

# GROUNDING AND THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Mental health and psychosocial support booklet



Bufdir

# OUR GOAL



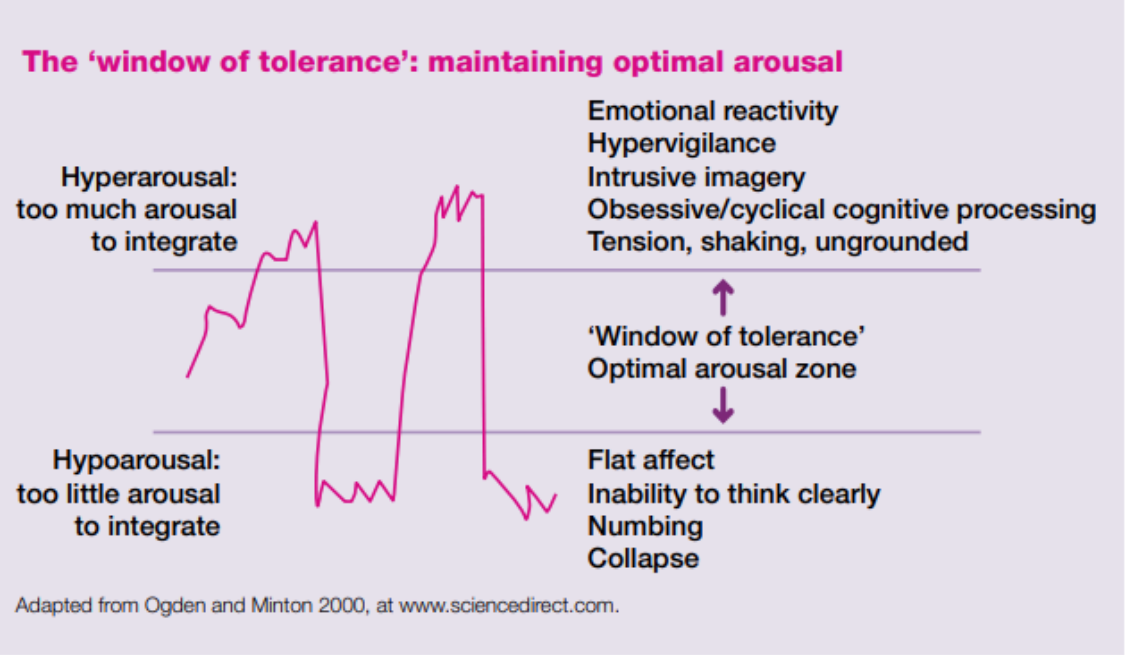
This booklet offers a comprehensive toolbox for caregivers, including techniques for parents to regulate their own emotions and practical steps for assisting children when they are overwhelmed or out of their window of tolerance. Caregivers experiencing trauma, displacement, or mental health challenges often face difficulties managing stress, which directly affects their ability to respond to their children in moments of distress.
To provide effective support, parents must first learn to regulate their own emotions. Knowing about tools is not enough—one needs to practice and apply them consistently.
. Only when caregivers are able to calm and stabilize themselves can they help their children return to balance.

This booklet offers parents practical methods to manage:

- Hyperarousal through calming strategies such as breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation.
- Hypoarousal through reactivation methods such as sensory stimulation and grounding techniques.

Drawing on resources including Doing What Matters in Times of Stress, Teaching Recovery Techniques , MHHRI  GBV manuals, and other evidence-based frameworks, this module provides a comprehensive toolbox for caregivers. It emphasizes that self-regulation in parents is the first step toward co-regulation with their children.

# GROUNDING AND THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE




The window of tolerance (WoT) is a helpful metaphor for understanding our reactions to stress and trauma.
However, when we go above the window, we become hyper-aroused, too activated. We might feel anxious, angry, panicked, or like we need to fight or run away. This is the body's natural fight-or-flight response to danger.
When we fall below the window, we experience hypo-arousal, too little activation. We may feel numb, shut down, tired, or disconnected. This is also a survival response, where the body tries to protect us by "freeze."
Trauma can make our window of tolerance narrower, meaning we are more likely to get overwhelmed, either too activated or too shut down, even by things that might not seem dangerous to others.

The good news is that with the right tools and support, we can learn to notice these states and gently bring ourselves back into our window. When we are stressed or traumatised, grounding exercises can help us regulate us back within this window.

There we will be able to stay present, think clearly, and respond to challenges.Over time, we can even widen the window, so we feel more stable, more present, and better able to cope.

We have put together some simple tools to help understand and manage trauma responses, and support healing, step by step.

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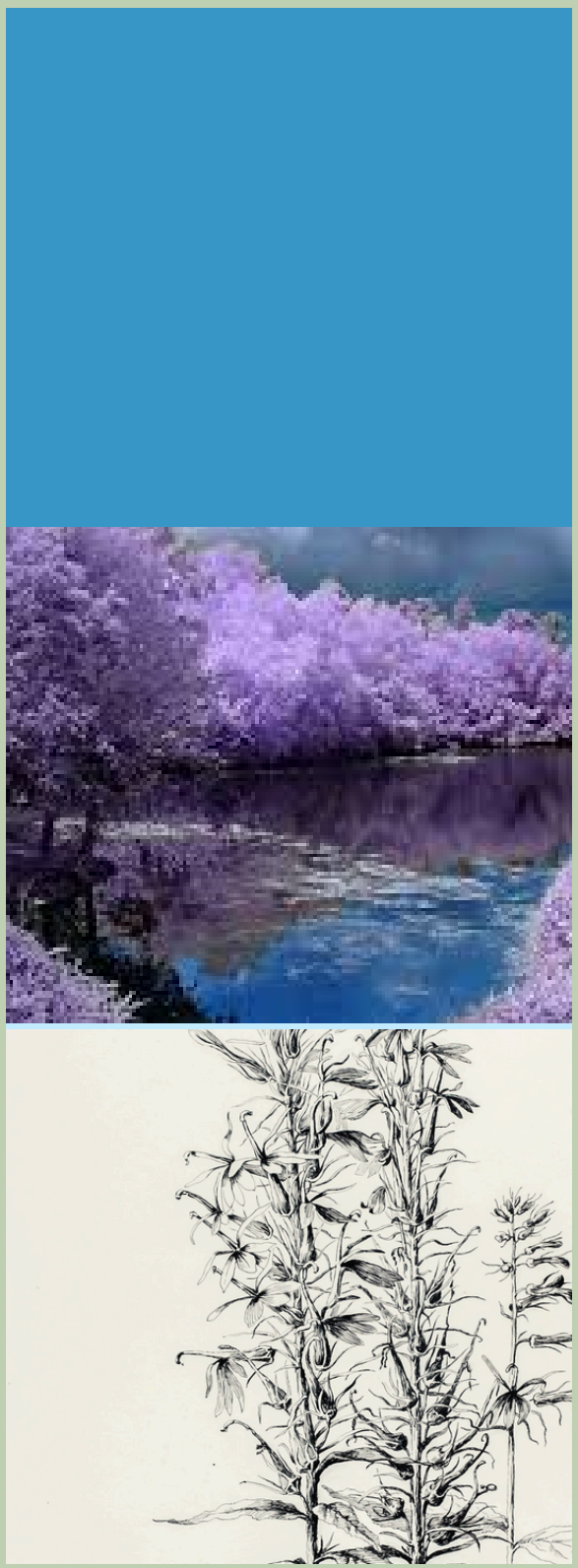
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# 🏠 Creating a Safe Place



This exercise supports survivors feeling frozen or overactivated, helping to restore balance.

Instructions:

- Make yourself comfortable, with your feet on the ground.
- Feel and relax your body – your head, your face, your arms, spine, stomach, buttocks, thighs, legs.
- Choose whether you want to close your eyes or keep them open during this exercise.
- Listen carefully to the trainer's voice.

Then:

- Think of a place in which in the past you were calm and confident and safe.
- It may be outdoors, at home, or somewhere else. It can be a place to which you have been once or many times, which you saw in a film, heard about, or imagined.
- You can be there by yourself or with someone you know.
- It can be private, unknown to others – somewhere that no one can find without your permission. Or you can decide to share it with others.
- This place must suit you and meet your needs. You can constantly recreate or adapt it.
- It is comfortable and richly equipped for all your wants. Everything you need to be comfortable is present.
- It is somewhere that fits you. It shuts out every stimulus that might be overwhelming.
- Imagine this place. Imagine you are there.
- Take time to absorb it in detail: its colors, shapes, smells and sounds.
- Imagine sunshine. Feel the wind and the temperature.
- Notice how it feels to stand, sit, or lie there. How your skin and body feel in contact with it.
- How does your body feel when everyone is safe, and everything is fine?
- In your safe place you can see, hear, smell and feel exactly what you need to feel safe.
- Perhaps you take off your shoes and feel what it is like to walk barefoot in the grass or in the sand.
- You can go to this place whenever you want and as often as you want.
- Just thinking about it will cause you to feel calmer and more confident.
- Remain there for five more seconds. Then prepare to return to this room.

OPEN YOUR EYES, STRETCH YOURSELF, AND DO WHAT YOU NEED TO RETURN TO THE PRESENT.



## 🟦Square-breathing

Instructions

• Sit comfortably.
• Lower your shoulders.

• Look at a square form – or visualize one with your eyes closed.

Step-by-Step Breathing Pattern:

- Breathe in while counting to 4.
- Let your eyes wander up the left side of the square.
- Hold your breath while counting to 4.
- Let your eyes run across the top of the square.
- Breathe out while counting to 4.
- Let your eyes run down the right side of the square.
- Hold your breath while counting to 4.
- Let your eyes run along the bottom of the square.

🔁 Repeat this cycle 4 times.

## 🕰️Distinguish Past and Present

Instructions

This exercise can help survivors to calm down and deal with overactivation. Recall a mildly unpleasant incident, when you were a little anxious, restless or ashamed. What do you notice in your body? What happens in the muscles? What happens in the stomach? How does your breathing change? Does your heart rate accelerate or decelerate? Do you become hotter or colder? If there are changes in temperature, do they occur everywhere or in specific parts of your body?

- Now turn your attention back to the room you are in. Notice the color of the wall. Notice details of decoration. What is the temperature? What do you smell?
- Does your breathing change when your attention changes?
- Now try to pay attention to your current surroundings while remembering the mildly unpleasant event. Can you keep your attention on where you are physically now, while remembering the event?
- End this exercise with your attention focused on your current surroundings.

# 🧽 Mind Clean

Instructions:



You can do the exercise in a warm bath – heat helps your muscles relax more deeply.

- Get a soft sponge and keep it nearby – you can use it for gentle massage or to focus your attention on physical sensations.
- You can also do the exercise while lying down – choose a comfortable position where your body is fully supported by the water.
- Create a cozy atmosphere: dim lighting, aromatherapy, or calming music can help you relax even more.
- Make sure you won't be disturbed – this is your time for restoration.

If the example below is not culturally appropriate, imagine pouring water over your head and that the water washes away all unwanted thoughts, tension, or anxiety.
Find a good place to sit – not too close to each other.
The next tool is called Mind Clean because, just like a house or room needs cleaning to get rid of dust and leftover rubbish, our minds need cleaning of unwanted material and tension.

- Close your eyes. If you can't, find a spot on the floor in front of you to look at.
- Now, imagine that you've got a sponge in your hand. Is it wet or dry?
- If it is wet, twist it until it is as dry as possible.
- Now lift it up and hold it to your forehead.
- Imagine that all the tension, worry and anxiety are pouring out of your mind and into your sponge. Let it pour out for a minute or so.
- Then lower the sponge and twist it until all unwanted tension and anxiety is gone.
- Then lift it up to your brow again.
- Imagine that any tension/worry/anxiety that is left in your mind is poured into the sponge.
- If you want to, you can imagine a strong pump sucking whatever tension is left into the sponge.
- Once more, twist the sponge until it is completely empty.
- Feel how good it is to have gotten rid of all that unwanted stress and tension.

You can use this mind-cleaning as often as you need.

## 🌬️ Making Room

Instructions



Trying to push away difficult thoughts and feelings often does not work very well. So instead, MAKE ROOM for them:

1) NOTICE the difficult thought or feeling with curiosity. Focus your attention on it. Imagine the painful feeling as an object, and notice its size, shape, colour and temperature.

2) NAME the difficult thought or feeling. For example: “Here is a difficult feeling” “Here is a difficult thought about the past” “I notice here is sadness”
“I notice here is a thought that I am weak”



3) Allow the painful feeling or thought to come and go like the weather. As you breathe, imagine your breath flowing into and around your pain to make room for it. Instead of fighting with the thought or feeling, allow it to move through you, just like the weather moves through the sky. If you are not fighting with the weather, then you will have more time and energy to engage with the world around you and do things that are important to you.

## 🤦 Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Instructions

When you are scared or anxious, your body becomes tense. This can generate symptoms of pain in the shoulders, neck or back, or tension in the jaw, arms or legs. To train yourself to progressively release this tension, start by intentionally tensing specific groups of muscles, and relaxing them.

- Focus on the difference of feeling between the tense and relaxed state of the muscles.
- Practice on different parts of the body: the head, face, neck, shoulder, back, stomach, buttocks, arms, hands, legs or feet. Increase tension and hold it for 5 seconds; then release and hold for 10 seconds. Find the tempo that suits you. Increase the tension and release the tension ten times in each muscle group, with a short pause in between.

# CALMING EXERCISES FOR HYPERAROUSAL (OVERACTIVATION)

- Start by focusing on your hands. Make a fist, hold it for 5 seconds, release for 10. Notice the difference between the tense and released states. Do it once more.

- Move the focus to your arms. Pull your forearms towards your shoulder. Feel the tension in your upper arms. Hold for 5 seconds, release for 10. Notice the difference. Do it once more.
-
- Stretch your arm out and lock the elbow. Feel the tension in the triceps. Hold for 5 seconds, release for 10. Notice the difference. Repeat. When your arms are relaxed, let them rest in your lap.

- Focus on your face. Increase the tension in your forehead, lift your eyebrows. Notice the tension. Hold for 5 seconds, release for 10. Notice the difference. Repeat.

- Increase the tension in your jaw. Hold. Release. Repeat.
- Focus on the muscles in your neck. Bend your neck so that your chin touches your chest, turn your head slowly to the left, bring it back to the centre, bend it back, bring it back to the centre, turn it to the right, bring it back to the centre. Repeat slowly since there is often a lot of tension in this area.

- Focus on your shoulders. Lift them. Hold and notice the tension. Release. Notice the difference. Repeat.
- Focus on the shoulder blades. Pull them back. Increase the tension. Relax. Notice the difference and repeat.

- Stretch your back by sitting in a very upright position. Hold the tension and relax, notice the difference and repeat.
- Increase the tension in your buttocks. Hold for 5 seconds and release, notice the difference, repeat.

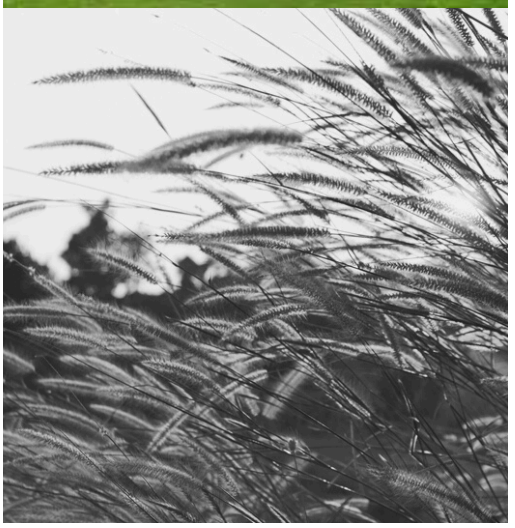
- Hold your breath. Pull your stomach in, tighten it, and relax. Notice the difference, repeat.

- Focus on your legs. Stretch them out, feel the tension in your thighs, hold and relax.
- Straighten your legs again; this time make your toes point towards you. Notice the tension in the back of your legs, and the feeling of relaxation when you release. Repeat.
- Focus on your toes, make them point downwards as far as you can. Feel the tension and release.
- Scan your whole body. Does any part still feel tense? Repeat the exercise for this part.

Imagine that a relaxed feeling is spreading through your whole body. Your body feels warm, perhaps a little heavier, relaxed.







# 🔗Unhooking

## Instructions

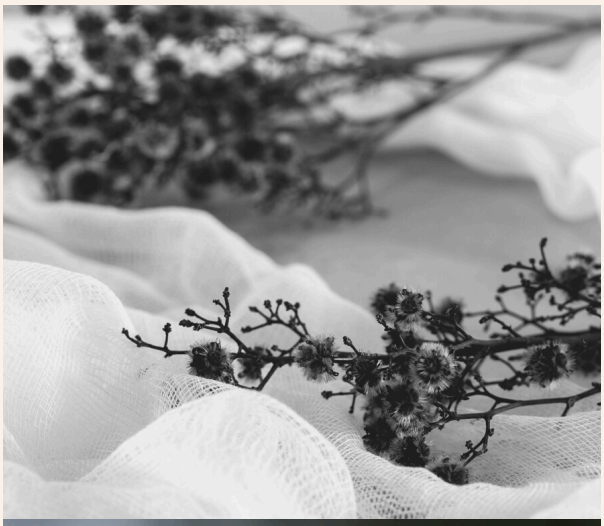
UNHOOK YOURSELF with these three steps:

- 1) NOTICE that a difficult thought or feeling has hooked you. Realize that you are distracted by a difficult thought or feeling, and notice it with curiosity.

- 2) Then silently NAME the difficult thought or feeling; for example:

“Here is a difficult feeling”
“Here is tightness in my chest”
“Here is a feeling of anger”
“Here is a difficult thought about the past”
“I notice here is a difficult thought”
“I notice here are fears about the future”

- 3) Then, REFOCUS on what you are doing. Pay full attention to whoever is with you and whatever you are doing.







# ACTIVATING EXERCISES FOR HYPOAROUSAL (UNDERACTIVATION)

## 🪵 Grounding the Body



### Instructions

This exercise can help a survivor to come down from hyperarousal and find a more balanced emotional state. It can also be used to focus survivors who are in 'freeze-mode'.

- Sit on your chair. Feel your feet touching the ground. Stamp your left foot into the ground, then your right. Do it slowly: left, right, left. Do this several times. Feel your thighs and buttocks in contact with the seat of your chair (5 seconds). Notice if your legs and buttocks now feel more present or less present than when you started focusing on your legs.
- Now move your focus to your spine. Feel your spine as your midline. Slowly lengthen your spine and notice if it affects your breath (10 seconds).
- Move your focus toward your hands and arms. Put your hands together. Do it in a way that feels comfortable for you. Push your hands together and feel your strength and temperature. Release and pause, then push your hands together again. Release and rest your arms.
- Now move your focus to your eyes. Look around the room. Find something that tells you that you are here. Remind yourself that you are here, now, and that you are safe. Notice how this exercise affects your breathing, your presence, your mood, and your strength.

## 👀 Re-orienting to the Present



### Instructions

This exercise is of help to survivors in 'freeze-mode', who feel numbed and frozen.
Form pairs and sit together. One of the pair should play a helper and the other a survivor. The Helper should assist the Survivor to use her senses to put herself fully in the present and feel safe. Take turns.

• Look round you and name 3 things you see.
• Look at something (an object, a colour, etc.) Tell yourself what you are seeing. Name 3 things you hear.

• Listen to a sound (music, voices, other sounds).
• Tell yourself what you are hearing. Name 3 things you touch.
• Touch something (different textures, different objects).
• Tell yourself what you are touching. Now, notice your state of mind.

• Do you feel that you are more present in the room or less present after doing the exercise?

• Do you feel calmer or more energised?

## 🤗 Squeeze-Hug







Instructions

This exercise calms survivors who are agitated. It can also help 'frozen' survivors to concentrate on the here-and-now.

- Cross your arms in front of you and draw them towards your chest.
- With your right hand, hold your left upper arm.
- With your left hand, hold your right upper arm.
- Squeeze gently and pull your arms inwards.
- Hold the squeeze for a little while.
- Find the right amount of squeeze for you right now.
- Hold the tension and release.
- Then squeeze for a little while again and release.
- Stay like that for a moment.

## ⚖️ Feeling the Weight of Your Body

Instructions

This exercise helps survivors who are 'frozen' or numb to focus on the present. The exercise activates muscles in the torso and legs, which gives a feeling of physical structure.

When we are overwhelmed, our muscles often change from extreme tension to collapse; they shift from a state of active defense (fight and flight) to submission and become more than ordinarily relaxed (hypotonic). When we are in touch with our strength and structure, it is easier to bear feelings. We can contain our experience and manage feelings of fragmentation (of being overwhelmed) better.

• Feel your feet on the ground. Pause for five seconds.
• Feel the weight of your legs. Hold for five seconds.
• Try stamping your feet carefully and slowly from left to right, left, right, left, right. Feel your buttocks and thighs touching the seat of the chair. Hold that for five seconds.
• Feel your back against the back of the chair, stay like that and notice if you feel any difference.



# Grounding and the Window of Tolerance

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