



# MINDFULNESS AND EMOTION REGULATION

## The “Window of Tolerance”

*"We can't change the wind,  
but we can adjust the sails."  
-Thomas S. Monson*

The “Window of Tolerance” is a term used to describe the optimal zone of arousal where we can function most effectively. Dan Siegel (1999) describes this zone as “the river of well-being” where we can navigate the ups and downs of daily life and maintain emotional well-being. In this zone we can think of ourselves as though we are “smooth sailing”; we can regulate our emotions without getting stuck or overwhelmed.

When life gets too difficult, we can go outside of our window of tolerance and into survival mode. We lose the ability to self-regulate because our nervous system becomes focused on protecting ourselves from danger, either real or perceived. In the zone of hyper-arousal, our body is mobilized into fight or flight. There is a rush of adrenaline and cortisol; we can feel overwhelmed, anxious, and can't think clearly. In the zone of hypo-arousal, our body shuts down; we feel numb, depressed, and unmotivated. Both of these zones are very familiar to people who are struggling with chronic stress, depression, anxiety and trauma. When in these zones, we need grounding skills to bring us back to “smooth sailing.”

### Hyper-Arousal

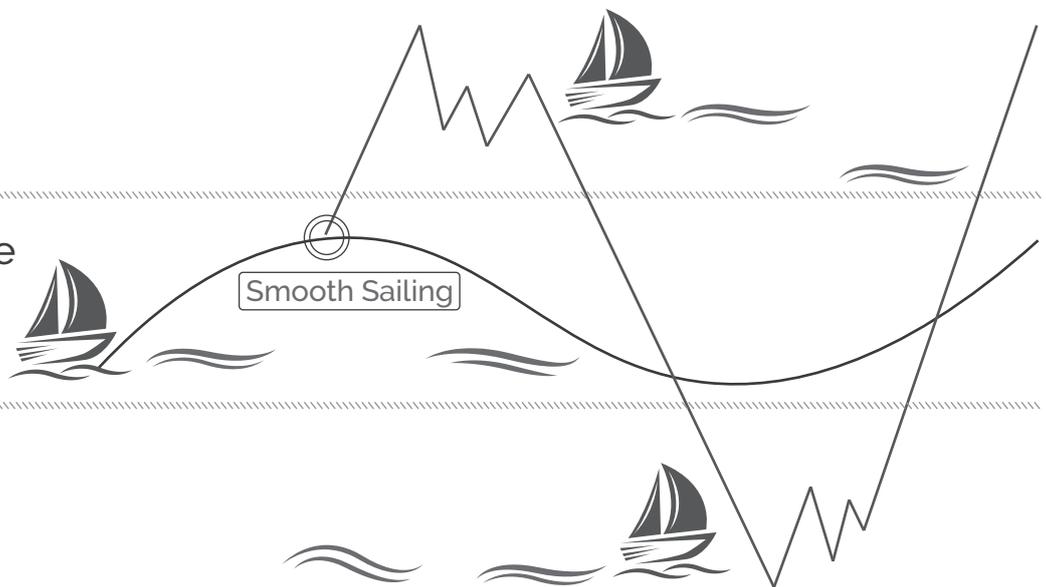
Fight or Flight  
Overwhelm  
Panic  
Can't think clearly

### Window of Tolerance

OPTIMAL AROUSAL ZONE  
Can adjust our sails with  
mindfulness

### Hypo-Arousal

Shut down  
Numb  
Depressed  
Unmotivated



Mindfulness helps us to widen the window of tolerance by bringing awareness to emotions as they are happening. This allows us to respond skillfully to difficult emotions and increase our resilience in the face of life's challenges. Emotion regulation gets easier with consistent mindfulness practice.

*Siegel, D.J. (1999). The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are. New York; Guilford Press*

## RESILIENCE PRACTICES

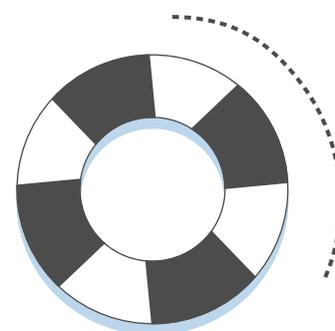
Meditations to try:  
3 minute breathing space  
Mindfulness of sounds

### 1. Grounding Skills for When We are Outside the Window of Tolerance

When we are outside the window of tolerance, mindful awareness is not available because our brain has gone into survival mode. When this happens, we need grounding skills to help our bodies to feel safe and our minds to be calm.

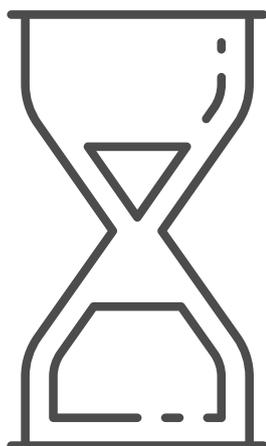
Here is a list of some grounding skills that can help. Take some time to review the different skills before you actually need them in the moment of being overwhelmed by emotions. Think of these skills as life preservers that you can quickly reach for when necessary.

- Take deep breaths; extend your exhale
- Release gripped hands
- Stand tall; feel the ground beneath you
- Take a brief walk
- Notice your feet connecting with the floor
- Orient to and label objects in the room
- Listen to a song you enjoy
- Call a friend you trust



### 2. The 3-Minute Breathing Space

The 3-minute breathing space is a mini-meditation that helps us to step out of automatic pilot and connect with the present moment. The image of an hourglass can help us visualize the three steps.



**Step 1: Awareness** – Stop what you are doing, close your eyes and turn your attention inward. Just notice and ask yourself what is here now? Check in with body, thoughts and feelings.

**Step 2: Gathering** – Now narrow the lens of your awareness and focus on your breath. You don't need to change the breath. Just feel the sensation of breath as they change through the inhale and exhale. Do this for 1 minute or at least 4 breath cycles.

**Step 3: Expanding** – The last step is to widen the attention to take in the whole body breathing with a sense of spaciousness. Expand attention to the space and sounds around you as you transition into the rest of your day.

Use this meditation throughout the day at different times. Over time, this practice can increase resilience by widening our window of tolerance and helping us respond skillfully when we are heading toward rough waters.

*Adapted from Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Segal, Williams, and Teasdale (Guilford Press, 2013).*