

Fact sheet

Window of tolerance

- ◆ Concept developed by Dr Dan Siegel.
- ◆ The window of tolerance represents the amount of elasticity we each have where we can tolerate different stressors.
- ◆ When we go out of the window, experience the stress response also known as the fight/flight and freeze response.
- ◆ The fight response is hyper-emotional and the flight and freeze response is experienced as hypo-emotional.
- ◆ In the fight/flight response, we get a flood of cortisol, the stress hormone, and the ability to think clearly and rationally is out of reach.
- ◆ Our window can change and depends on how many different stressors we are dealing with at any given time, AND what coping strategies we have available.
- ◆ Being aware of your own stress response can help – helping students to identify their stress responses can also help shift the thinking about problems to a metacognitive state.
- ◆ Many of our students have internal messaging that formal learning spaces are unsafe because of previous negative learning experiences.

What does the stress response look like in the adult learning space?

- **Fight** response behaviours or feelings – stuck, worried, fearful, alarmed, anxious, pressured, frightened, put downs, aggressive, competitive, sarcastic.
- **Flight** response behaviours or feelings – restless, preoccupied, over-doing things, overwhelmed, avoiding or stalling, leaving the room
- **Freeze** response behaviours or feelings – numb, terrified, despairing, hopeless, judged, exhausted, lost, unable to join in, zone out, daydream, absent.

Window of tolerance activity poster

Teaching (and learning) about the window of tolerance helps us to have a bit of insight into our reactions (and other people's) to stress. Making a poster about our own triggers and a visual representation of the way we experience stress can be a therapeutic activity.

1. Talk about the window and the up (hyper) reactions and down (hypo) reactions. Use the fight/flight language if you feel comfortable and confident to explain it.
2. Give examples of what might trigger people in the classroom – too much noise, disruptions, phones, worksheets, tests, repetitive work etc.
3. Use my example as a model and ask people to visualise what their feelings look like. Find pictures to represent them.
4. Don't forget the arrows! They show that we don't stay stuck in one place – we move up and down during the normal course of the day.