
EXPAND YOUR WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

BY ROBYN HACKER, PHD

“Wellness is Not a
State of Being, But a
State of Action.”

Emily Nagoski, PhD & Amelia Nagoski, DMA



Photo by Brian Ho on Unsplash

We work hard to create structure and a sense of control in our lives. This approach significantly improves our well-being by decreasing cognitive, physical, and emotional effort day-to-day, and in the best of times it creates space for rest. Unfortunately, our sense of control and our ability to rest were drastically altered, nearly overnight, as the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

This was particularly apparent for women, many shouldering the majority of childcare,

education, and house chores while still managing professional responsibilities and offering support to everyone around us. The pandemic created significant neglect of our own health, our personal needs, and our well-being. Survey researchers have found statistically significant differences between men and women's response to the COVID-19 pandemic with women experiencing significantly more stress¹.

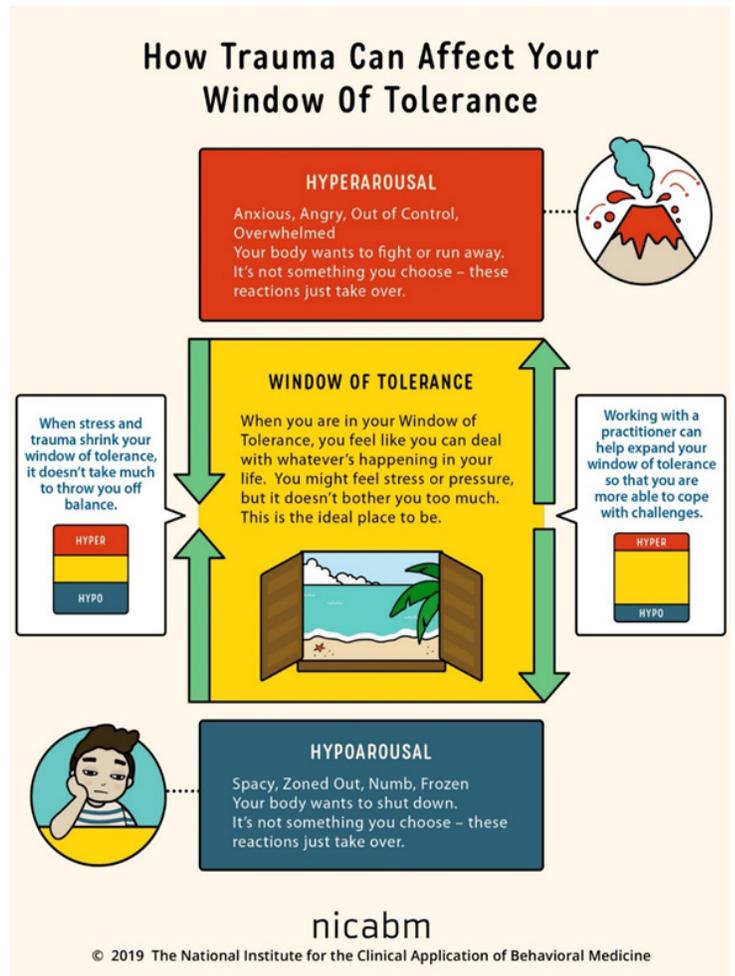
Nothing about the past fourteen months was simple. Everything was in constant

flux and most things felt difficult. As we transition into our new normal, we are realizing that we have changed. For some, the pandemic presented an opportunity to slow down and connect with what is important, but for many, it exacerbated the madness of our lives. Schedules ceased to exist, and our support systems were also in crisis. For most of us, what is known as our Window of Tolerance (WOT) shrank.

Our WOT is the zone in which our nervous system is “optimally aroused”. Our stressors feel manageable in this zone, and it is also here that we experience rare instances of feeling cool, calm, and collected. We can focus on the present moment without feeling overwhelmed and anxious or dissociated and detached. The Window of Tolerance is essentially those times when we are effectively and efficiently balancing an emotional reaction with a logical, pragmatic, and problem-solving response. Neurologically, it is when our limbic system and our prefrontal cortex are communicating in a fluid and helpful way rather than hijacking each other.

I like to consider this zone like a battery in which my wattage is at an ideal operating level. Type-A and perfectionistic tendencies relax enough so we can focus on what needs to get done and enjoy the day rather than perseverating or overthinking too much. If that wattage gets too high, we get anxious. Too low and we might shut down and feel exhausted. We are within our WOT when we can reframe anxiety and frustration as motivation rather than a reason to shut down or turn to unhealthy coping strategies to manage the stressors in our lives. Our WOT is as unique as each of us; it varies based on our current circumstances and previous experiences and changes throughout the course of our lives, sometimes daily. It is well established in clinical literature that trauma and stress significantly impact our WOT.

For most of us, the pandemic prevented us from operating within our WOT.



Comments from colleagues and loved ones felt more personal, it was harder to not yell at our kids and partners, and our ability to focus was often non-existent. We felt more angry, anxious, numb – even paralyzed at times, and our short-term memory was drastically impacted. It was difficult to remember what we just said and rates of forgetting why we went into that room increased. Doing one more thing, even if for ourselves, felt overwhelming, and keeping a daily routine of any kind was hard.

It is normal for the challenges of life to temporarily demand we step outside our WOT. We might become distressed and jump into a hyperarousal state when more wattage is required and then feel exhausted and drop into a hypoarousal state when our wattage is low. These are built in survival strategies at our bodies' disposal to keep us alive.



Photo by r-mo-w at Unsplash

Unfortunately, our brains do not know the difference between a temporary stressor (e.g., an important deadline) or chronic stress (e.g., being in an underrepresented group, a pandemic, ongoing racial violence). As a result, we have remained in a chronic stress state for much of the past 14 months, and rates of mental health issues and substance abuse as a means of coping have skyrocketed as our WOT shrank.

Despite the sustained period, there are relatively simple ways to increase your own Window of Tolerance as we move into our new reality.

- ☛ **Make time for yourself.** As cliché as it sounds, we must fill our cup to be able to pour into others. You have permission to take a day off solely for you – away from your children, your partner, and your responsibilities. Daily make time to drink water, to eat nutritious food, and to sleep. Take bathroom breaks. Carve out 5 minutes to deep breathe. Turn off work notifications when you leave the office and keep them off over the weekend. Remember the things you enjoy – things that truly fill your cup – and build them into your schedule as priorities. The reality is if you do not care for yourself, everyone you are prioritizing over yourself may be forced to figure out how to move forward without you. The people who truly care about you will adapt to you taking time for yourself; they will much prefer you be healthy than not present at all.
 - ☛ **Listen to your body.** If we can learn to listen, our bodies give us all the information we need to heal. Unfortunately, obtaining a successful career in the law has likely taught you to override this built-in information source. Your analytical skills will not provide what is needed to increase your wattage; you cannot think your way through healing from this past year. As I was known to say to clients, “If you want to get unstuck, you’ve got to sit in the suck.” In more eloquent terms, one might say “to heal, we must feel”. We must feel the messages our body gives and honor emotions we have been suppressing. If you are not sure where to start, consider grief. At this point, we are all grieving or needing to grieve something. Maybe it is the loss of life pre-pandemic or what we were unable to do last year. For many, we are needing to grieve the loss of a loved one or our own health.
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- ☛ **Complete the cycle.** As described in *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*, “Just because you’ve dealt with the stressor doesn’t mean you’ve dealt with the stress itself.” Stress remains in our body if we do not complete the cycle. The most efficient way to complete the stress cycle is through physical activity. This might be walking, breathing exercises, biking, a big ugly cry, or a dance break. Creativity, laughter, and human connection are other options. Figure out what you need to complete the cycle. Listening to your body will guide you to knowing when this has been done. Notice progress in this realm; do not expect perfection.
 - ☛ **Ask for help.** Life is hard and we are not biologically programmed to navigate it alone. Read that sentence again. Whatever emotion – shame, fear, guilt, embarrassment, or a sense of not being deserving of support – holds you back from reaching out, this is your ego preventing you from being your best self. If you are struggling, no matter how big or little it feels, you are not meant to carry this burden alone. Healing happens in connection with others. So much support is available, if you just get out of your own way and ask. Humans benefit from helping others. Finding the courage to ask for help may not only change your life, but someone else’s too.

One of the simplest options for increasing your Window of Tolerance is to reach out to your Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program at info@coloradolap.org or 303-986-3345 for a free and confidential well-being consultation. All this requires is that you take an hour for yourself to ask for help and to connect with someone who can help you figure out strategies for completing your stress cycle. ●

Notes

1. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342800932_I'm_not_Working_from_Home_I'm_Living_at_Work_Perceived_Stress_and_Work-Related_Burnout_before_and_during_COVID-19

Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) is the free, confidential and independent well-being program for the legal community of Colorado. For more information, go to www.coloradolap.org. For a confidential consultation, discussion about your stressors, or to obtain helpful resources, contact COLAP at 303-986-3345 or info@coloradolap.org.