

THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

MAINTAINING OPTIMAL AROUSAL FOR TRAUMA-FOCUSED THERAPY

Being in our optimal 'window of tolerance' helps us handle life's activities without feeling overwhelmed or withdrawn. Being in, and staying in, this window can be difficult though for children who have experienced trauma.

When a child or young person is within their optimal window of tolerance, their brain is usually functioning well and they are able to reflect, think rationally and make decisions calmly without feeling either overwhelmed or withdrawn. But for children who have previously experienced trauma, this window can be radically changed by a 'trigger'.

A **trigger** is something that sets off a memory tape or flashback, transporting the child back to the event of their original trauma. Triggers are very personal and different things trigger different children. Whatever the trigger, it activates the child's nervous system to believe it is under attack. When this happens, the child can move into either a hyper (too much) or hypo (too little) arousal state.

Hyperarousal, also known as the 'fight or flight' response, is often characterised by hypervigilance, feelings of anxiety or panic, and racing thoughts.

Hypoarousal, also known as the 'freeze' response, is often characterised by feelings of emotional numbness, emptiness or paralysis.

A child who has experienced trauma may come to believe the world is unsafe because of their past experiences, and may operate within a window of tolerance that has become narrow or inflexible. A narrowed window of tolerance can cause a child to perceive danger more readily and react to real and imagined threats with either a fight/flight or a freeze response. In either of these states, the child may become unable to process triggers effectively. This is because the thinking part of their brain (the prefrontal cortex) shuts down, leading to feelings of being overwhelmed. This can then present as chaotic responses or overly rigid ones. During these times, the child is outside their window of tolerance.

The 'window of tolerance'

Hyperarousal:
too much arousal
to integrate

Hypoarousal:
too little arousal
to integrate

Emotional reactivity
Hypervigilance
Intrusive imagery
Obsessive/cyclical cognitive processing
Tension, shaking, ungrounded

'Window of tolerance'
Optimal arousal zone

Flat affect
Inability to think clearly
Numbing
Collapse

(Adapted from Ogden and Minton 2000)¹⁰

Carers and case managers can help children affected by trauma to keep within their optimal window of tolerance through various body exercises. Here are some ideas you can encourage children to do:

- Centring exercises** (being in the 'here and now') – Get the child to place one hand over their heart and the other on their stomach. Have them lengthen their spine and take several full, slow breaths. Ask them to focus on the fullness of their body as they let their breath come and go.
- Breathing exercises** such as 4 x 4 x 4 – Have the child inhale deeply for four counts, exhale for four counts and repeat the cycle for four minutes several times throughout the day.

There are also various ways you can help a child get back into their window of tolerance depending on how the child is behaving. Some examples include:

- If overwhelmed** – Get the child to sit in a chair with their feet fully planted on the ground or have them stand with their spine fully extended. Ask them to slowly scan the environment and name the objects within their field of vision.
- If shaking or trembling** – Tell the child to take full, slow and easy breaths. If you can, have them sit in a chair or on a sofa and wrap a blanket or comforter around them (some people feel better if they also cover their heads).
- If numb** – Tell the child to gently squeeze their forearms with their opposite hands. Ask them to focus on their senses and tell you what they see, hear, smell.

Note: The terms 'child' and 'children' also refer to 'young person' and 'young people'.

Here to help! Come and talk to us if you'd like more practical ways you can be trauma informed.

Sources:

> For more ideas to help children keep within their window of tolerance check out *Living Within The Window of Tolerance: The Different Zones of Arousal* at www.laurakerr.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/LauraKerr_Short_WOT_Handout.pdf

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