

Window of Tolerance

Our **WOT** is the state at which we function well, remaining calm and composed in the face of stress. When we are outside our WOT, we go into survival mode – fight, flight or freeze, flop or submit. We either feel overwhelmed or we can shut down. When the WOT is narrow, we may more easily fall into rigidity and depression or chaos; when the WOT is wide, we are able to 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 are feeling. For instance, one may have a high tolerance for disappointment at one point in the day, continuing to function reasonably well when something does not go to plan (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 WOT's reflect our level of 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; outside of it we become reactive.

Introducing the window of tolerance

Our Window of Tolerance (WOT) is our optimal zone of arousal and 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 “hypo-arousal.” 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 hypo-arousal mode, we tend to feel extremely zoned and numb, both emotionally and physically. Learning the signs that we are either hyper-aroused or hypo-aroused and then doing 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.

Signs of a narrowing Window of Tolerance

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

- What are the signs that you have entered a hyper aroused state? For example, you might notice that you become snappy towards loved ones, or have a short temper, or feel agitated and irritable. Write these down.
- B. What are the signs that you have entered a hypo-aroused state? For instance, you might feel disconnected from people around you, have little or nothing to contribute to conversations, and feel emotionally flat or even numb. Write these down.

Staying within the Window of Tolerance

Thinking back to that time when you remained within your WOT, and thinking about your personal signs of a narrowing WOT: -

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

Strategies to remain in your Window of Tolerance

Mindfulness can help you become aware of fluctuations in your levels of arousal and respond wisely rather than automatically. By becoming aware of your body sensations, thoughts, and emotions, you can learn to recognise when you are in your optimal zone of arousal or going into hyper or hypo-arousal.

Mindfulness & Grounding techniques - Calms the nervous system and helps us get in touch with our emotions.

If you have a wide WOT it means that you are more resilient, meaning that you are more able to bounce back from difficult experiences. By becoming more aware of the different states of arousal in everyday life, and by taking steps toward ensuring you are doing what you can to remain within your WOT, you can work towards widening your WOT.

Summary

The WOT is where things feel just right, where you are best able to cope with the lemons that life throws at you. You are 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

When you **ARE NOT** IN YOUR WINDOW OF TOLERANCE:

HYPER AROUSAL

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

HYPO AROUSAL

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