

Living Within Your Window of Tolerance



**A Quick Guide to
Regulating Emotions,
Calming Your Body
& Reducing Anxiety**

Laura K. Kerr, PhD

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(Updated October 2024)

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PO Box 27152
San Francisco, CA 94127

www.laurakerr.com

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Introduction

Healing from trauma is often described as a journey. Some people hate this description. I've heard, "It's too kitschy!"; "A journey's like a vacation, and recovering from trauma is like hell!" As a trauma survivor, I can admit I too have balked at the notion of a healing journey.

But over the years I spent working through my trauma responses, and through the work I've done as a trauma-trained psychotherapist, I came to see that the idea of a "healing journey" is sometimes pretty accurate (despite being cliché).

The truth is, even if there is some magical place a trauma survivor can reach where she, he, or they are completely over the past, the world can still be a dangerous and stressful place. The unexpected always happens, like the loss of a loved one, unemployment, or an illness. And for many of us, such events trigger old defenses and survival tactics—the very ones we worked hard to overcome.

For those just starting the journey, the focus is on increasing safety and creating a life that isn't constantly hijacked by trauma triggers and defenses.

There are three important ways to think about safety:

- 1) Safety in your body
- 2) Safety in your emotions and thoughts
- 3) Safety in your environment and relationships

In the face of the unexpected, we need tools to help us feel safe. We also need ways to journey towards the life we want to live and how we want to feel about ourselves.

Learning to live within your Window of Tolerance is a great way to support the gains you have made, as well as taking those first steps towards safety and post-traumatic growth.

Before I describe the window of tolerance, it helps to say what it isn't: the defense reactions hyperarousal and hypoarousal.

When we are triggered by reminders of past traumas, or we experience fear, overwhelm, or just lots of stress, our bodies naturally react defensively. We become hyperaroused, which is the automatic activation of fight, flight, or freeze defense responses. Alternatively, when there is no opportunity to escape the sense of being threatened or chronically stressed, the body may eventually collapse, going into a state of so-called hypoarousal.

Continually activating defense responses can lead to health problems. It can contribute to substance use and abuse when drugs and alcohol are used to escape hyperarousal or hypoarousal. Activation of defenses also causes relationship problems. Most of us have difficulty getting along with others when our defenses are aroused.

Often we think states of hyperarousal and hypoarousal are signs that there is something the matter with us. Actually, when your body responds defensively, it's just trying to keep you safe. You have little control; these reactions happen unconsciously and automatically to the subtlest signs of danger.

Consequently, we have a hard time thinking our way out of defense responses. Instead, as I share below, it's often better to work with the body where the defense responses originate.

Learning the signs that you are either hyperaroused or hypoaroused, and then taking actions that help you feel calm and safe, is the practice of returning to the window of tolerance. Once back in the "window," you not only feel better but also reduce the intensity of your responses to stress and fear.

I think of the window of tolerance as the ultimate compass for the healing journey. Most trauma survivors spend a lot of time on a superhighway to hyperarousal or hypoarousal. Perhaps you've experienced rapidly changing emotions—what some describe as going from zero to a hundred to a state of anger/rage, panic, or shut down. Maybe you have heard this phrase used to describe you or you describe yourself this way.

Think of returning to the window of tolerance as getting off that superhighway of rapid defense response. Instead, you start creating a new path towards a more peaceful you.

Maybe it starts as a tiny path. You get a little way into the window before something startles you back to your rapid and automatic response to threat. That's okay!

The more you practice living within the window of tolerance, and the more you identify when you are outside the window, the wider the new path becomes. You're less often on the superhighway and more often on a peaceful path of your own creation.

And that's a nice journey to be on.

On page 7 you'll find a diagram of the window of tolerance, hyperarousal, and hypoarousal, along with the behaviors and inner experiences associated with each of these states. Use the diagram to begin identifying your personal signs of hyperarousal, hypoarousal, and living within the window of tolerance. It might also be helpful to identify five to ten things you enjoy doing that keep you in the window of tolerance. Write them down and keep them with you to refer to when you find yourself back on that superhighway.

On the pages following the diagram, you will find simple body-based exercises (they take a few minutes at most) that you can do throughout the day to increase the time you spend in your window of tolerance. There is also a list of things you can do quickly and easily when you find yourself outside your window that rely on the body. Pick one to five and also write them down and keep them with you for those unexpected stressors.

I wish you peace throughout your journey.

Laura

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE: ZONES OF AROUSAL

HYPERAROUSAL ZONE

Sympathetic “Fight or Flight Response”

(Too much arousal)



SIGNS YOU ARE HERE:

- Tension, shaking
- Hypervigilance
- Impulsivity
- Defensiveness
- Anger/Rage
- Obsessive/cyclical thoughts
- Intrusive imagery
- Emotional reactivity
- Emotional overwhelm
- Feeling unsafe
- Racing thoughts

OPTIMAL AROUSAL ZONE

Ventral Vagal “Window of Tolerance”



SIGNS YOU ARE HERE:

- Feel and think simultaneously
- Awareness of boundaries (yours & others)
- Experience empathy
- Reactions adapt to fit the situation
- Feelings are tolerable
- Feel safe
- Present moment awareness - “Right here, right now”
- Feel open and curious (versus judgmental and defensive)

HYPOAROUSAL ZONE

Parasympathetic “Immobilization Response”

(Too little arousal)



SIGNS YOU ARE HERE:

- No energy
- Feel ‘dead’
- Reduced movement
- Passive
- Ashamed
- Can’t defend oneself
- Dulled cognition/“can’t think”
- Relative absence of sensation
- Numbing of emotions
- Shut down
- Disconnected
- No feelings
- “Not there”
- Can’t say no
- Flat affect

I. Practices for being in the “here and now”

These exercises take less than a minute to do. They’re great in the morning when you awaken in the morning, as a break from work, or anytime throughout the day to increase emotional regulation and relaxation.

Centering exercise

Put one hand over your heart, and rest your other hand on your belly. Lengthen your spine. Take several full, slow breaths. Notice the fullness of your body as you let your breath come and go.

Grounding exercise

Stand in a relaxed position, focusing attention on the sensations in your feet. Put weight on different areas of your feet: front, back, sides. Then play a bit with movement—bending your knees, moving up and down. Sense the ground through your feet and legs.

Alignment exercise

Take a little time to become aware of how your body aligns in a vertical direction: your ankles on top of your feet, your legs on top of feet and ankles, the pelvis resting on your legs, torso on pelvis, your head supported by shoulders and torso, arms hanging off your torso. Then imagine that you are being lifted by the top of your head. Also imagine the feeling of gravity pulling in the opposite direction on the bottom of your spine. Next, shift from feeling stretched to allowing your spine to collapse. Repeat these two movements several times with the flow of your breath—expand on the inhale, and then collapse on the exhale.

Walking exercise

Bring all your attention to your body as you walk (and out of your head and worries). Notice how your feet hit the ground, how your feet roll, the movement in your knees, and corresponding sensations in your hips and shoulders. Play with your usual gait. Practice pushing off with your feet or walking at different paces. Notice the corresponding changes in body sensations.

II. The power of breath

The following simple breathing exercises are also great to do throughout the day, whether during your commute, while waiting in line, as you transition between work and play, or when giving yourself the ultimate treat—meditation!

Simple breath

Imagine while you are inhaling that your breath is going all the way down to your pelvis. Then let the breath expand in your lower belly. When you exhale, let the breath escape effortlessly. Repeat five to ten times.

Bell jar breath

Inhale a breath. When at the top (or end) of the inhale, imagine a rounded quality. Then let the inhale roll over into the exhale. Notice where the breath rolls—front, back, side to side (wherever it seems to go). Repeat five to ten times. This breath is also useful when feeling hyperaroused.

4 x 4 x 4 breathing

Inhale deeply for four counts, exhale for four counts, and repeat the cycle for four minutes several times a day. I find this a good practice before starting work or appointments and while commuting. It's also a great way to get back in the window of tolerance after stressful experiences. You can use a smartphone to time yourself so you can give full attention to your breath.

III. Getting back in the window of tolerance

The following are ways to calm yourself when you find yourself outside your window of tolerance.

If experiencing overwhelm

Sit in a chair with your feet fully planted on the ground, or stand with your spine fully extended. Then slowly scan the environment, naming the objects within your field of vision.

If shaking or trembling

Take full yet slow and easy breaths. No need to breathe too deeply, though. If you can, sit in a chair or on a sofa and wrap a blanket or comforter around yourself. Some people feel better if they also cover their heads.

If numb

Gently squeeze your forearms with opposite hands. Also increase your awareness by noticing the environment through the five senses. What do you see, hear, smell? If you can, try touching or tasting something mindfully.

If hypervigilant

Lengthen your spine while taking full breaths. Pay attention to the rise and fall of breath as it alternatively fills and empties the chest and/or belly.

If heart is accelerated

Take your attention away from the heart region by paying attention to the sensations in your feet. Notice the feeling of being grounded and connected to the floor or earth beneath you.

If you have a collapsed feeling in your body

Try pushing firmly against the wall with your arms fully extended, your head up, and using your energy to ground down through the feet. Notice the feeling of sturdiness in your body as you push.

If feeling the impulse to hurt yourself or someone else

Push against a sturdy wall without aggression. Focus your awareness on grounding, starting with your feet and then slowly moving up your body. Feel your connection to the earth. Take full breaths and keep bringing your thoughts back to your body sensations and away from the focus of your desperation, anger, or rage.

If feeling disconnected or experiencing depersonalization

Start by slowing the pace of whatever you are doing. Then firmly but gently squeeze the forearms, calves, thighs—whatever feels enlivening to you. Try also the “walking exercise” above.

If feeling frozen or panicked

Sit comfortably in a chair or sofa and wrap yourself in a comforter or blanket. Focus on taking full, slow breaths, continually bringing your thoughts back to the present moment. Create a mantra for such moments, such as “I can be present and watch the waves of energy go by without getting caught in the story.”

“Shake off the freeze”

Begin by slowly jumping off the ground. Then shake your arms when your feet land back on the ground. Take full breaths, mindfully inhaling when you jump and exhaling fully when your feet land back on the ground. You can also say something to yourself like, “I’m safe. I’m letting go.”

Using thoughts

Name your reaction to yourself as a defense response, thus reframing the experience. Say to yourself, “This is just a memory,” or “I’m just triggered right now.” You might also try saying to yourself, “I can be here—right here, right now.”

Mindfully not dealing works, too

Give yourself permission to avoid, dissociate, or disconnect. But when you do, try to be mindful of your need to check out. Also make plans to give yourself needed TLC (like these exercises) as soon as you can—and follow through!

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Laura K. Kerr, PhD is the author of [Trauma's Labyrinth: Reflections of a Wounded Healer](#), recipient of a Living Now Book Award and a Foreword INDIES Book of the Year Award, and [Dissociation in Late Modern America: Defense Against Soul?](#) Formerly, she was a mental health scholar (PhD, Stanford University) and psychotherapist specialized in sensorimotor psychotherapy, a trauma-focused psychotherapy that addresses the effects of trauma on the body.

Laura lives in San Francisco, CA with her husband. She enjoys creative writing, making art, gardening, and supporting local wildlife. Visit her at laurakerr.com.

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