

Window of Tolerance



acaciaEAP
employee assistance program

The Window of Tolerance is a concept that was developed by Dr Dan Siegel and is described as the optimal zone of arousal in which a person can function and navigate their daily stressors most effectively.

When sitting within this optimal zone, individuals are calm yet alert and clearly focused on what they are doing. They can effectively manage and respond to their emotions and the demands of everyday life.

Calm Activation and Deactivation

When in the optimal zone, the individual shifts between two core modes: calm activation and calm deactivation.

- **Calm Activation:** the individual is ready for action, and their heart rate increases, muscles are engaged, thought processes are clear, and decision-making is optimised.
- **Calm Deactivation:** the individual is settling their self down, and their heart rate reduces, muscles relax, and clear thinking remains but with a sense of calm.

Very much like an air-conditioner makes small adjustments to maintain a constant optimal temperature, the calm activation and calm deactivation process allow us to stay within our optimal state of arousal.

Hypoarousal and Hyperarousal

In most cases, the human mind is able to keep us within this optimal zone. However, when inevitable lifestyle influences impact us, such as stress, anxiety, trauma, other mental health conditions, or environmental factors, we can be thrown outside of our window of tolerance.

When this occurs the individual can decline into a state of Hypoarousal (freeze response) where they shut down and their ability to function is reduced, or they can escalate into Hyperarousal (fight/flight response) where they struggle to stay calm. In both states, information becomes incredibly difficult to process, decision-making is impaired, memory is hindered, and thought process is unclear.

Moving out of our optimal zone is incredibly normal. It is a very embedded historical defence mechanism that activates within the brain and can be seen across the animal kingdom. However, it is possible for people who have experienced significant stress or trauma in their lives to become stuck in a state of hypoarousal or hyperarousal.

Maintaining your Window of Tolerance

One of the most important steps in preventing constant and long-term fluctuations across these zones is by getting to know what it feels like, both emotionally and physically, inside or outside our window of tolerance.

The more awareness we can have around how we feel during these differing times, the better able we are to address and support ourselves according to the situation we are in.

Each person and experience will be different. However, it is commonly reported that entering hyperarousal comes with a sense of being unable to stay calm, whereas hypoarousal aligns more with shutting down and withdrawing.

Simple yet consistent journaling or self-check ins can assist with monitoring how we are feeling or behaving and if these red flags are starting to rise.

This awareness can then be paired with strategies to self-soothe in order to bring the individual down from hyperarousal. Strategies can include breathing exercises, journaling, stretching, a warm shower or bath, listening to music, laying down, or mindfulness exercises.

In terms of hypoarousal, more stimulating strategies can be used to boost moods. This can include exercise or movement, cold water, upbeat music, holding something frozen, activating all five senses, chewing gum, or cognitive stimulation, such as a game or brain teaser.

Hypoarousal (Freeze response): where an individual shuts down and their ability to function is reduced. They may experience anxiety, panic, fear, and hypervigilance.

Hyperarousal (Fight/Flight response): where an individual struggles to stay calm. They may experience numbness, shame, a lack of energy, and an inability to think or respond.

Final Words

It is important to understand that we do not get to choose how large our window of tolerance is or what events in our lives may impact us. But what we can do is learn to understand signs that we have slipped outside of our optimal zone and engage in strategies to bring ourselves back to where we need to be to maintain resilience when faced with life's challenges.

If you have concerns surrounding your window of tolerance or would like to learn more hyperarousal and hypoarousal strategies, Acacia is always here to assist in any way we can. Reach out to us to discuss accessing counselling support from one of our experienced EAP professionals.

