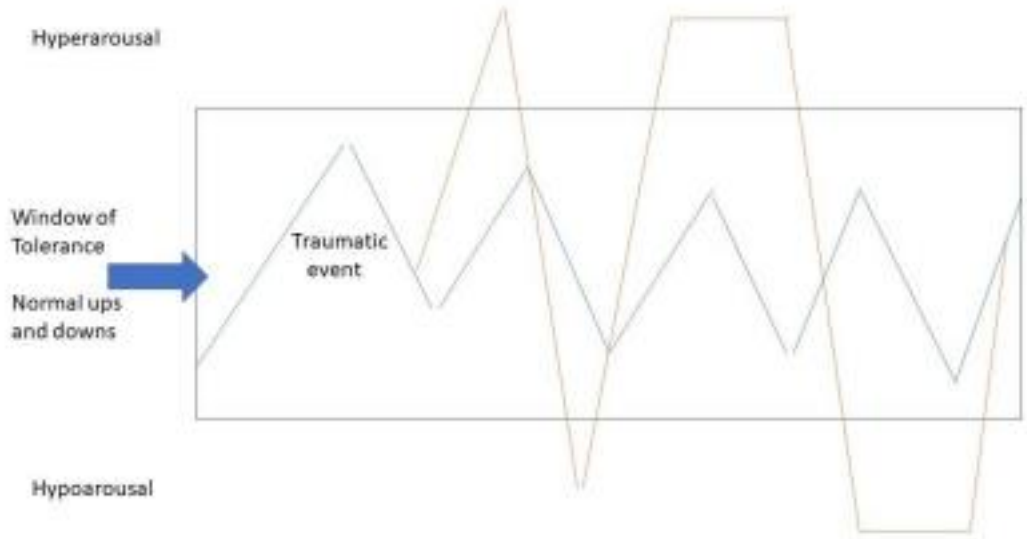
Window of Tolerance

A healthy nervous system experiences ups and downs almost like a roller coaster. These normal brain/body reactions are called “Window of Tolerance”, a term created by Dr. Dan Siegle (Gill). Those normal ups and downs are caused by your sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems.

The sympathetic nervous system is activated when we feel things like pain, anger, or fear. It brings us into a fight or flight situation. Although these feelings can be strong, we are generally able to pull back so it’s not devastating. The parasympathetic nervous system comes into play when we experience feelings of loss, or exhaustion. Its main function is to promote relaxation or rest. However, that state doesn’t last and soon we’re back on our feet getting at the world.

Sometimes, the events or traumas, we experience throughout our lives can lead these optimal ups and downs to transform into non-optimal peaks and valleys. The peaks bring us into a state of hyperarousal, and the valleys bring us into hypoarousal. See diagram below:



Hyperarousal

This state is characterized by excessive activation, or energy, that takes the form of anxiety, panic, fear, hypervigilance, etc. This keeps our system stuck on “on” and can affect our ability to relax. This can lead to difficulty sleeping, digesting, and ultimately makes it difficult to manage our emotions.

Hypoarousal

This state can occur when we stay in hyperarousal mode for too long, surpassing the pain/emotional overwhelm our brain/body can tolerate. Staying in the hyperarousal state can lead us to plunge into a state of hypoarousal (shutting down or dissociating). This might lead us to feel sleepy all the time, and might lead us to feel emotionally drained.

Thankfully our bodies adapt to pull us out of these states. It's good to know which state you're in, so you too can adjust your activities. If you're hyperaroused, calming activities like meditation, yoga, or practicing any kind of mindfulness can help you regulate these feelings. If you are hypoaroused, energizing activities like spin, HIIT, or vigorous exercise can help bring you back into your window of tolerance.

Bibliography

Gill, Lori. "Understanding and Working with the Window of Tolerance." *Attachment and Trauma Treatment Centre for Healing (ATTCH)*, 25 November 2017, https://www.attachment-and-trauma-treatment-centre-for-healing.com/blogs/understandi ng-and-working-with-the-window-of-tolerance. Accessed 24 November 2020.