



Regulating the Nervous System

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Live Well With Chronic Illness



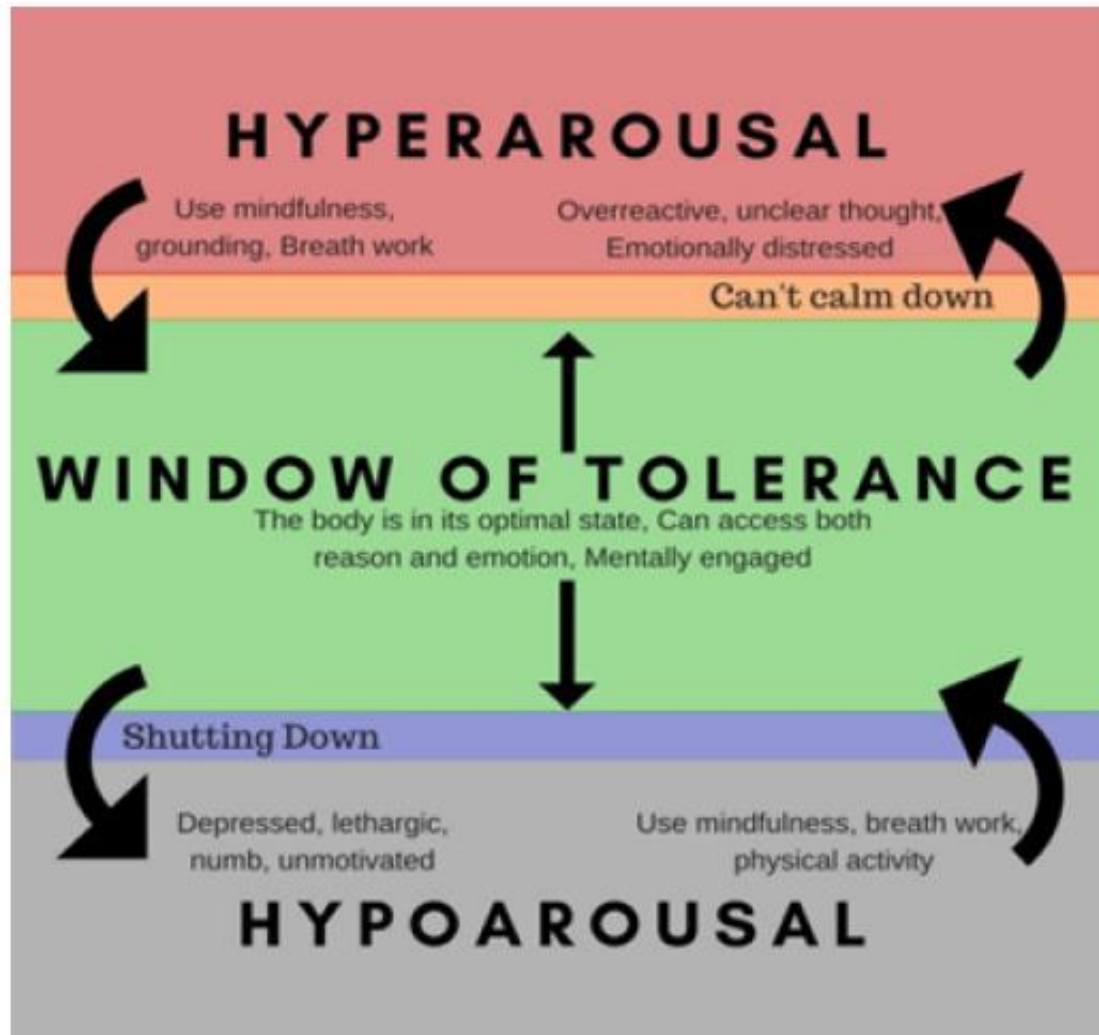
Look After Yourself



- You are responsible for your wellbeing.
- Be kind to yourselves
- Take what feels helpful, and leave the rest.
- Practices are optional
- We can't help our nervous systems from becoming dysregulated – this is not our fault
 - Mast Cell Mediators being neuroactive
 - Stress and anxiety is normal when we are ill



The Window of Tolerance



Acknowledgment: Dan Siegel's Window of Tolerance - Mindsight

- Wide window of tolerance
- We can 'cope' with life
- We feel calm, regulated
- We are functioning optimally
- Flexibility - move between nervous system states if we need to, but easily return to a regulated state in the middle
- We feel SAFE



Hyperarousal

Can't Calm Down

Window of Tolerance

Shutting Down

Hypoarousal

When we are unwell

Window of Tolerance Shrinks

No bandwidth

Life feels overwhelming

We get stuck in hyper or hypo
arousal

distressed, emotional, stressed and
anxious.

Physically overwhelmed

We do not feel safe

Awareness



Check-in with your nervous system state - where are you on the diagram?

Are you in the green – centred, grounded, calm, relaxed, feeling sociable?

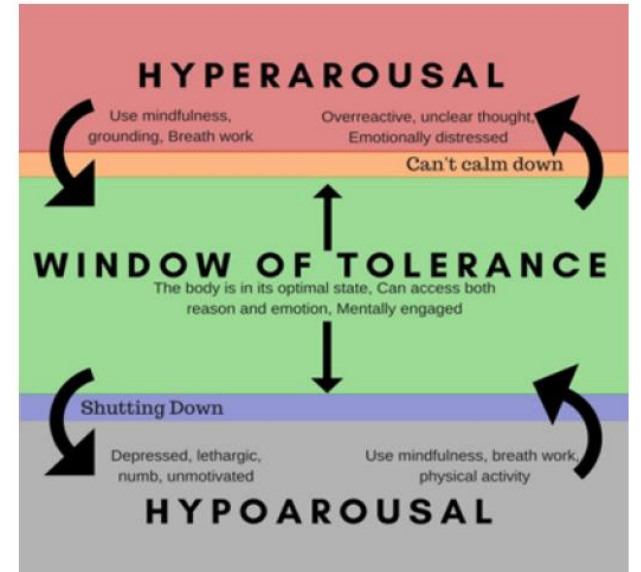
Are you in the red – angry, agitated, frightened, buzzing, high energy?

Are you in the grey – low, sad, depressed, fatigued, low energy?

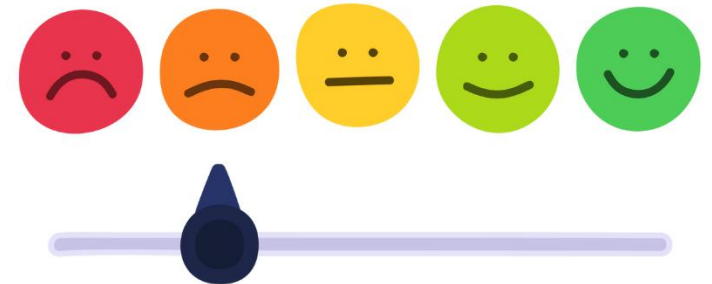
Start checking-in regularly 3 times a day, just notice where you are

We can't change what we're not aware of – become aware of your current state.

No right or wrong – no judgment, no panic. Just observation.



Acknowledgment: Dan Siegel's Window of Tolerance - Mindsight



The Vagus Nerve

Autonomic Nervous system

Controls all unconscious functions
and also sensing danger or safety

Senses safety, inhibits the stress
response

Allows us to go back into rest and
digest – return to the window of
tolerance.



Image 2.2 Photolithograph of a 1543 woodcut by Andreas Vesalius
Credit: Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

Safety

The key to accessing the 'green band' is feeling safe.

Our brain and our vagus nerve perceives safety, no threat, and switches off the fight/flight response, activating the parasympathetic

When we live with MCAS, when the nervous system is being affected by mediators, it can become hard to find safety

Working on actively seeking safety enables our nervous system to 'stand down' and we can more easily find our way to the green state

How can we help the vagus nerve to perceive safety and exit F/F?



Self-Compassion



Our Inner Critic activates our danger response – our nervous system perceives that as danger and threat

We can't feel safe when we are constantly under attack from within

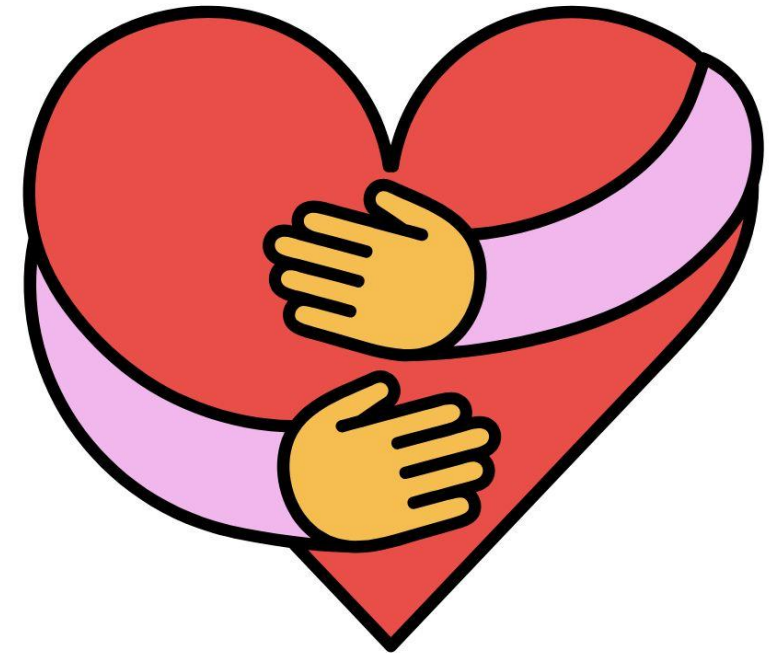
Practicing self-compassion downregulates the nervous system into the green zone, and switches off the Fight/Flight

Begin by thinking about how you would speak to a friend or loved-one

What would you say to them?

Say that to yourself

Give yourself the same kindness and forgiveness that you would to others.



Joy

We have a natural negativity bias

Our brains are ‘programmed’ to remember and ruminate on danger – that is a survival mechanism

This mental preoccupation with ‘bad things’ triggers our nervous system into danger – we can’t find safety when we are constantly thinking about threats

It makes it much harder to notice things that are good

By deliberately seeking out joy, pleasure, and fun, and spending time focusing our attention on those genuine sensations, it signals safety.

Hobbies, crafts, creativity, music, films, socialising, looking at nature.



Movement



Fast, agitated movement – activates the Fight or Flight

Slow, steady movements, in time with your breathing - activates the Rest and Digest

Slow, gentle movement practices like Qigong, Tai Chi, Yoga, walking

Help to regulate the nervous system.

Practice –

- Slow walking
- Moving at half-speed
- Shaking



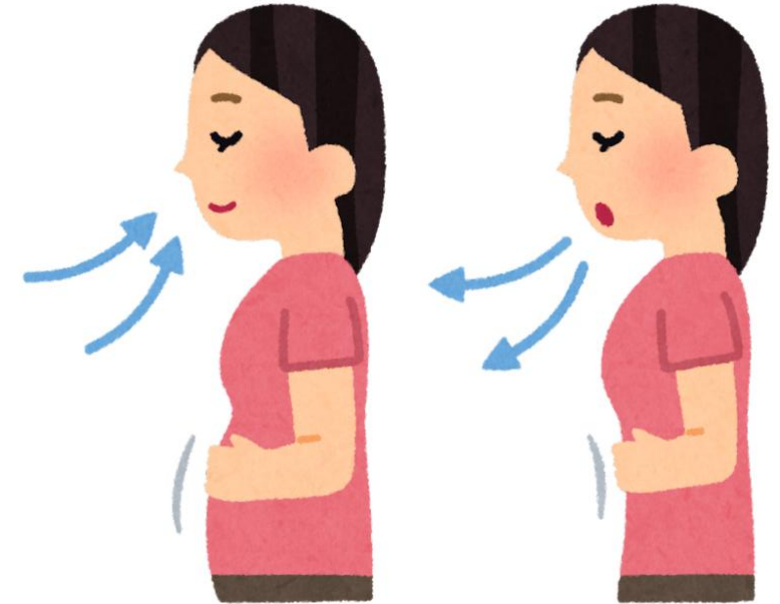
Breathing Exercises



Fast, shallow breaths, strong inhale, upper chest = danger, and activates the Sympathetic, Fight or Flight

Slow, deep breaths, long exhale, into our tummy (Diaphragmatic breathing) = safe, and activates the 'Rest and Digest'

- 7/11 breathing
- Lotus Flower Breathing
- Alternate Nostril Breathing
- Equal inhale and exhale – resonant breathing (6/6)





Vagus Nerve Exercises

Some tools that can improve vagal tone – help it ‘brake’ the sympathetic system -

- Massaging around your ears
- Squeezing the Tragus part of your ear (The triangle that sticks out)
- Pulling your ear lobes gently
- Humming/singing
- Gargling
- Vibration

Spontaneous deep breath, sign, yawn

Caution - very, very gentle vagus nerve stimulation, and to only do a very little bit to being with.



Staying Present

Thinking about the past or worrying about the future – activates F/F

Thinking about the past or future, the unhappier we are and the worse we feel.

Focus in the present moment = better mental health, and better nervous system regulation

Be fully present and absorbed in what you are doing right now

Easier said than done –practice and repetition

Mindful doing. Each day, be fully present during a task – eating, drinking, showering, washing up. When your mind wanders, bring it back.



Choosing Helpful Thoughts



Our thoughts trigger our nervous system

Our nervous system can't tell the difference between what is real and what is just thoughts

Thinking about difficult, unhelpful things, activates F/F

It's not easy to avoid thinking about our illness, and sometimes it is necessary and productive

We need to get really good at differentiating between 'helpful' and 'unhelpful' thoughts – ask yourself 'is this helping me?'

Recognising and interrupting the 'unhelpful' thoughts, and spending more time choosing helpful thoughts.



STOP Practice

Notice we are ruminating, our thoughts are racing, our nervous system is dysregulated

The STOP Process

- Stop what you are doing – pause briefly
- Take a Breath – focus on your breathing for a few moments
- Observe – notice what’s happening in your body, notice your nervous system state
- Proceed – make a choice about how you want to proceed – what would be supportive for you now, what would be one helpful next step to support yourself.

Tip - In advance – set an intention for how you want to proceed, so that it’s available to you in the moment when it feels harder to make good choices.



Summary



We can influence how our nervous system is working and help support it when it's being affected by mast cell mediators in a variety of ways.

- Becoming aware of our nervous system state
- Fostering a sense of safety as often as possible
- Self-compassion
- Joy
- Movement
- Breathing exercises
- Vagus nerve exercises
- Present Moment Awareness
- Helpful Thoughts
- STOP Practice

We don't need to do ALL of these!
Pick one or two tools that work for you

Be compassionate!

Regular repetition is the key - neuroplasticity

Worksheet



When I notice my inner voice is being critical and unkind, I will

.....

Every day, one thing I can do that makes me feel happy or brings me joy is

.....

A breathing or vagus nerve practice that I find helpful is

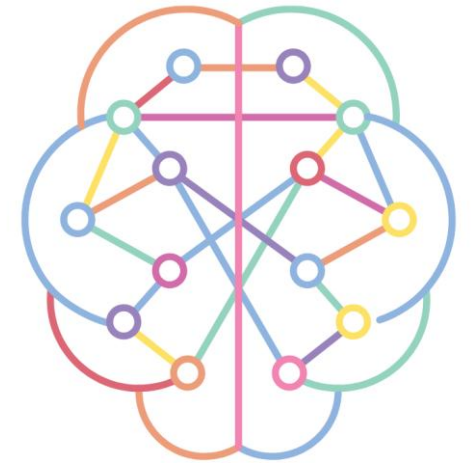
A slow movement practice I can do is.....

Each day, what is one activity I can do mindfully, focusing on being in the present moment.....

3 times a day I am going to check-in with myself in a non-judgemental way, and begin to notice where my nervous system is at.

When I notice myself ruminating or becoming anxious or panicking, I am going to practice the STOP Routine

When I practice my STOP Routine – what are 2 or 3 choices I can give myself for helpful, intentional ways to proceed? Write these down now.....



The End

Thank you for Listening

Any Questions?

