

The Window of Tolerance

Learning your body's signals — and finding your way back to steady

Some days you can handle a rough email, a tense conversation, a long wait — not enjoy them, but handle them. Other days the very same things send you into a spin, or flatten you completely. Psychiatrist **Dr. Dan Siegel** coined a phrase for this in his 1999 book *The Developing Mind*: the **window of tolerance** — the zone where you're alert enough to respond but settled enough to think, feel, and choose at the same time.

The window is a widely used way of describing something familiar: everyone has a band where they cope well, and stress, poor sleep, pain, and especially past trauma can narrow it. Outside it, people go one of two ways — *up* into **hyperarousal** or *down* into **hypoarousal**. Neither is weakness, and neither means something is broken in you: they're your body's protection systems doing their job a little too thoroughly.

How to use this

1. **Read the two lists below** and mark what you recognize.
2. **Fill in your own signs on page 2.** Yours are more specific than any list — and catching them *early* is most of the skill.
3. **Practise the page-2 skills while you're still inside the window.** A skill rehearsed when you're calm-ish is far easier to reach when you're not.

The goal isn't to never leave the window — everyone leaves it. It's to notice sooner, and to have a way back.

Above the window — hyperarousal (revved up)

The accelerator: your system reads danger and gears up to fight or flee, whether or not the moment calls for it. It can feel like:

- Pounding heart; fast, shallow breathing; tight chest, jaw, or fists
- Restless and unable to settle; thoughts racing; everything feels urgent
- Snappy, irritable, or angrier than the moment deserves
- Waves of panic or dread; feeling unsafe for no clear reason
- Wired at night — exhausted, but sleep won't come

Below the window — hypoarousal (shut down)

The brake, pulled hard. When fighting or fleeing seems pointless, the system powers down to get through. It can feel like:

- Numb or flat — feelings somewhere out of reach
- Foggy and spaced out, like watching your life through glass
- Heavy limbs; small tasks feel enormous
- Quiet voice; hard to find words; drifting off mid-conversation
- Bone-tired no matter how much you sleep

A common version is a quiet, functional shutdown: still working, still answering messages — while everything feels distant and harder than it should. Looking fine on the outside is not the same as being inside your window.

Learn your own signs (fill in)

Signs tend to arrive in order — body first, behaviour second, thoughts last. The earlier the sign you catch, the smaller the skill you need.

– My earliest signs of going **above** the window (jaw? chest? voice? speed?):

– My earliest signs of dropping **below** it (fog? heaviness? going quiet?):

– What pushes me out — situations, people, times of day:

– What has helped me come back before, even a little:

Five ways back inside the window

1. Lengthen your exhale. In through the nose for about four counts, out for about six — roughly six breaths a minute, for two to five minutes. In a 2022 review in *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, Sylvain Laborde and colleagues pooled dozens of slow-breathing trials: breathing this way shifted the body toward its calmer rest-and-digest state in most of them.

2. Try the physiological sigh. Two inhales through the nose — one full, one short top-up — then one long, slow exhale through the mouth; repeat three to five times. In a 2023 randomized study in *Cell Reports Medicine*, Melis Yilmaz Balban and colleagues found five minutes a day of this improved mood and slowed breathing over a month.

3. Orient with 5-4-3-2-1. Slowly name five things you can see, four you can feel, three you can hear, two you can smell, one you can taste. A widely used grounding skill in trauma-focused therapy — done slowly, turning your head to actually look around, it also helps you come back from far away.

4. Move before you reason (*for below the window*). You can rarely think your way up out of shutdown — return through the body instead. Stand, press your palms hard into a wall for ten seconds, walk to another room, hold something warm, say today's date and where you are out loud.

5. Cool water on your face (*for above the window*). A dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) skill from psychologist Marsha Linehan: hold a cool — not ice-cold — cloth over your cheekbones and eyes for fifteen to thirty seconds while exhaling slowly; this nudges the body's dive response, which slows the heart. *Skip it if you have a heart condition, an irregular heartbeat, a very low resting heart rate, or an eating disorder, and never pair it with holding your breath.*

Widening the window — and when to seek help

Coming back inside is one skill; widening the window is a slower, quieter project: practising while calm, decent sleep, regular movement, people around whom your system settles — and therapy, which works deliberately at the edges of the window so it can stretch without flooding you past it.

If you're outside your window most days, if the swings trace back to things that happened to you, or if numbness or panic is interfering with work or relationships, that deserves real support. TEO Counselling offers virtual therapy across British Columbia, Ontario, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Newfoundland & Labrador — and a free 15 minute consultation at teocounselling.com.

If you're in crisis or having thoughts of suicide, call or text 9-8-8 — free, any hour, anywhere in Canada. In British Columbia you can also call 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433).

This handout is educational — it isn't therapy, diagnosis, or medical advice, and it can't take your situation into account. If it stirred more than it settled, that reaction is worth bringing to a professional.