

Widening the 'Window of Tolerance'

For people who have experienced trauma, their 'window of tolerance' often becomes narrow.

With a narrowed 'window of tolerance' our bodies might perceive danger, even if they are not in any danger. If a person has been impacted by trauma, their body's flight/fight/freeze 'alarm' system may be in constant 'high alert.'

In other words, even when a person is safe and protected their body can still carry memories of trauma and they might respond as if they are in an unsafe situation. It's like their alarm system gets 'stuck on'.

*"Elevated arousal makes it more likely that an individual will be more reactive, startle more readily, have difficulty concentrating and focusing, feel unsafe in open or crowded spaces, and constantly be scanning for threat even when no threat is present."*¹

In widening our window of tolerance and remaining in here, we learn to recognise the triggers that cause us to go outside our 'window of tolerance' into hyper or hypo arousal and ways to regulate our bodies. These triggers will be different as everyone responds to trauma differently.

Mindfulness is about being in the present moment. Grounding exercises, techniques for self soothing, calming the body and slow breathing are some ways to regulate our bodies and stay in our 'window of tolerance.'

*"Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally."*²

Mindfulness not only makes it possible to survey our internal landscape with compassion and curiosity but can also actively steer us in the right direction for self-care.



Grounding Exercises

Grounding exercises are some of the strategies used by our specialist practitioners at The SAFV Centre when supporting clients.

Pushing Down

1. Pause for a moment and notice your legs and bottom against the chair.
2. Plant your feet firmly on the ground.
3. Take a deep breath in.
4. While you hold your breath, push down as hard as you can with your feet.
5. Hold the pressure in your legs as you continue to push down.
6. Try and hold for a few more seconds.
7. As you exhale, release the pressure in your legs.

Feel the difference in how your legs feel now, compared to when you were pushing down.

What do you notice?

This can also be done with your arms, pushing down into the base of your chair.

1. Scarer, 2013; Van der kolk, 2014; Steele & Kuban, 2012
2. Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D

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Child Version: Rag Dolls and Tin Soldiers

1. Lie on the ground with your child.
2. Instruct them to become 'like a tin soldier' and put as much rigidity in their body as they can.
3. Next invite them to become 'like a rag doll' and let all the tension go in their body.
4. Do this several times. Could also do it with the children standing up.
5. Ask them what they notice when doing both actions.
6. Explain that knowing how to release the tension in our bodies can help us to relax and feel calm.

It might be helpful to demonstrate what this activity looks like so the child has an understanding of what to do.

Notice Five Things

This technique will take you through your five senses to help remind you of the present.

Take a deep belly breath to begin.

5 - LOOK: Look around for 5 things that you can see, and say them out loud. For example, you could say, I see the computer, I see the cup, I see the picture frame.

4 - FEEL: Pay attention to your body and think of 4 things that you can feel, and say them out loud. For example, you could say, I feel my feet warm in my socks, I feel the hair on the back of my neck, or I feel the pillow I am sitting on.

3 - LISTEN: Listen for 3 sounds. It could be the sound of traffic outside, the sound of typing or the sound of your tummy rumbling. Say the three things out loud.

2 - SMELL: Say two things you can smell. It's okay to move to another spot and sniff something. If you can't smell anything at the moment, then name your 2 favourite smells.

1 - TASTE: Say one thing you can taste. It may be the toothpaste from brushing your teeth, or a mint from after lunch. If you can't taste anything, then say your favourite thing to taste.

Take another deep belly breath to end.