



Window of Tolerance

Emotions

Exercise

15-20 min

Client

No

Therapeutic change often depends on widening what can be called a Window of Tolerance (WOT). Our WOT is the state at which we function well and remain calm and composed in the face of stress. It is the optimal arousal state in which emotions can be experienced as tolerable, and experience can be integrated (Siegel, 2010). When we are outside our WOT, our nervous system responds by going into survival mode – fight, flight, or freeze. We either feel overwhelmed and go into what is known as “hyperarousal,” or we can shut down and go into what is known as “hypoarousal.” According to Siegel (1999), WOT can be narrow or wide. When the WOT is narrow, we may more easily fall into rigidity and depression or chaos; when the WOT is wide, we can manage stressors with a sense of ease and reason.

We can have multiple WOT’s throughout the day, depending on what we are doing and how we feel. For instance, one may tolerate disappointment well at one point in the day, continuing to function reasonably well when something does not go as planned (wide WOT), though later in the day, perhaps when this person is tired or hungry or running late, he or she may fall to pieces in the face of disappointment (narrow WOT). WOT’s also vary between people. For instance, while one person may fall apart after receiving negative feedback (narrow WOT), another person may take the feedback in stride, viewing it as useful, constructive information (wide WOT). Generally speaking, our WOTs reflect our emotional tolerance (i.e., how comfortable we feel with specific feelings, bodily sensations, memories, issues) in a given situation. Within our WOT, we remain open and receptive while we become reactive outside of it (Siegel, 2010).



Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (Ph.D.) and Lucinda Poole (PsyD) based on Daniel Siegel’s concept “the Window of Tolerance.”



Goal

This tool aims to increase people’s ability to perceive and understand accurately the signs that they are hyper-aroused or hypo-aroused. It further helps them learn to return to the window of tolerance, the optimal state of arousal for healthy functioning.



Advice

- Practitioners should draw on their expertise in Step 4 to help clients develop strategies to remain in their WOT. Research has shown that mindfulness skills and grounding skills are useful tools for this purpose. Mindfulness can help clients become aware of fluctuations in their arousal level and respond wisely rather than automatically. By becoming aware of their body sensations, thoughts, and emotions, clients can learn to recognize when they are in their optimal arousal zone or going into hyper or hypo-arousal. Practitioners should understand that moving out of a hyperaroused state requires calming the nervous system down (i.e., mindfulness and grounding techniques), whereas moving out of a hypo-aroused state requires behavioral activation and getting in touch with one's emotions.
- Advise clients that a wide window of tolerance means that they are more resilient, meaning that they can bounce back from difficult experiences. By becoming more aware of the different states of arousal in everyday life and taking steps toward ensuring they are doing what they can to remain within their WOT, they can widen their WOT.
- Help clients build autonomy by emphasizing the malleability of their WOT. While their WOT may be relatively narrow, they can take steps to widen it over time (Step 4).



References

- Siegel, D. J. (2010). *Mindsight: The new science of personal transformation*. Bantam Books.
- Siegel, D. J. (1999). *The Developing Mind*. Guilford Press.



Window of Tolerance

Step 1: Introducing the Window of Tolerance

Our Window of Tolerance (WOT) is our optimal zone of arousal, allowing us to cope and thrive in everyday life. When we are living within our WOT, we remain calm and composed when stressful things happen. When we are outside of our WOT, by comparison, we can go one of two ways. We either feel overwhelmed and go into what is known as “hyperarousal,” or we can shut down and go into what is known as “hypoarousal.” This is because our nervous system kicks in and sends us into survival mode – fight, flight, or freeze. In hyperarousal mode, we tend to be reactive and impulsive and experience an influx of negative thoughts. In hypoarousal mode, we tend to feel extremely zoned and numb, both emotionally and physically. Learning to recognize that we are either hyperaroused or hypo-aroused and do things that help us feel calm and safe is the practice of living within the WOT. The WOT can be narrow or wide and is different for all people and at different times in our lives.

In Appendix A, you will find a diagram of the WOT, hyperarousal, and hypoarousal, along with the behaviors and inner experiences that often go with each of these states.

Step 2: Your experience with the Window of Tolerance

Can you think of when you remained within your WOT in the face of something stressful or distressing? Describe this moment in detail below, including what triggered you (e.g., someone cut me off in traffic), what happened in your mind and body (e.g., felt calm, thought that this person must be in a rush), and what the outcome was (e.g., no negative effects, the event was an insignificant blip in my day).

Trigger(s):

Signs:

Outcome:



Step 3: Signs of a narrowing Window of Tolerance

To help you stay in your WOT more often, it helps identify signs that your WOT is narrowing (that is, that you are stepping outside of your WOT to either a hyperaroused state or hypo-aroused state).

- A. What are the signs that you have entered into a hyperaroused state? For example, you might notice that you become snappy towards loved ones, have a short temper, or feel agitated and irritable. Write these down in the WOT worksheet in Appendix B.
- B. What are the signs that you have entered into a hypoaroused state? For instance, you might feel disconnected from people around you, have little or nothing to contribute to conversations, and feel emotionally flat or numb. Write these down in the WOT worksheet in Appendix B.

Step 4: Staying within the Window of Tolerance

Thinking back to that time when you remained within your WOT (Step 2), and thinking about your signs of a narrowing WOT (Step 3):

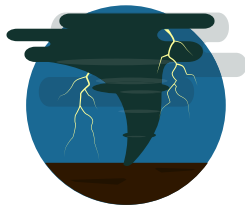
- A. What are some practical things that you can do to move back into your WOT when hyperaroused? For example, you might take some deep breaths, take time out, or practice meditation. Write these down in the WOT worksheet in Appendix B.
- B. What are some practical things that you can do to move back into your WOT when hypoaroused? For example, you might go for a brisk walk, call a friend to talk, or engage in expressive writing to discover underlying emotions. Write these down in the WOT worksheet in Appendix B.



Appendix A: Window of Tolerance Infographic

HYPERAROUSAL

This is when you feel extremely anxious, angry, or even out of control. Unfamiliar or threatening feelings can overwhelm you, and you might want to fight or run away.



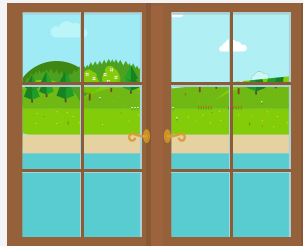
Signs that you are here

You:

- feel overwhelmed
- are shaking or trembling
- react heavily to emotions
- have a lot of negative thoughts
- act on impulses
- act defensively
- feel unsafe
- feel anger or rage

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

This is where things feel just right, where you are best able to cope with the lemons that life throws at you. You're calm yet alert, and you can think clearly and rationally.



Signs that you are here

You:

- are aware of boundaries (yours and others)
- have feelings of empathy
- react in a way that suits the situation
- can handle your feelings
- feel safe
- are in the present moment
- feel open and curious

HYPOAROUSAL

This is when you feel extremely zoned out and numb, both emotionally and physically. Time can go missing. It might feel like you're completely frozen.



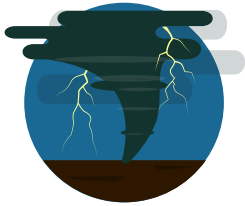
Signs that you are here

You:

- experience very little sensations
- feel numb
- have little or no energy
- feel disconnected (from self and others)
- feel empty
- do not feel like physically moving
- find it hard to think

Appendix B: Window of Tolerance Worksheet

HYPERAROUSAL

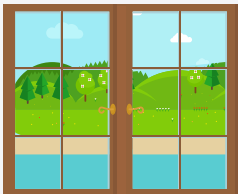


Signs that I am here:

Things I can do to move back into my window of tolerance

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Signs that I am here:



HYPOAROUSAL



Signs that I am here:

Things I can do to move back into my window of tolerance