

UNDERSTANDING THE

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE



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mindfulness
EXERCISES



UNDERSTANDING THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Sometimes when we sit down to meditate it feels as though our thoughts, our emotions, our pain all get worse.

The truth is, this activity or the pain has been there all along, but through mindfulness it becomes revealed.

Working with what's present is an important part of our mindfulness practice. Yet it's difficult when what's revealed goes beyond the scope of what we're currently equipped to sit with.

Thus it's equally important we work to the level we're currently capable and allow ourselves to baby step through the process of uncovering.

When pushing too fast and too far ahead, mindfulness practice can not only fail to ease our suffering, but will exacerbate it.

Understanding and working with the concept of the "window of tolerance" can help our meditation practice feel safe and stable.

It's only within this window of safety that we can continue the mindful work of releasing past trauma.

WHAT IS THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE?



The Window of Tolerance is a term coined by Dan Siegel of the [Mindsight Institute](#). When we're within our window of tolerance, we may still feel stress or discomfort, but it's a tolerable. We can be present with what's arising.

On either side of the window of tolerance is the zone of hyperarousal and the zone of **hypoarousal**. When we're in a state of hyperarousal, we want to fight or run away. We may feel anxious, overwhelmed, and both physically and emotionally stressed. In a state of hypoarousal, we just want to shut down. We may feel spaced out, exhausted, or numb.

Each of us has an optimal arousal level that lets us flow and be present with the normal highs and lows of the human experience. This is the window of tolerance. Mindfulness can teach us to expand our window of tolerance. On the contrary, working outside of our window before we are ready can quickly backfire and shrink this zone.

RECOGNIZING YOUR WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Learning to recognize your window of tolerance, and when you're close to leaving this zone, is an important part of mindfulness practice.

Your window of tolerance can vary over the course of your lifetime, and even day to day. By applying mindfulness to our mindfulness practices themselves, we can appropriately respond to signs that we may be stepping outside our window.

MINDFULNESS GAUGES

Using mindfulness gauges is a common way to recognize when we're close to exiting the window of tolerance.

A mindfulness gauge can be sensation in the body, mood or emotion, or even a thought. Each individual will have a mindfulness gauge they trust most, one that works the best for them.

For example, one person may use their breath as a mindfulness gauge. During mindfulness practice, they may notice their breath gets short or uneven when they're becoming hyper aroused.

For another, the mindfulness gauge could be a mood such as boredom. They may recognize that what they describe as boredom is in fact the body protecting itself by disengaging from the practice or shutting down, entering a state of hypoarousal.

AROUSAL SCALES

In addition to or instead of using a mindfulness gauge, an arousal scale can be a helpful method of identifying a state of hyper or hypoarousal.

When using an arousal scale, you label your stress on a scale of 0-10, with 10 being the most unbearable. You decide where in this range your window of tolerance is.

During any mindfulness practice, regularly check in. Ask yourself what number you're at and if this number is within your window.

Arousal scales are obviously subjective, but they work because you are the one doing the measuring and the monitoring.

Using an arousal scale helps us feel a sense of autonomy in our practice. Whether you decide you're at a level 3, or a level 7, it matters only to you. You're in charge then of shifting your practice accordingly.

RETURNING TO THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE



Remembering that you have agency within your mindfulness practice is important. Some teachers will encourage their students to sit and remain present with whatever is arising, no matter what. This approach, however, assumes the student is free from past trauma, or has developed a wide window of tolerance.

Even for those of us who are desperate to heal, pushing beyond the window of tolerance can send our nervous system into an unrecoverable state, thereby slowing the healing practice we so desperately seek to accelerate. We should never divorce mindfulness from patience or self-compassion.

If you do find yourself in an uncomfortable position, close to or outside of your boundaries, there are several things you can practice to return to the window of tolerance. There's nothing wrong with taking a break from your meditation to self-regulate. Your meditation will improve when you return.

BREATH

The breath is a wonderful tool for self-regulation because the breath is always with you. The breath may even be both your mindfulness gauge, and the tool you use to put the brakes on when you notice you've left your window of tolerance.

If feeling over stimulated, focus on breathing in and out through the nose. Let each breath take longer, and feel the movement of breath expand in your belly. Ensure the breath is even, or that the exhale breaths are slightly longer than each breath in. To release energy, you might even take 1 - 3 audible exhale sighs.

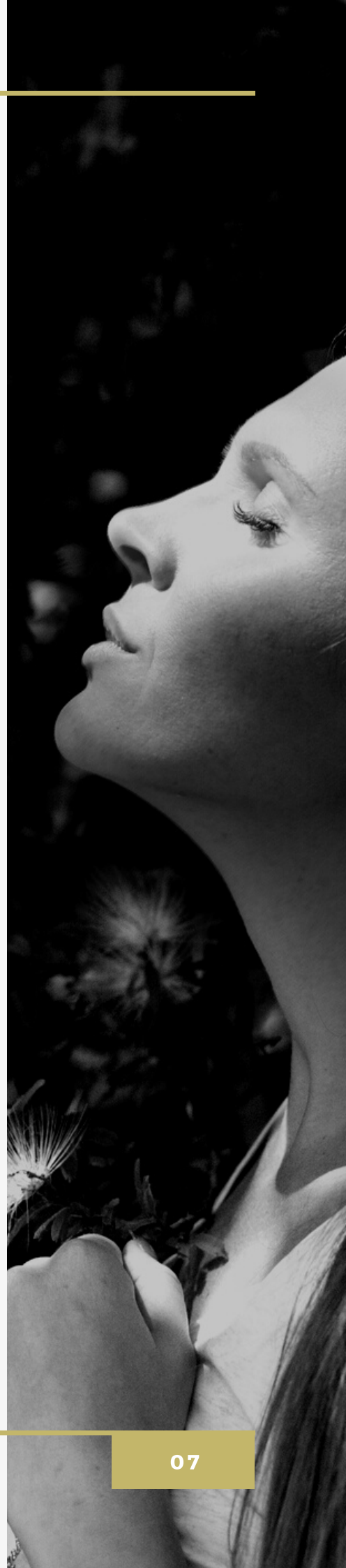
If feeling hypoaroused, focus on your inhale breaths, and notice how each breath in helps you feel taller.

POSTURE

There's no one perfect meditation posture. A trauma-informed mindfulness teacher will understand that you may need to lie down, curl up, stand or walk.

A simple shift in posture can shift you back into the window of tolerance if needed. Listen to your body and allow yourself to move if needed. Remember that at any time, you can stand, leave the room, take a break.

Remember too that the posture you choose to practice in today need not be the same posture you practice in tomorrow.





GROUNDING

Grounding practices bring you back to reality and back to the present moment by reconnecting you to form.

Grounding includes physical connection to the earth, such as becoming aware of the connection between your seat or your feet and the ground below.

Grounding can be experienced through each of the senses. Using eyesight, it might feel grounding to open your eyes and look at the earth ahead of you, or to look at a particular safe object in the room.

To ground with the sense of sound, open your awareness to the sound of your own breath, or the sounds taking place around you.

To ground with the sense of smell, you might work with a particular scent, or notice the taste in your mouth. Something as simple as swallowing can bring you back to right here and right now.

To ground with the sense of touch, place your hands on your body, your chair, your cushion, or the earth. This physical connection can help you feel present and safe during any mindfulness practice.

AWAKENING

If feeling particularly exhausted, disconnected, or numb, it's sometimes best just to let yourself rest.

If you feel safe working through the sensation and back to the window of tolerance, increase alertness by smelling an awakening scent, sitting up taller, flexing then releasing your muscles, removing a layer of clothing to cool down, or even splashing cold water on your face.

SAFETY FIRST

Mindfulness is wonderfully healing, but if there is trauma in your past, it's possible you need more guidance than mindfulness alone.

By working with a trained trauma specialist, you can develop the above resources and others so you may more comfortably practice mindfulness and meditation.

Your time and energy while meditating should be spent practicing self-awareness, not self-protection. Feeling safe is an important first step to any mindfulness practice.

Sometimes setting your mindfulness practice aside while you work on developing your sense of safety and agency is the most mindful thing you can do.

