
- Numbing of emotions
- No feelings
- Disconnected
- Ashamed
- Flat affect
- Reduced physical movement
- Passive
- Shut down
- Can’t say no

Self Regulation And Staying Within The Window of Tolerance: *Using The Body*

I. Practices for being in the “here and now”

These exercises take less than a minute to do. They're great in the morning when you just wake up, or as a break from work — anytime throughout the day — as a way to increase emotional regulation and relaxation.

Centering Exercise

Put one hand over your heart, and rest your other hand on your belly. Lengthen your spine. Take several full, slow breaths. Notice the fullness of your body as you let your breath come and go.

Grounding Exercise

Stand, in a relaxed position, focusing attention on the sensations in your feet. Put weight on different areas of your feet: front, back, sides. Then play a bit with movement — bending your knees, moving up and down. Sense the ground through your feet and legs.

Alignment Exercise

Take a little time to become aware of how your body aligns in a vertical direction: your ankles on top of your feet, your legs on top of feet and ankles, the pelvis resting on your legs, torso on pelvis, your head supported by shoulders and torso, arms hanging off your torso. Then imagine that you are being lifted by the top of your head. Also imagine the feeling of gravity pulling in the opposite direction on the bottom of your spine. Next, shift from feeling stretched to allowing your spine to collapse. Repeat several times these two movements with the flow of your breath — expand on the inhale, and then collapse on the exhale.

Walking Exercise

Bring all your attention to your body as you walk (and out of your head and worries). Notice how your feet hit the ground, how your feet roll, the movement in your knees, and corresponding sensations in your hips and shoulders. Play with your usual gait. Practice pushing off with your feet, or walking at different paces. Notice the corresponding changes in body sensations.

II. The Power of Breath

The following simple breathing exercises are also great to do throughout the day, whether during your commute, waiting in line, transitioning between work and play, or when giving yourself the ultimate treat — meditation!

“Simple breath”

Imagine while you are inhaling that your breath is going all the way down to your pelvis. Then let the breath expand in your lower belly. When you exhale, let the breath escape effortlessly. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

“Bell jar breath”

Inhale a breath. When at the top (or end) of the inhale, imagine a rounded quality. Then let the inhale roll over into the exhale. Notice where the breath rolls — front, back, side to side (wherever it seems to go). Repeat 5 to 10 times. This breath is also useful when feeling hyperaroused.

“4 x 4 x 4 breathing”

Inhale deeply for four counts, then exhale for four counts, and repeat the cycle for four minutes several times a day. I find this a good practice to do before starting work or appointments, and while commuting. It's also a great way to get back in the Window of Tolerance after stressful experiences. You can use your smartphone to time yourself so you can give full attention to your breath.

III. Getting Back In The Window of Tolerance

The following are ways to calm yourself when you find yourself outside your Window of Tolerance.

If experiencing a sense of overwhelm

Sit in a chair with your feet fully planted on the ground or stand with your spine fully extended. Then slowly scan the environment, naming the objects within your field of vision.

If shaking or trembling

Take full, yet slow and easy breaths. No need to breath too deeply, though. If you can, sit in a chair or on a sofa, and wrap a blanket or comforter around yourself. Some people feel better if they also cover their heads.

If numb

Gently squeeze your forearms with opposite hands. Also increase awareness by noticing the environment through the five senses. What do you see, hear, smell? If you can, try touching or tasting something mindfully.

If hyper-vigilant

Lengthen your spine while taking full breaths. Pay attention to the rise and fall of breath as it alternatively fills and empties the chest and/or belly.

If accelerated heart rate

Take your attention away from the heart region by paying attention to the sensations in your feet. Notice the feeling of being grounded and connected to the floor or earth beneath you.

If collapsed feeling in the body

Try pushing firmly against the wall with your arms fully extended, your head up, and using your energy to ground down through the feet. Notice the feeling of sturdiness in your body as you push.

If feeling the impulse to hurt yourself or someone else

Push against the wall without aggression, and instead focus with awareness on a sense of grounding, starting with your feet and then moving through your body. Breathe full breaths, and keep bringing your thoughts back to your body sensations and away from the focus of your desperation, anger, or rage.

If feeling disconnected or experiencing depersonalization

Start by slowing the pace of whatever you are doing. Then firmly but gently squeeze the forearms, calves, thighs — whatever feels enlivening to you. Try also “Walking Exercise” above.

If feeling frozen or panicked

Sit comfortably in a chair or sofa, and wrap yourself in a comforter or blanket. Begin to focus on taking full, slow breaths, continually bringing your thoughts back to the present moment. Create a mantra for such moments, such as “I can be present and watch the waves of energy go by without getting caught in the story.”

“Shaking off the freeze”

Begin by slowly jumping off the ground, and shaking the arms out when feet land back on the ground. Take full breaths, mindfully inhaling when you jump, and exhaling fully when your feet land back on the ground. You can also say something to yourself like, “I’m safe. I’m letting go.”

Using thoughts

Name your reaction to yourself as a defense response, thus reframing the experience. Say to yourself, “This is just a memory,” or “I’m just triggered right now.” You might also try saying to yourself, “I can be here — right here, right now.”

Mindfully not dealing works too

Give yourself permission to avoid, dissociate, or disconnect. But when you do, try to be mindful of your need to check out. Also make plans to give yourself needed TLC (like these exercises) as soon as you can — and follow through!

Please note: This document is not intended as a substitute for psychotherapy or other forms of professional support. Please do not suffer alone. In the USA, visit suicidepreventionlifeline.org or call 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

References

- Ogden, Pat. 2012. *Level I: Training in Affect Dysregulation, Survival Defenses, and Traumatic Memory*. Bolder, CO: Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute.
- Ogden, Pat, Kekuni Minton, and Clare Pain. 2006. *Trauma and the body: A sensorimotor approach to psychotherapy*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Siegel, Daniel J. 2012. *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*. Second ed. New York: The Guilford Press.