

What is the Window of Tolerance?

If you were to attend a professional training on trauma, the instructor would likely reference the nervous system and its window of tolerance. In recent years, trauma researchers and therapists have developed a deeper understanding of the nervous system's role in regulating extreme stress and have learned some techniques for regulating this system.

You have probably heard of the fight-flight-freeze response which describes our impulse to defend ourselves or run until we reach safety. This is part of the window-of-tolerance model, but it's not quite the whole picture. Let's start with understanding a regulated nervous system. A regulated nervous system experiences a stress and calming response throughout the course of a given day. Perhaps you are driving and someone brakes unexpectedly ahead of you. When your nervous system is regulated you will feel some stress, but once your body feels safe and you are able to act in a way to ensure your safety (i.e., press your own brakes), your system will calm back to baseline. Dr. Dan Siegel of UCLA coined the term "window of tolerance" to describe this space in which we can regulate ourselves without too much effort.

You've probably felt some of these fluctuations in your system today—rushing to get somewhere and relaxing when you arrive on time, for example. Next we'll explore what happens to the nervous system when a traumatic experience enters the picture.

Trauma pushes the activation of the nervous system beyond its ability to self-regulate. When a stressful experience pushes the system beyond its limits, it can become stuck on "accelerate." When a system is overstimulated like this, we can experience anxiety, anger, rage, and restlessness. This is the fight-or-flight mode; your body is activated and ready to move. Some nervous systems will stay here, while others will dip below the normal range and become stuck on "the brakes." Below the window of tolerance we see symptoms of depression, fatigue, disconnection, and lethargy. Systems can get stuck above or below the line for prolonged periods of time, or they can vacillate between the two.

How can you discharge the traumatic stress and transition back into the window of the regulated nervous system? Here are a few tips:

- 1 Seek safe relationships.** Being with someone who is safe and soothing will help your nervous system settle and create a safe space for you to connect and share your experience. We are social beings and we heal in relationship, so if you find yourself isolating or pulling away from social contact, consider instead seeking out people who feel supportive.
- 2 Practice mindful breathing.** This trauma response is connected to the brain stem (basic physiological regulation) and the limbic (emotional) brain. Practicing mindful breathing helps connect a basic physiological process (breathing) with your prefrontal cortex (thinking brain), which helps integrate and shift our neurological state. To put that more simply: breathing has a HUGE capacity to calm the brain and regulate the nervous

What is the Window of Tolerance?

system. Biofeedback techniques such as those used by Heartmath are wonderful tools to assist with this.

- 3 Find a therapist **who understands trauma and can help you get to know the habits of your nervous system.** Recognizing when you are outside of your own window of tolerance and building personal strategies to soothe or stimulate your system is key to regulating in an ongoing way. For some people, sitting still is calming; for others, movement brings more peace. Find someone who can support you as you explore what works best for you.

There are many unique and healthy ways you can learn to support your nervous system and bring it back into its window of tolerance when something stressful occurs. Creating a support network that includes a trained trauma therapist or someone trained in biofeedback is a helpful way to build your ability to heal and recover from traumatic experiences. When you learn to work with your nervous system, you may even build up a wider window of tolerance, which can allow you to move about the world feeling more grounded and connected to others.