

The Window of Presence

High Arousal: Fight or Flight

Emotional Signs: Anxious, scared, distracted, defensive, angry, irrational, “flipped out”. Feeling hijacks thinking.

Physical Signs: Heart and breath rates rev up, jittery, twitchy, shaky, hard to stay still, hot, adrenaline rush, feeling split off from the body.

The High Arousal Edge

Inside the Window of Presence

This green window represents emotional and physical experience that we can tolerate without “going off” into upset, flip out or shutdown. Within this range of intensity we can stay present, grounded, oriented in space and time, and able to think, feel and communicate. Our nervous system does not hijack our consciousness in threat responses like fight, flight or freeze. (Siegel, 2001).

Emotional Signs: Oriented to present time situations and relationships; Able to think and feel at the same time; Emotions are available, but also containable.

Physical Signs: Heart and breath rates support current activity; Able to move or hold still; Connected with comfortable or tolerable energy and sensation in the body. Emotions and physical responses may or may not be strong, but they remain tolerable.

The Low Arousal Edge

Low Arousal: Freeze

Emotional Signs: Numb, hopeless/helpless, frozen in fear or shame, confused, spaced out, hard to think or feel or talk, no initiative.

Physical Signs: Heart and breath rates go down, drowsy, shut down, immobilized, cold, rigid, feeling split off from the body.

Autonomic Regulation and the Window of Presence

Our Autonomic Nervous System (ANS)

The ANS is important because without it there is no life in a body. The complex task of organizing and coordinating our ANS is called autonomic regulation. Our survival, health and relationships depend on it. Autonomic dysregulation compromises our health, our emotional stability, our relationships, our decision making, our perception of reality, our identity, and our ability to protect ourselves and survive, both individually and as a species.

The Window of Presence

The “window of presence” is an image that helps us recognize regulation (when our brain is functioning effectively) and dysregulation (when our brain is getting disorganized or fragmented). Staying well regulated means staying inside our window of presence (also called our window of tolerance, Siegel, 1999). As we approach our regulatory edges, we become increasingly more dysregulated and our awareness tends to fragment.

Neural Integration is a Sign of Regulation.

- Being well regulated at a given moment means we stay neurologically organized and integrated. This means our brains are functioning well enough that we can think, feel, connect and communicate in a congruent way.
- In general, being well regulated means we can shift among the 3 ANS layers at will and as needed to tend to external challenges and internal needs.
- Long term, competent regulation means we manage our lives so we can mostly stay within our window, even in challenging or intense situations. This usually requires regular opportunities for solo and interactive regulation. The more competently regulated we are, the better our chances of good health and long life.

Autonomic and Emotional Regulation

Autonomic Regulation coordinates our basic body systems like breathing, swallowing, digestion, metabolism, temperature, our cardiovascular system, immune system and inflammatory system. In particular, this includes our threat response system and energy level. All of this is mostly unconscious.

Emotional Regulation involves our emotions and moods. This includes joy, love, playfulness, grief, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, resentment, hopelessness and shame. Much of this is, or can be, conscious.

Autonomic regulation is the infrastructure for emotional regulation, so autonomic and emotional regulation are closely related; each affects the other. However, emotional regulation is secondary and cannot fully compensate for autonomic dysregulation. This means emotional regulation depends on our finding effective ways to regulate the autonomic nervous system.

Regulatory Edges and Dysregulation

At the regulatory edges the brain loses oxygen and cannot stay online and integrated. Dysregulation creeps in. Our awareness starts to fragment. At the high arousal edge a person may yell “I am not yelling” and believe it. At the low arousal edge, a person may remember only their experiences of feeling rejected and hopeless and have no meaningful access to very real experiences of being loved or sought after. The sooner we notice our regulatory edges, the better our chances of having enough brain power online to make good choices about reregulation.

Competent Autonomic Regulation

The complex process of regulating the ANS develops primarily in relationship. However, competent adult regulation depends on both solo and interactive strategies. Learning to reregulate quickly and effectively avoids dysregulation, which wastes energy, stresses the system, and leads to health and relationship problems.