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

HYPERAROUSAL ZONE

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

- 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”

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

HYPOAROUSAL ZONE

Parasympathetic “Immobilization Response”
(Too little arousal)

- Relative absence of sensation
- Feeling 'dead'
- No energy
- "Not there"
- Can’t defend oneself
- Numbing of emotions
- No feelings
- Disconnected
- Ashamed
- Flat affect
- Reduced physical movement
- Passive
- Shut down
- Can’t say no

US National Suicide Hotline 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
Self Regulation And Staying Within The Window of Tolerance: Using The Body*

I. Practices for being in the “here and now” (meditation for non-meditators): These exercises take less than a minute to do. They’re great in the morning when you wake up, as a break from work, and throughout the day to increase emotional regulation and relaxation.

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

Grounding Exercises
a. Sit with legs crossed and with spine lengthened. Try to sense the ground through the perineum. Rock back and forth, noticing changing sensations. Or try:

b. Stand, in a relaxed position, Focus 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 knees, moving up and down. Sense the ground through the feet and legs.

Alignment Exercise
Take a little time to become aware of how the body aligns in a vertical direction: the ankles on top of feet, legs on top of feet and ankles, the pelvis resting on legs, torso on pelvis, head supported by shoulders and torso, arms hanging off the torso. Then imagine 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: These simple breathing exercises are great to do throughout the day, whether on 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 fall out effortlessly. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

“Bell jar breath”
Inhale a breath, and 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, etc. and to do while commuting. It’s also a great way to get back in the WOT after stressful experiences. You can use a smartphone to time yourself so you can give full attention to your breath.

III. Practices When Aroused And Outside The Window of Tolerance. These are great ways to calm yourself when you find yourself outside the Window of Tolerance.

If experiencing a sense of internal overwhelm
Sit in a chair with 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 breathe too deeply, though. If you can, sit in a chair or on a sofa, and wrap a blanket or duvet around yourself. Some people feel better if they also cover their head.
If numb
Gently squeeze 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 hypervigilant
Lengthen the 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 arms fully extended, your head up, 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 a sturdy wall without aggression. Focus with awareness on a sense of grounding, starting with noticing 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, etc. — whatever feels enlivening to you. Try also walking exercise (see above).

If feeling frozen or panicked
Sit comfortably in a chair or sofa, and wrap yourself in a duvet 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. Then shake your arms when your 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, be mindful of your need to check out. Also make plans to give yourself needed TLC as soon as you can — and follow through!

*Some of these exercises were adapted from *Level I: Training in Affect Dysregulation, Survival Defenses, and Traumatic Memory*, by Pat Ogden, PhD. (Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute, 2012).*