

# LIVE WITHIN YOUR WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

A Quick Guide To Regulating Emotions,  
Calming Your Body & Reducing Anxiety



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## INTRODUCTION

Healing from trauma is often described as a journey. Some people hate this description. I've heard, "It's too kitschy!" And "A journey's like a vacation, and recovering from trauma is like hell!" As a trauma survivor, I can admit I too have balked at the notion of a healing journey.

But through the years I have spent working through my trauma responses, and through the work I've done as a trauma-trained psychotherapist, I came to see that the notion of a "healing journey" is sometimes pretty accurate (despite being cliché).

The truth is, even if there is some magical place a trauma survivor can reach where she or he is completely over the past, the world can still be a dangerous and stressful place. The unexpected always happens, like the loss of a loved one, unemployment, or an illness. And for a lot of us, such events trigger old defenses and survival tactics – the very ones we work hard to overcome.

For those just starting the journey, focusing on increasing a feeling of safety is the first step on the way to a life not constantly hijacked by trauma triggers and defenses.

There are three important ways to think about safety:

- 1) Safety in your body
- 2) Safety in your emotions and thoughts
- 3) Safety in your environment and relationships

In the face of the unexpected, we need tools to help us feel safe in all aspects of our lives. We also need ways to journey towards the life we want to live and how we want to feel about ourselves.

And learning to live within your **Window of Tolerance** is a great way to maintain the gains you have made, as well as a vital first step for creating a sense of safety.

Before I describe the Window of Tolerance, it helps to say what it isn't: the defense reactions *hyperarousal* and *hypoarousal*.

When we are triggered by reminders of past traumas, or we experience fear, overwhelm, or just lots of stress, our bodies naturally react defensively. We become “**hyper**aroused,” which is the automatic activation of fight, flight, or freeze defense responses. Alternatively, when there is no opportunity to escape the sense of being threatened or chronically stressed, the body may eventually collapse, going into a state of so-called “**hypo**arousal.” (On page 7, I

provide some of the signs of hyperarousal and hypoarousal, along with signs of the Window of Tolerance, which is also known as the optimal zone of arousal).

The continual activation of defense responses can lead to health problems. It can contribute to substance use and abuse, when drugs and alcohol are used to get out of hyperarousal and hypoarousal. Activation of defenses also causes relationship problems. Most of us have difficulty getting along with others when our defenses are activated.

Often we think our hyperarousal and hypoarousal responses are signs that there is something the matter with us. Actually, when the body responds defensively, it's just trying to keep you safe. You have little control; these reactions happen quickly and automatically to the subtlest signs of danger.

Consequently, we have a hard time thinking our way out of our defense responses. Instead, it's often better to approach these states by working with the body – both when feeling calm and when triggered or overwhelmed.

Learning the signs that you are either hyperaroused or hypoaroused, and then doing things that help you feel calm and safe, is the practice of returning to the Window of Tolerance. By living within the Window of Tolerance, and avoiding or escaping defense

states, you will not only feel better, but also can reduce the intensity of your responses to stress and fear.

I think of the Window of Tolerance as the ultimate compass for the healing journey. Most trauma survivors spend a lot of time on a superhighway to hyperarousal or hypoarousal. Perhaps you've experienced rapidly changing emotions – 'going from zero to a hundred' – to a state of anger/rage, to a state of panic, or to being shut down and numb. Maybe you have heard this said about you, or you describe yourself that way.

Think of developing your Window of Tolerance as getting off that superhighway of rapid defense response. Instead, you start a new path towards a more peaceful YOU. Maybe it

starts as a tiny path. You get a little way in the Window before something startles you back to your rapid and automatic response to threat. That's okay!

The more you practice living within the Window of Tolerance, and the more you identify when you are outside the Window, the wider the new path becomes. You're less often on the superhighway, and more often on a peaceful path of your own creation.

And that's a nice journey to be on.

On the next page you'll find a diagram of the Window of Tolerance, hyperarousal, and hypoarousal, along with the behaviors and inner experiences associated with each of these states. Use the diagram to begin identifying your personal signs of hyperarousal, hypoarousal, and living within the Window of Tolerance. It might also be helpful to identify 5 to 10 things you enjoy doing that keep you in the Window of Tolerance. Write them down and keep them with you to refer to when you find yourself back on that superhighway.

On the pages following the diagram, you will find simple body-based 'exercises' (they take a few minutes at most) that you can do throughout the day to increase the time you spend in your Window of Tolerance. There is also a list of simple things you can do quickly and easily when you find yourself outside your Window of Tolerance that also focus on the body.

I wish you peace along your journey.

*Laura*



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

## HYPERAROUSAL ZONE

Sympathetic "Fight or Flight Response"  
(Too much arousal)



### SIGNS YOU ARE HERE:

- Tension, shaking
- Emotional reactivity
- Defensiveness
- Racing thoughts
- Intrusive imagery
- Emotional overwhelm
- Feeling unsafe
- Obsessive/cyclical thoughts
- Hyper-vigilance
- Impulsivity
- Anger/Rage

## OPTIMAL AROUSAL ZONE

Ventral Vagal "Window of Tolerance"



### SIGNS YOU ARE HERE:

- Feel and think simultaneously
- Experience empathy
- Feelings are tolerable
- Present moment awareness - "Right here, right now"
- Feel open and curious (versus judgmental and defensive)
- Awareness of boundaries (yours & others)
- Reactions adapt to fit the situation
- Feel safe

## HYPOAROUSAL ZONE

Parasympathetic "Immobilization Response"  
(Too little arousal)



### SIGNS YOU ARE HERE:

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

# I. Practices for being in the “here and now”

These exercises take less than a minute to do. They’re great in the morning when you just wake up, or as a break from work – anytime throughout the day – as a way to increase emotional regulation and relaxation.

## **Centering Exercise**

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

## **Grounding Exercise**

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

## **Alignment Exercise**

Take a little time to become aware of how your body aligns in a vertical direction: your ankles on top of your feet, your legs on top of feet and ankles, the pelvis resting on your legs, torso on pelvis, your head supported by shoulders and torso, arms hanging off your torso. Then imagine that 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

The following simple breathing exercises are also great to do throughout the day, whether during 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 escape effortlessly. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

### “Bell jar breath”

Inhale a breath. 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, and while commuting. It’s also a great way to get back in the Window of Tolerance after stressful experiences. You can use your smartphone to time yourself so you can give full attention to your breath.

## **III. Getting Back In The Window of Tolerance**

The following are ways to calm yourself when you find yourself outside your Window of Tolerance.

### **If experiencing a sense of overwhelm**

Sit in a chair with your 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 breath too deeply, though. If you can, sit in a chair or on a sofa, and wrap a blanket or comforter around yourself. Some people feel better if they also cover their heads.

### **If numb**

Gently squeeze your 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 hyper-vigilant**

Lengthen your 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 your arms fully extended, your head up, and 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 the wall without aggression, and instead focus with awareness on a sense of grounding, starting with 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 – whatever feels enlivening to you. Try also “Walking Exercise” above.

### **If feeling frozen or panicked**

Sit comfortably in a chair or sofa, and wrap yourself in a comforter 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, and shaking the arms out when 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, try to be mindful of your need to check out. Also make plans to give yourself needed TLC (like these exercises) as soon as you can – and follow through!

**Please note:** This document is not intended as a substitute for psychotherapy or other forms of professional support. **Please do not suffer alone.**

In the USA, visit [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org) or call 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

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I am a full-time writer & mental health scholar (PhD, Stanford University School of Education), a periodic speaker, lecturer & teacher, and a former trauma-focused psychotherapist. My focus is healing mind, body & soul following traumatic experiences. I also write about the social conditions that contribute to trauma and traumatic stress. I am married and live in the San Francisco Bay Area.