

Window of Tolerance

Illustrating the impact of trauma



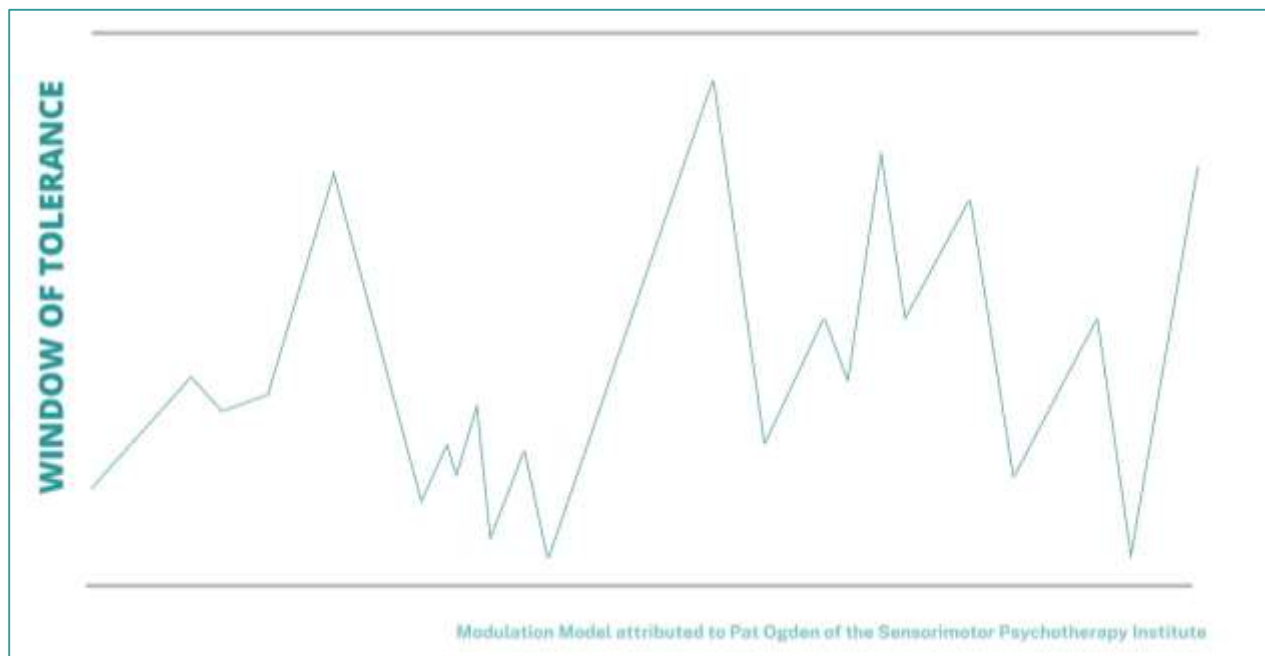
Dublin Rape Crisis Centre Resource

What is the Window of Tolerance?

Every person has an optimum 'zone' in which they can function normally and effectively – where they can thrive in their lives. Within this 'zone', a person can cope with and respond to the demands of life without a lot of difficulty. How a person manages – whether well or less well – depends on how much stress they are under and how well resourced they are with supports and coping skills.

The Window of Tolerance¹ is a way of describing this 'zone of arousal' that also explains the impact of trauma. It is a useful 'map' to apply in situations of crisis and stress.

It suggests that each of us has **a range of daily experiences that we can tolerate or manage if we have enough supports and resources in our lives**. If we do not have those, it is less easy for a person to cope with pressure, especially if any extra stress occurs.



A person who has had significant trauma in their lives may have a window that is smaller than usual – their tolerance for stressful situations may be less than someone who has not had trauma. It can make it more challenging to remain in or return to the Window of Tolerance. Thus they may need coping resources even more to be able to function effectively under stress, even 'everyday' stresses.

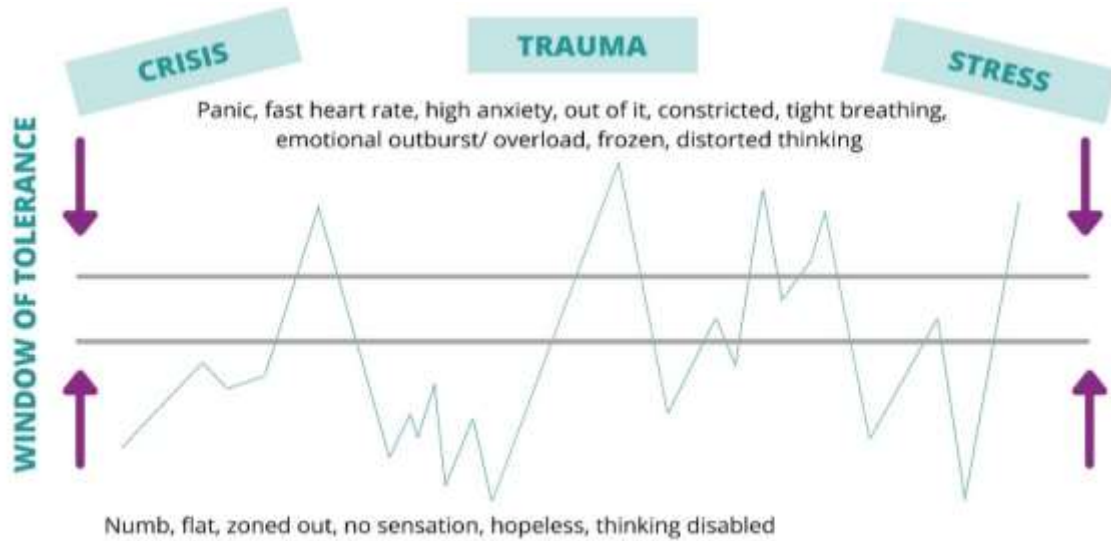
¹ Information based on work done by Dan Siegal (1999) & Pat Ogden of the Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute (2002).

How does the Window narrow & widen?

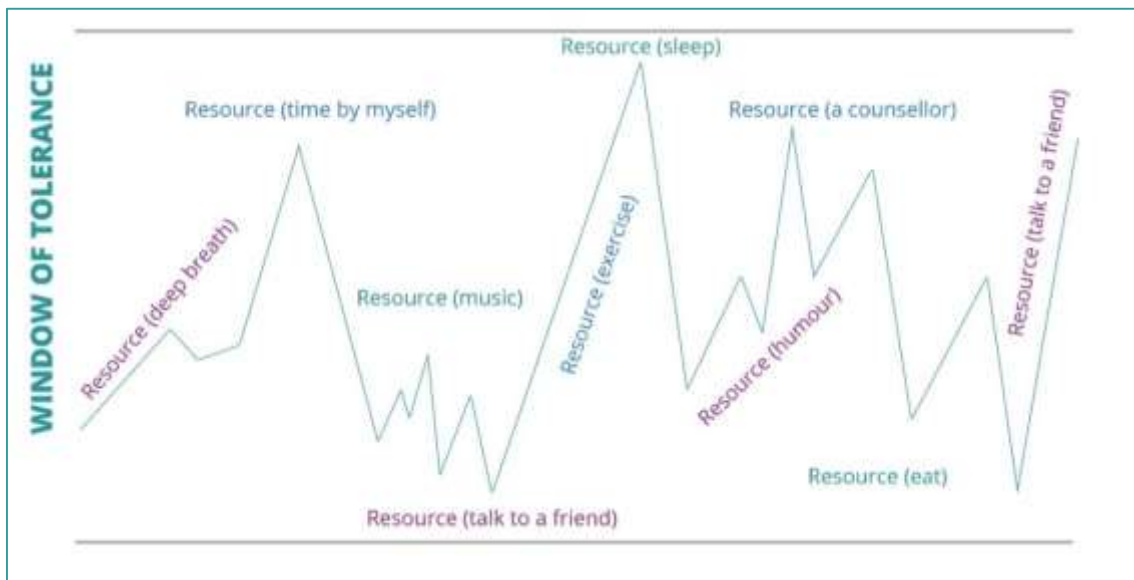
The image below illustrates that when we are under stress or in a crisis, our window of tolerance may reduce. So our response can quickly veer outside the window of tolerance.

For example, nearing a deadline or important presentation at work or school, a person may:

- ▶ Begin to feel stressed, panicky and somewhat overwhelmed, unable to sleep and have problems with their tummy.
- ▶ Alternatively, they may feel very flat and 'out of it', numb, unable to think, totally exhausted and even dizzy.



However, **with good preparation and resources available** to them, the effect of the “stresses” is minimised and they should be able to remain in or quickly return to the window of tolerance. (Here that could mean practicing the presentation in advance, getting support from a friend & having a good night’s sleep - different things work for every person.)



How do I know if I am outside my window?

The level of stress a person feels tends either towards a state of over-stimulation - called **hyperarousal** - or a state of under-stimulation - called **hypoarousal**. They may get 'stuck' there until they find a way to return to their window of tolerance.

A range of behaviours are typical for hyperarousal or hypoarousal:

Hyperarousal: 'Fight or Flight' response

- ▶ Panic and feeling overwhelmed
- ▶ Feeling of tension or shaking
- ▶ High anxiety, racing thoughts
- ▶ Insomnia
- ▶ Feeling Irritable or easily triggered into anger
- ▶ Impulsiveness
- ▶ Hypersensitivity
- ▶ Feeling overly alert and defensive.

Hypoarousal: 'Freeze' response

- ▶ Feeling spaced out or numb
- ▶ Unable to process information – feeling like they cannot think
- ▶ Feelings of hopelessness and despondence
- ▶ Appearance of being dazed and distant – 'spaced out'
- ▶ Poor concentration and lack of energy
- ▶ Feeling unable to defend yourself
- ▶ Passive, unable to say no
- ▶ Physically inactive and lacking energy.

How to return to or stay in the Window

When a person is outside their window of tolerance, the main aim is to reduce stress and add to the person's resources in order to build resilience and strength again.

With practice and time, they can learn to see the signs that they are leaving their window before it actually happens and take action to stop that.

If a person has had extra stress, has fewer resources or has had past trauma, they may need to take additional measures - they may need to do some deep breathing or grounding exercises, and/or approach someone like a support figure or counsellor for outside support.

There are a few strategies available:

- ▶ **Know the signs** that they are veering off or approaching the limits of their Window – these are behaviours showing they are under stress, such those listed above.

Ask: What tells me that I am outside my Window of Tolerance - signs in my body, emotions, thoughts, behaviour?

- ▶ **Know the typical trigger events** that lead to them moving outside their Window and either avoid them or if inevitable, prepare for them.

Ask: What sort of situations/experiences lead to my window of tolerance becoming narrow, or trigger me outside it?

- ▶ **Have their coping strategies ready**, so that they can quickly return to the window of tolerance.

Ask: What resources are available to me? What can I do to feel calm, able to cope?

Resources may include getting enough sleep, eating well, exercising, having a hobby, learning a new skill, socialising with friends, practicing mindfulness. There are also many grounding techniques available which are specific exercises, usually related to the senses, to help return a person to a state of calm and help them feel safe in their own body.

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre is there for anyone affected by sexual violence, including those supporting others. Call the [National 24-Hour Helpline 1800 77 8888](tel:1800778888) for non-judgemental information & support.

DRCC also offers [specialised training](#) on issues like secondary/vicarious trauma and sexual consent & healthy relationships – contact our Education Department for more at etadmin@rcc.ie or 01-661 4911 or check out www.drcc.ie.

Disclaimer: This resource is information on how best to meet a disclosure of sexual violence in a trauma-informed way. For young people under 18 and those disclosing abuse retrospectively to when they were a child, Children's First Guidelines must always be followed. **Issued June 2021.**

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