

The Window of Tolerance

A person's 'window of tolerance' is the term used to describe their optimal zone of arousal. When people are functioning within their window of tolerance, they are typically able to make decisions for themselves, process and interpret information and stimuli, and respond to the demands of everyday life without too much difficulty or overwhelm. Every person's window of tolerance is different. Those with a small window of tolerance may feel as if their emotions are intense and hard to manage. Those with a wider window of tolerance may be better at handling intense emotions without their ability to function being impacted. Most people fluctuate between their window of tolerance daily but are generally able to remain within their window of tolerance when they feel safe and supported.

When people are experiencing extreme stress, they will go through periods of either hyper- or hypo-arousal. Hyper-arousal is better known as the fight/flight/meltdown response and the person will experience physical symptoms such as a racing heartbeat or becoming pale and flush because of the change in their blood flow. Hypo-arousal or better known as the freeze/shutdown response will look like a person feeling numb or unresponsive. In either of these states, a person may be unable to process stimuli or information effectively. Prolonged states of trauma and/or extreme stress can cause a person to operate outside of their window of tolerance and result in their window becoming more narrow or inflexible as a result. People who are frequently in a state of hyper or hypo arousal may experience mental health issues.

Managing a person's window of tolerance

When we understand where somebody is within their window of tolerance, we are better able to support them and promote their emotional regulation. Environmental adjustments, self-soothe strategies and mindfulness techniques can help a person stay in their optimal zone. Doing these things as a regular practice even when not needed can also help to widen a person's window of tolerance resulting in them being able to deal with stressful situations in more adaptive ways. Other ways to support a person's window of tolerance include:

- Breathing exercises
- Physical activity and exercise
- Sensory input
- Encourage the person to take part in their special interest