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CLIENT HANDOUT



UNDERSTANDING YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

The Window of Tolerance

Your nervous system moves up and down a scale of arousal. In the middle is a window where you can think, feel and act at the same time. Stress pushes you above or below it. Regulation brings you back and, with practice, widens the window.

Hyperarousal

Fight or flight. Too much activation.

- Racing heart, shallow breath
- Anxiety, panic, dread
- Anger, irritability
- Racing thoughts, scanning for danger
- Urge to argue, act or escape

Regulated

Present and grounded. Emotions felt without taking over.

- Calm but alert
- Able to reason and decide
- Connected to other people
- Can feel and name emotions
- Handles stress, then recovers

Hypoarousal

Freeze or shutdown. Too little activation.

- Numb, flat, empty
- Exhausted, heavy, foggy
- Spaced out, disconnected
- Shame, hopelessness
- Urge to withdraw or collapse

HIGH AROUSAL ↑ FIGHT / FLIGHT

OPTIMAL ZONE

Window of Tolerance

LOW AROUSAL ↓ FREEZE / SHUTDOWN

Coming Back Down ↓

Slow the body so the mind can follow.

- Long, slow exhale, out longer than in
- Feel your feet on the floor
- Lower your voice and your pace
- Name it: “I am above my window.”

Staying Inside

Nobody stays here all the time. The skill is noticing when you have left, and knowing the way back.

- Check in with your body during the day
- Catch the edges early, while still steerable
- Act before you are out of the window

Coming Back Up ↑

Wake the body gently and reconnect.

- Stand up, stretch, move
- Cold water on hands or face
- Look around and name five things you see
- Reach out to one safe person

NARROWS THE WINDOW

- Trauma, chronic stress
- Ignoring early signs
- Substance use
- Isolation
- Poor sleep or pain
- Long shifts, no rest

WIDENS THE WINDOW

- Steady breathing
- Body-based therapy
- Grounding practice
- Trusted relationships
- Movement and sleep
- Practice the way back

Concept: Dan Siegel, *The Developing Mind* (1999). Educational material, not a substitute for clinical care.

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