

Making **SPACE** for Learning

Trauma Informed Practice in Schools

Discussion Paper 15

Working with the window of tolerance in the classroom



Preamble

This discussion paper is one in a series designed to stimulate discussion and sharing of experience amongst staff in educational settings working with young people who may have experienced complex relational trauma.

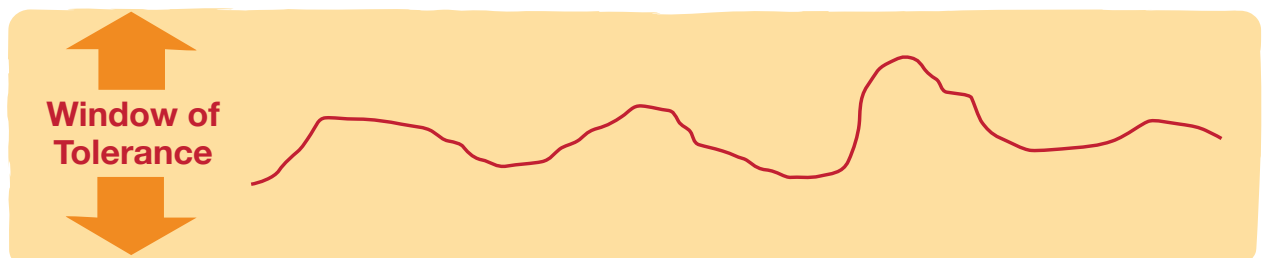


Introduction

How have you responded in moments of extreme stress? Were you primed for action with a surge of energy ready to challenge or escape? Alternatively you may have found yourself suddenly depleted feeling foggy or collapsed? Our responses in extremely stressful situations represent a potent mix of primitive biological drives and patterned reactions developed from prior experiences of threat. These responses are less consciously chosen as they are determined by environmental factors that shape them over time. In these moments our entire internal system becomes subsumed with one goal- survival and we lose our ability to think logically and rationally about the situation.

Thankfully most of us don't spend too much time in this state. We navigate our way through life with various intensities of emotional and physiological arousal that we process without disrupting the overall functioning of our system. These ebbs and flows of life could be described as occurring within a 'window of tolerance'. This is an optimal zone for processing and integrating our experiences of life. In this zone we can rationalize and reflect on problems and choices and are in touch with what's going on around us. In this zone our bodies are un-strained and we feel relatively calm.

Overshooting the window



Undershooting the window

Probably all of us could identify times when we have been outside of the boundaries of our window of tolerance. At these times our thinking or behaviour has become disrupted by our intensified emotional and physiological arousal. We may behave in ways we wouldn't normally choose and we lack flexibility in our responses. At these dysregulated times we enter into states often characterized by either excessive rigidity or chaos.

It would seem the width of our window of tolerance varies from person to person. For some the window may be quite narrow, while for others they may be able to tolerate a high degree of intensity of emotional or physiological arousal. For example, those who follow the adventurer Bear Grills in his program, Man vs. Wild will have watched him navigate his way through a range of highly challenging situations that would strike terror into the hearts of most of us. For Bear, high degrees of intensity feels ok and he is able to think, behave, and feel with balance and effectiveness revealing a wide window of tolerance. For others, however, their window of tolerance may be quite narrow. For these people, emotions such as sadness or fear may be quite disruptive to functioning if they are even mildly present.

The width of ones window of tolerance may also change depending upon factors such as context or state of mind. For example we may be more able to tolerate stressful situations when familiar people are around us and thus our window of tolerance may be broader when we are with these people.



The Window of Tolerance and Trauma

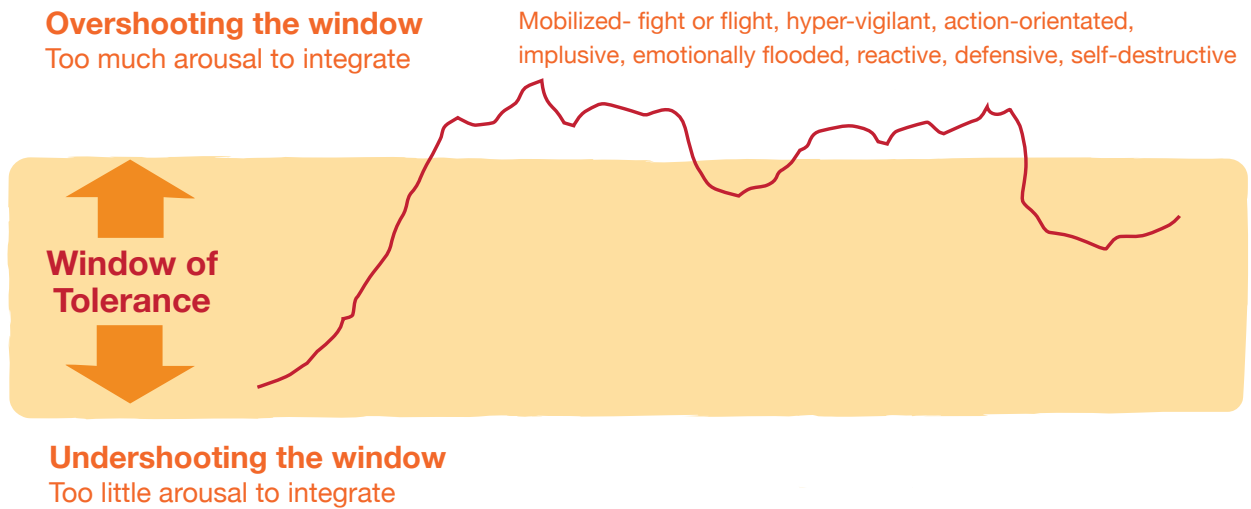
For many young people who have experienced trauma their systems are too often overwhelmed. They find themselves operating outside of their window much more than the average person. They also find themselves with a window that lacks width and flexibility compared with the average person. For some this means they commonly overshoot their window, while for others they tend to undershoot it.

Both under and over shooting protections put in place by traumatised young people are probably responses that have developed over their lifetimes as useful ways to survive when threatened. These young people have become acclimatised to environments that they expect to be threatening or dangerous. Their systems have been primed too many times to work hard to survive and this becomes an overarching daily imperative that is deeply programed into their brains, so much so that they are not consciously aware of looking for threatening cues around them but their subconscious brain does anyway. We probably underestimate the amount of time young people spend in survival mode rather than learning mode in our classrooms.



Overshooting the window- Too much arousal

Many traumatised young people have difficulty finding stillness. You might have noticed their darting eyes and a tendency to fiddle with something in their hands or how easily they startle. You might even notice yourself feeling a little stirred up or ill at ease when around them. You notice this because their internal system that is primed to act to protect itself is communicating with your nervous system. These young people are likely to engage in actions such as fight or flight in the face of threat. We can expect them to move toward or away when they feel unsafe. These protective actions are deeply engrained in the most primitive part of their brains and they have likely been used successfully in the past by the young person to help keep her/himself safe.



Some bodily cues suggesting too much arousal and an overshooting of the window of tolerance:

- Dilated pupils (to let light in to see better)
- Lack of saliva making mouth dry
- Shallow breathing
- Butterflies in the stomach
- Faster heart beat
- Excessive sweating
- Tensed muscles (readied for action)
- Agitated movement
- Trouble finding stillness



Garry

The bell sounds ending lunchtime. A teacher hurries towards her year 9 class having missed lunch to handle a yard duty incident. Distracted and rushed she moves into the classroom and the students flow in behind her. As she sorts out her teaching materials two students begin throwing around a cap that one student has forgotten to remove after lunch. The teacher raises her head to spy her student Garry moving around the room trying to get his cap back. The teacher recognises the cap as Garry's because he is always wearing it in the yard. She sighs to herself as she recognises Garry as a student that is frequently unsettled and unproductive in her classroom. The class has barely begun and he is already in the middle of the disruption she thinks to herself. The teacher moves forward and says firmly "I'll have that cap" and picks it up off the floor before Garry can dive for it. She announces that she will be keeping it until the end of the class as he is not supposed to have his cap in the classroom anyway. Garry squeals "that isn't fair". His chest puffs up and his eyes look wildly at her. His left fist tightens and the veins in his redenned neck become prominent. His face shows he is mad and his body seethes with anger as his arm and shoulder muscles tense. Without consciously thinking the teacher takes a step back from him. He yell's "I hate this f##ing school" towards her. She replies frustratedly tightening in her body "Garry that is not appropriate language". Garry lunges towards his cap in the teachers hand. The teacher drops the cap with a sudden surge of fear. Garry scrapes it up from the floor and takes off out of the classroom.

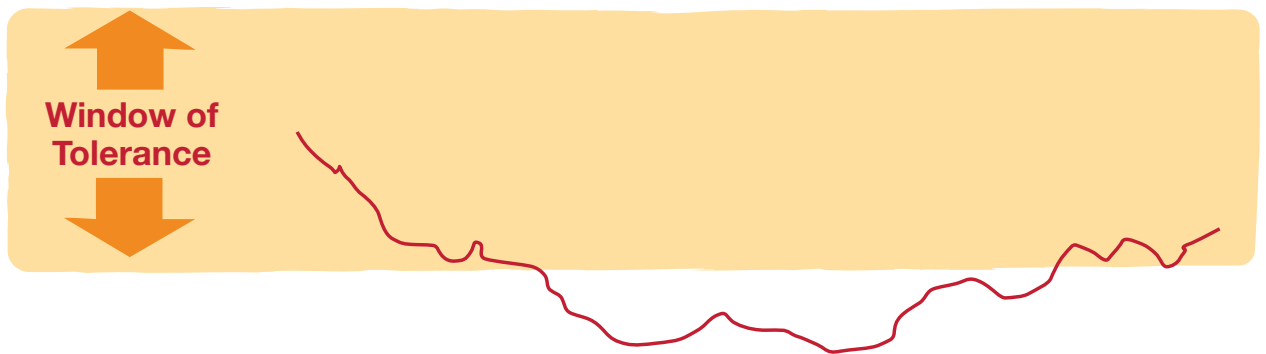


Undershooting the window- Too little arousal

Some traumatised young people have endured extremely high levels of trauma. These young people might describe feeling empty and hollow at times of high stress. They might lack a sense of themselves at these times and describe not feeling anything in their body. At these times they are moving into a state of protection that involves shutting down their system to protect themselves. These young people will not seek interaction with others and instead will retreat into themselves to endure the moment through a fortification of withdrawal.

Overshooting the window

Too much arousal to integrate



Undershooting the window

Too little arousal to integrate

Immobilized, submit, collapsed, weak, defeated, flat, numb, empty, helpless, hopeless, bored

Some bodily cues suggesting too little arousal and an undershooting of the window of tolerance:

- Slumped body parts
- Collapsed body
- Endless stare with pin like pupils
- Loose muscles
- Slowed heart rate
- Blank face



Miranda

A teacher pauses as he goes to write Miranda's 'Health and Human Development' semester report. For most students reports flowed easily for him but with the lack of submitted work and a large amount of absences he noticed next to Miranda's name in his attendance book he found himself struggling to find words for her. When he thought about her, the picture in his mind was of a shrunken, head lowered young person, hunched down in her chair at the back of the classroom. He found her really hard to read and he realised he had never seen her really smile like other kids. He recalled a difficult moment that occurred some time ago when he called upon her to answer a question after showing a sex education DVD to the class and how response-less she had been, just vacantly sitting there, face blank and slumped

down in her chair. He had quickly called upon another student as he had felt a sense of disconnect and awkwardness. He felt a bit exasperated when he thought about her and didn't know what to do with her, how to engage her, nothing seemed to touch her. From what he understood Miranda was involved quite a bit with the school counsellor and he imagined she had a difficult home life. He wasn't sure about the best way to teach Miranda but he knew something needed to change as presently not much was getting through to her.



Operating from within the window of tolerance

When within their window of tolerance a young person's physiological system is not stretched. They won't feel signs of fight, flight, freeze or collapse as their systems sense that they are safe. In their window of tolerance social engagement is available to them. They are better equipped to listen to others around them, interact cooperatively and learn.

Some cues suggesting young people are in their window of tolerance:

- Body feels calm, settled, neutral
- Able to be socially orientated with those around them
- Able to be reflective
- Able think clearly
- Able to set boundaries
- Able to self regulate
- Able to be mindful



Recognising those that overshoot and undershoot the window of tolerance in the classroom

It is often easier to recognise those young people in the classroom who overshoot their window of tolerance compared with those who undershoot. These are likely to be the students who show their stress by moving towards or away from you. This movement is highly visible as we are biologically primed as social beings to notice others threatened movements to then gauge our own safety. For overshooting students looking to find safety involves an active re-negotiation of relationships, while for those who undershoot their window, seeking safety often involves slipping away from others in a passive attempt to find invisibility for a time. These students do not demand a response from others. In fact they are working hard to be overlooked and with twenty four or so other students in the classroom it is easy to not spot them.



Introducing and implementing the window of tolerance into the school context

Thinking about introducing and implementing the 'window of tolerance' into a school context could be something to consider as a broader teaching group. Some questions to think about:

- Where and by whom would it be best introduced? Eg. In Homeroom or English or Math or to year level group gatherings?
- What are some ways it could be consistently supported across teaching contexts and classrooms?
- What are some ways it could be consistently supported and utilised by coordinators and principals?
- What are some ways students could be involved in its introduction and implementation?



Some ideas for introducing the window of tolerance in the classroom

- Introduce the window of tolerance model to your students. Talk about examples of when someone might overshoot or undershoot the window paying attention to what that might feel like in the body and normalising that exceeding the window happens for us all at times.
- Represent the window of tolerance concept in a concrete way. For example it might be drawn on the white board or each student might have an A4 laminated version of the window at their desks.
- Institute window 'check ins' throughout class time to gauge views about where the group is at in terms of the window.
- Acknowledge contextual events that may be influencing where everyone is at with regard to their window e.g. approaching exams or social function.
- Model reflecting upon where you are in relation to your window of tolerance. You don't need to detail underlying reasons.



Some ideas for working with young people who are frequently outside of their window of tolerance

As a first step in working with young people who frequently find themselves outside of their window of tolerance we should acknowledge the important role their protective response/s have played for them in the past. It is wonderful that when they really needed it their brain and body found a way to survive.

We also need to help young people hold on to a sense of safety in their daily life as much as possible. It is only when they don't sense safety that they will need their protective responses. With this in mind you might like to consider the following questions with the young person in a time of calmness:

- Where is the safest place for you at school?
- Where is the safest place for you in the world? Is there any way we can help you bring some of that place with you to school?
- Are there people at school that help you feel safe and ok? If so who?
- Is there anyone you wish you could bring with you to school to help feel ok? (might be from family or a friend or might be a music or sport hero etc.) How might we help you bring something of this person with you to school?

The responses to these questions could contribute to a plan built with the young person to help her/him more readily hold on to a sense of safety in their every day. The more a young person feels safe at school the less likely it is they will exceed their window of tolerance.

Some other ideas for working with young people outside of their window of tolerance:

- Learn more about the body signs of increasing stress for the young person and for yourself.
- Offer students opportunities that will increase their sense of control and power.
- Recalibrate your expectations for young person's advancement- it may be that she/he isn't able to grasp all of the course material and the focus may need to be a social/regulatory one for a time.



Some ideas for working with young people who overshoot their window of tolerance

Young people who overshoot their window of tolerance have highly primed nervous systems ready for action. Their systems require calming through activity that allows them to slow down. We need to aim to help these young people find regulating movement. Some ideas for use with these students in the classroom include:

- Intersperse directed group activity breaks- e.g. yawn and stretch breaks, everyone walk once around the room without lifting your feet off the floor or like there is no gravity in the room, initiate Mexican waves, stand up turn around and sit down again.
- Incorporate more kinaesthetic learning opportunities.
- Plan movement breaks with young person- e.g. walk around the oval or opportunity to run an errand or to be able to connect with safest place in school (wherever that is for the young person).
- Plan and practice an escape route with the young person should they need it.
- Work with colleagues and young person to create a plan for if they become activated and practice it.



Some ideas for working with young people who undershoot their window of tolerance

Young people who undershoot their window of tolerance have nervous systems that can begin to shut down when they lose a sense of safety. These are the students that can become disconnected from themselves and the classroom and require gentle engagement to re-enter their window of tolerance. Some ideas for use with these students in the classroom include:

Present moment breaks- introduce short, sharp activities that bring young people into the present moment with a focus on what is happening in the here and now. Some examples-

- Everyone point to something that's green.
- Tap your head and rub your belly at the same time, then swap.
- Find out what colour eyes the person next to you has.
- Push your big toes into the bottom of your shoes.

Sensory stimulation

- Everyone say three objects you can see, two things you can hear, and one thing you can smell.
- Incorporate kinaesthetic learning opportunities that have a sensory element to them i.e. activities that stimulate many of the senses
- Create a space in the room for a sensory break e.g. cushion corner with textured cushions and calming posters and DVD player playing calming music etc.

The window of tolerance is a model we could all apply to our lives. It may be a handy guide to help us better understand the shifting states of the young people we work with, as well as an opportunity to be more reflective about our own windows. It can help us better understand how available our students are to learning at any given time and it can provide us some direction around what a young person might need to re-establish themselves safely within their window of tolerance.



Questions for reflection or discussion

Three questions about the young person's resources:

1. In what situations is the young person most likely to be able to maintain themselves within their window of tolerance and thus utilise social engagement with others and feel safe?
2. Are there particular people that she/he feels most safe with?
3. In what situations are the young person's protective responses most likely to be shown?

Five questions to take into the classroom with you:

1. Where is the young person in relation to their window of tolerance?
2. How do I know?
3. Where am I in relation to my window of tolerance?

4. How do I know?
5. What do I need right now to maintain myself in my window of tolerance?

Three questions to share with colleagues

1. What are some ways to share knowledge about the window of tolerance framework amongst teachers and students?
2. What are some strategies you already use to help students maintain themselves within their windows of tolerance?
3. What are some things you do to maintain yourselves within your windows of tolerance?



Further reading about the 'window of tolerance'

Ogden, P & Minton, K. (2000) Sensorimotor Psychotherapy: One Method for Processing Traumatic Memory. *Traumatology*, volume VI, issue 3, article 3. Electronic version of this article: <http://www.fsu.edu/~trauma/v6i3/v6i3a3.html>

Ogden, P. Minton, K. & Pain, C. (2006) *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy*. New York: Norton & Co.

Siegel, D. (1999) *The Developing Mind- How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are*. New York: Guilford. (Chapter 7 'Self Regulation' is particularly relevant)