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Why Everything Feels Like Too Much Right Now: Understanding Your Window of Tolerance



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I learned about my window of tolerance in therapy years ago, and life has never been the same.

I'd been struggling to understand why I was so reactive to things that seemed to roll off other people. A colleague's dismissive comment would send me spiraling for hours. A last-minute schedule change felt catastrophic. I'd snap at my friends over small things, then feel terrible about it. Meanwhile, people around me seemed to handle similar stressors with relative ease. I thought something was wrong with me. That I was too sensitive. That I needed to toughen up, get over it, be more resilient.

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Then my therapist drew this simple diagram, a window with zones above and below it—and began explaining how my nervous system was working. Something shifted. Not immediately, but gradually, as I started to understand what was actually happening in my body. Instantly, I found relief; I didn't need to fix myself. I wasn't broken. My window had just narrowed. Most importantly, I understood that everyone's window looks different based on their history, their current stressors, and what they're carrying.

I think about that a lot lately. Because right now, if you're feeling like everything is too much, like your capacity has shrunk, like you're reacting more strongly to things that wouldn't have bothered you before, like you're exhausted by interactions that used to be manageable, you're not imagining it. Your window of tolerance has likely narrowed. And given everything happening in our current political and social climate, you're not alone in that.

What My Therapist Taught Me

The window of tolerance is a concept from trauma therapy that describes the zone where your nervous system can handle stress effectively. Inside this window, you can process information, regulate emotions, think clearly, and respond to challenges without becoming overwhelmed or shutting down.

My therapist explained it like this: imagine your window as the range of stimulation, emotional, sensory, and cognitive, that you can handle while staying functional and present. When I'm inside my window, I can think clearly and make decisions. I can feel emotions without being overwhelmed by them. I can be present in conversations and relationships. I can handle normal stressors and challenges. I have access to creativity,

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empathy, and flexibility. My body feels relatively calm and resourced. But outside my window, I flip into one of two states that she helped me recognize.

Sometimes I go into what she called hyperarousal, which is basically my nervous system in overdrive. I get anxious, panicky, and activated. My heart races, my muscles tense, and I can't settle. I become hypervigilant, constantly scanning for threats. I'm reactive, snapping at people, overreacting to small things. My mind races, and I can't focus or think clearly. I feel like I'm too much; too emotional, too intense, too sensitive.

Other times, I drop into hypoarousal, which is the opposite but equally outside my window. I feel numb, disconnected, shut down. My thinking gets foggy, and I can't concentrate. I'm exhausted but in a flat, empty way. I go through motions without really being present. My feelings seem far away or absent entirely. I feel like I'm not enough — not motivated, not capable, not present.

What helped me most was understanding that the size of my window isn't fixed, and it's not the same as everyone else's. My window is shaped by my history, the trauma I've experienced, the stress I've endured, the safety I've known or haven't known. It's also shaped by my current circumstances, what I'm carrying right now, how resourced I feel, and whether I'm getting sleep and support.

This isn't a moral failing. It's neurobiology. And learning that changed everything for me.

Why I'm Thinking About This Again Now

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So, now I think we need to name something that's affecting all of us right now, whether we're consciously aware of it or not. We're living through a time of sustained collective stress. Political upheaval. Social division. Economic uncertainty. Climate anxiety. Threats to fundamental rights and safety for many communities. Constant exposure to distressing news. The ambient hum of "everything is not okay" that follows us through our days.

This isn't acute stress, a single difficult event you can process and move through. This is chronic, ambient, ongoing stress that never fully resolves. And chronic stress has a predictable effect on your nervous system: it narrows your window of tolerance.

I notice it in myself. Things that I could handle easily a few years ago now push me to my edge faster. I have less bandwidth for small frustrations. I find myself either activated and anxious or numb and checking out more frequently than I used to. It might be helpful to think of your window like a muscle that's been clenched for months or years. It can't expand easily anymore. It's protective, trying to keep you safe by staying in a defensive posture. But it also means you have less capacity to handle additional stressors. As a result, when something happens, a difficult conversation at work, a conflict with your partner, a mistake you made, a last-minute change of plans, it pushes you outside your already-narrowed window much faster than it would have in calmer times. In other words, you're not more sensitive than you used to be. Your baseline stress load is higher, so your available capacity is lower.

If you're someone in a helping profession, if you're absorbing other people's stress on top of your own, if your job requires you to be emotionally present for people in crisis, if you're expected to create stability for others while your own foundation feels shaky, your

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window is likely even narrower. I wrote about this in [my letter to helpers](#), about how we're carrying everyone else's pain while the world feels like it's on fire. Of course, our windows have shrunk. You're not imagining that everything feels harder right now. It is harder.

Your nervous system is telling you the truth.

The Comparison That Nearly Broke Me

Here's the part that helped me most when I first learned this concept, and the part I want you to really take in. Back when I was going through my divorce, I kept comparing my reactions to other people's. My sister had gone through a divorce a few years earlier and seemed to bounce back quickly. My friend was dealing with a sick parent and still showing up for everyone with grace. Meanwhile, I was barely holding it together over things that seemed objectively smaller.

I felt so much shame about this. Why does this bother me so much when they seem fine? What's wrong with me that I can't handle what they're handling? But that comparison was useless. Worse than useless, it was cruel to myself.

My sister will have a different window. Different history. Different support system. Different nervous system baseline. My friend will carry different things in different ways. Their "fine" and my "overwhelmed" could both be accurate responses from differently calibrated nervous systems. Someone who grew up with consistent safety and secure attachment will have a naturally wider window than someone who experienced childhood trauma or neglect. Someone who's currently well-resourced, getting sleep,

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having support, and feeling financially stable will have more capacity than someone who's barely hanging on. Someone who's been marginalized, discriminated against, or had to stay hypervigilant for safety will have developed a different nervous system baseline than someone who's moved through the world with more privilege and ease.

None of this is about weakness or strength. It's about what our nervous systems have learned they need to do to keep us safe. The fact that something overwhelms you but doesn't overwhelm someone else doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. Your window is yours. It makes sense given what you've lived through and what you're living with. And while you can work to gradually widen it, and I have, over time, the first step is accepting that it is what it is right now, without judgment. That acceptance was harder for me than any therapeutic technique. But it was also the most important piece.

Learning to Recognize the Signs

Once I understood the window of tolerance, I began paying attention to my body differently. Not judging what I noticed, just observing. I started to see the patterns of how I leave my window.

When I'm heading into hyperarousal, my breathing changes first. It gets shallow and fast, caught in my chest instead of reaching down into my belly. My heart starts racing even when I'm just sitting at my desk. My muscles tense; I notice my jaw clenched, my shoulders up by my ears, and my fists clenched without realizing it. I feel hot, flushed, like I need to move or escape. My thoughts start racing, jumping from worst-case scenario to worst-case scenario. I become reactive in ways I'm not proud of. Small annoyances feel massive. I snap at people I care about. I can't let things go; my mind

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keeps returning to whatever upset me, replaying it, rehearsing what I should have said. Sometimes I notice I'm doom-scrolling, constantly checking news or social media, unable to put my phone down even though I know it's making everything worse. That's a clear sign to me that I've left my window and entered hyperarousal.

The hypoarousal signs are different, but once I learned what to look for, they became just as recognizable. I feel flat. Disconnected. Like I'm watching my life from far away instead of living it. My body feels heavy, hard to move. My thinking is foggy, I can't concentrate, can't remember things, can't even make simple decisions. I find myself going through the motions. Answering questions on autopilot. Nodding along in conversations without really hearing what's being said. Sometimes I realize hours have passed and I'm not sure what I did. The exhaustion feels different from regular tiredness. It's not "I need sleep" exhaustion. It's empty, depleted, "I have nothing left" exhaustion that sleep doesn't fix.

Sometimes I flip between these states, activated and anxious one moment, numb and shut down the next. That's my nervous system trying different strategies to manage overwhelm when neither is really working.

The key practice for me has been just noticing. Not judging, not trying to immediately fix it, just noticing. When I feel myself getting reactive or shutting down, I try to pause and ask myself: Am I outside my window right now? Just naming it, saying to myself, "Oh, I'm in hyperarousal right now" or "I've gone into shutdown", sometimes creates enough space that I can start to come back. Not always, but sometimes. And sometimes it's enough.

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What I've Learned to Do When I'm Outside My Window

Here's what I wish someone had told me earlier: you can't think your way back into your window. You can't logic yourself into regulation. You have to work with your body, because this is a nervous system state, not a cognitive problem.

I've developed some practices over time that help me when I notice I've left my window. They're not about forcing myself to calm down or fixing myself. They're about gently guiding my nervous system back toward the zone where I can actually function.

When I'm in hyperarousal, when I'm activated and anxious, I've learned that my nervous system is in mobilization mode. It's preparing for fight or flight. So I need to help it complete that cycle and come back down.

If I can, I move my body. Not necessarily intense exercise, but intentional movement. Sometimes I literally shake my hands, my arms, my whole body for a minute or so. It looks silly if anyone's watching, but it helps. This is what animals do after a threat passes: they shake it off. We can do that too. Other times I push hard against a wall for ten seconds and then release. Or I dance. Or I walk briskly around the block. The goal is to let my body do what it's preparing to do, mobilize, so it can complete the cycle.

I also work with my breath, but not the way people usually suggest. When I'm anxious, my breath is short and shallow. If I try to take deep breaths, my body sometimes resists. Instead, I focus on making my exhale longer than my inhale. I breathe in for four counts, out for six. Then four in, eight out. This activates what's called the parasympathetic nervous system, the rest and digest system, without forcing it.

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Something else that helps me is orienting to my actual surroundings. When I'm in hyperarousal, I'm usually responding to a threat that's not actually in the room with me. Maybe I'm anxious about something that might happen, or replaying something that already happened, or doom-scrolling about things happening far away. So I look around the room I'm actually in. I name five things I can see. I touch something with texture, a soft blanket, a cold countertop, my dog's fur. I smell something pleasant if I can. I'm teaching my body: right now, in this moment, in this room, I'm actually safe. The threat I'm responding to isn't here.

I've also learned to notice when I'm carrying something I don't need to carry right now. If I'm spiraling about something I can't impact in this moment, I try to put it down. Not forever, just for a little while. I say to myself: This is real. It matters. And I'm putting it down for the next twenty minutes so I can come back to my window. I can pick it back up later if I need to. Then I physically do something else, make tea, fold laundry, pet my dogs. Something that requires just enough attention to interrupt the spiral but not so much that it's overwhelming.

When I'm in hypoarousal, when I'm numb and shut down, the approach is different. My nervous system has gone into conservation mode, so I need gentle stimulation to come back online without triggering back into hyperarousal. I've found that cold helps. Cold water on my face. An ice cube in my hand. Sometimes I eat something crunchy or sour because the sensory input helps wake things up a bit. I might put on upbeat music. These aren't meant to jolt me out of shutdown, just to provide enough stimulus to help me come back into my body. Small movements help too. I stretch. I roll my shoulders. I

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stand up and sit down a few times. I wiggle my toes. Small, deliberate movements that remind my body it can move, it can respond, it's not stuck.

Connection is hard when I'm shut down because the impulse is to isolate completely. So even a small connection helps bring me back. I might text a friend, I don't have to explain what's happening, just "hey, thinking of you." Or I sit with my dog. Or I watch a show that makes me feel something, even if it's just mildly amused. I'm coaxing my system back toward engagement. Sometimes I just name out loud what I'm experiencing: "I'm shut down right now. I feel disconnected." Just naming it creates a tiny bit of space between me and the state. I'm not the shutdown; I'm the person noticing I'm in shutdown. That distinction matters.

One practice that works for both states is what I call the reality check. I ask myself: In this exact moment, am I safe? Not "is the world safe" or "is everything okay," but "right now, in my body, in this room, am I in immediate danger?" Usually, the answer is no. I'm sitting at my desk, or in my car, or on my couch. Nothing is actively threatening me in this moment. This doesn't minimize the real threats that exist. It helps my nervous system distinguish between "threat exists somewhere" and "I am currently under attack." That distinction is crucial.

Throughout all of this, I try to talk to myself with compassion. When I recognize I'm outside my window, I don't berate myself with "What's wrong with me, why am I like this?" I try to say, "My nervous system is doing what it knows how to do. I'm overwhelmed. That makes sense. What do I need right now?" I don't always get all the way back to the center of my window. Sometimes I just move a little bit back toward it, and that's enough. A tiny bit more regulation is still progress.

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Why This Connects to Everything Else

If you've been reading my other articles, you might be noticing how this all fits together. I'm starting to see it myself as I write.

When I wrote about [recognizing your body's signals](#) of safety and threat, I was really talking about learning to read when you're approaching the edges of your window. Your body knows before your mind does. That tightness in your chest, that shallow breathing, that exhaustion that won't quit, these are your nervous system telling you where you are in relation to your window.

In my letter to helpers who feel guilty about needing to rest, I addressed the reality that helping professions narrow your window dramatically. When you're absorbing other people's stress on top of your own, when you're expected to be regulated so others can regulate around you, your window gets smaller and smaller. You can't sustain that without tending to your own capacity.

When writing about [psychological safety, never being done](#), about communication as prevention rather than intervention, I was talking about creating environments that help people stay inside their windows instead of constantly pushing them outside.

Because here's what I'm learning: when everyone's windows are narrow, psychological safety matters more than ever. Small stressors that would normally be manageable, a critical comment, an unexpected change, a tense meeting, can push people outside their windows much faster when they're already operating near the edge. When people are outside their windows, they can't access their best thinking, their empathy, their ability

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to collaborate. This is why the stakes feel higher right now for creating psychological safety at work, in our communities, in our relationships. Not because people are weak or too sensitive, but because collective stress has narrowed everyone's capacity.

Understanding your window of tolerance helps you make sense of your own reactions without shame. It helps you recognize when you need to prioritize regulation over productivity. It gives you language to ask for what you need from others: "I'm outside my window right now, and I need a break." It helps you have compassion for others who are struggling, even when their windows look different from yours.

And it helps you create conditions in your relationships and workplaces that keep people within their windows. Small acts of psychological safety, the ones I talk about in my prevention article, become even more critical when everyone's capacity is diminished.

You're Not Too Sensitive

I want to come back to this because it's important, and because I needed to hear it years ago when I was comparing myself to everyone else. If you're reading this and recognizing yourself, if you've been feeling like everything is too much, like you're more reactive or more shut down than usual, like your capacity has shrunk, please hear this: **You're not too sensitive.** You're accurately calibrated to your current circumstances. Your nervous system is doing exactly what it evolved to do: respond to threat. The fact that you're struggling right now doesn't mean you're broken. It means you're human, with a nervous system that's working overtime to keep you safe in genuinely difficult times.

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Other people who seem fine aren't stronger than you. They have different windows shaped by their histories and current loads. Their fine and your struggling can both be true and valid at the same time. Yes, there are things you can do to work with your window, to come back inside it when you've left, to gradually widen it over time. I've shared some of what's helped me. But these things work better when you start from a place of compassion rather than shame.

You make sense. Your reactions make sense. Your nervous system is giving you real information about your real capacity. The question isn't "What's wrong with me?" The question is "What does my nervous system need right now to feel safer?" And sometimes the answer is simple: to put down what I'm carrying for a few minutes. To move my body. To connect with someone safe. To remember that in this exact moment, I'm actually okay.

Your window is what it is right now. And that's okay. You can work with it. You can tend to it. You can gradually expand it over time, I have, and I'm still working on it. But you can't shame yourself into a wider window. You can only compassion yourself there.

What You Can Do Right Now

If you've made it this far and you're feeling overwhelmed by this article, by everything else, let me offer you something simple. Something I do when I notice I'm outside my window and need to come back. Stop reading for a moment. Put your feet flat on the floor. Feel the ground beneath you. The solidity of it. Take one breath where your exhale is longer than your inhale. Just one. You don't have to fix your breathing or calm down completely. Just one breath. Look around the room you're in. Notice one thing

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that brings you even the smallest bit of comfort or pleasure. The light is coming through the window. Your coffee mug. A photo of someone you love. Your pet is sleeping nearby. Ask yourself: In this exact moment, am I safe?

If the answer is yes, let yourself register that for just a few seconds. Your nervous system needs to know: right now, in this breath, in this body, in this room, you're okay. That's enough. That's actually a lot.

You don't have to fix everything. You don't need a wide window. You don't have to be fine. You just have to notice where you are, what you need, and take one small step back toward your window. You can do this. Not perfectly. Not all the time. But enough. Enough to keep going. Enough to take care of yourself. Enough to remember that your capacity might be smaller right now, but it's not gone. You're here. You're trying. You're learning to work with your nervous system instead of against it.

That matters more than you know.

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