

THE BEHAVIOUR INSTITUTE

Diploma in Trauma-Informed Psychotherapy

UNIT 2 • CORE READING 4 OF 6

04

The Window of Tolerance

A concept that changes how you pace every single session

What This Document Covers

This document introduces the window of tolerance, a concept developed by psychiatrist Dan Siegel that has become one of the most widely used, and most clinically practical, frameworks in trauma-informed work. Once understood, it genuinely changes how a session gets paced, moment to moment.

Three Zones, Not Two States

The window of tolerance describes a zone of arousal within which a person can think clearly, feel their emotions without being overwhelmed by them, and remain genuinely present and engaged. Above and below this zone sit two further states, both of which compromise a person's capacity to think, connect, or process what is happening.

The Window Itself: Optimal Arousal

Within the window, a person can experience stress, even significant stress, while still remaining able to think, reflect, and respond flexibly. This is the state in which genuine therapeutic work — processing difficult material, building insight, trying out new responses — is actually possible.

Above the Window: Hyperarousal

When arousal rises above the window, a person moves into hyperarousal — corresponding closely to the fight or flight responses covered in Document 1. This can look like panic, racing thoughts, anger, agitation, or an overwhelming urge to flee the room or the conversation. Critically, meaningful reflective thinking becomes very difficult, or impossible, in this state.

Below the Window: Hypoarousal

When arousal drops below the window, a person moves into hypoarousal — corresponding to freeze or collapse. This can look like numbness, a sense of disconnection or unreality, exhaustion, or a flat, minimal emotional presentation. It is easily mistaken, including by experienced clinicians, for calm or disengagement, when it is in fact a different kind of overwhelm.

Pause and Consider

Think about your own window of tolerance. What tends to widen it — makes you able to handle more stress while staying present and thinking clearly? What tends to narrow it, so that even small stresses tip you into hyperarousal or hypoarousal more easily than usual?

Why the Width of the Window Varies

Everyone's window of tolerance has a different natural width, and that width is not fixed — it narrows and widens based on a range of factors, including sleep, general stress load, physical health, and directly relevant to this course, trauma history. A significant, unprocessed trauma history tends to produce a narrower window: smaller stressors are more likely to push someone into hyperarousal or hypoarousal, and the person may spend considerably less time, proportionally, within their window than someone without that history.

This has a genuinely important clinical implication: a narrow window of tolerance is not a character trait, a sign of weakness, or something a client can simply choose to override through effort. It is a measurable, physiological difference in how much a given nervous system can currently handle before losing its capacity for reflective thought.

Why This Concept Changes Clinical Practice

Effective trauma work depends on keeping a client within, or close to, their window of tolerance. Material that would be genuinely useful to process while within the window can become actively counterproductive, or even harmful, if introduced while a client is significantly outside it — either because it overwhelms an already-hyperaroused system further, or because a hypoaroused client is not actually able to meaningfully engage with or integrate what is being discussed.

This is part of why trauma-specific approaches, covered in depth in Unit 4, place such heavy emphasis on pacing, grounding, and titration — working with difficult material in small, manageable increments, with regular attention to where a client currently sits relative to their own window, rather than pushing straight into the most difficult material available.

Widening the Window Over Time

One of the genuine goals of trauma-informed and trauma-specific work over time is not simply to keep a client inside an existing, narrow window, but to gradually widen the window itself — increasing a person's capacity to tolerate stress and strong emotion while remaining present and able to think. This tends to happen gradually, through repeated experiences of activation followed by successful return to a regulated state, ideally within the context of a genuinely safe, supportive relationship. This is one reason the therapeutic relationship itself, covered in depth in Unit 5, matters so significantly in trauma work — it often serves as the very context in which this widening becomes possible.

What's Next

The next document turns to a related question: given that trauma responses and window width vary so considerably between people, what actually accounts for those individual differences, beyond what has already been covered in Document 3?

A Few Things to Take With You

- The window of tolerance describes the zone of arousal within which a person can think clearly and stay genuinely present
- Above the window sits hyperarousal (fight or flight); below it sits hypoarousal (freeze or collapse) — both compromise reflective thinking
- A narrow window of tolerance, often linked to trauma history, is a physiological reality, not a character trait or a failure of effort
- Effective trauma work depends on pacing material to keep a client within, or close to, their window, rather than pushing past it
- A genuine goal of trauma work over time is gradually widening the window itself, often through the therapeutic relationship

Before You Move On

- Can you recall a moment, professionally or personally, when you mistook someone's hypoarousal for calm or disinterest? Looking back, what other signs might have indicated otherwise?
- Why do you think pushing difficult material on someone who is significantly outside their window can be actively counterproductive, not just unhelpful?
- What practical steps might help you recognise, in real time during a session, when a client has moved outside their window?