



MARRIAGE + FAMILY THERAPY

## Your Window of Tolerance

*Finding the zone where you can feel, think, and stay connected*

### What it is

Your window of tolerance is the zone where you feel calm enough, and alert enough, to handle what life is throwing at you. Inside this window you can think clearly, feel your feelings without being swept away by them, stay connected to the people around you, and make choices instead of just reacting. The term comes from Dr. Dan Siegel, a psychiatrist who studies how the brain handles stress.

Everyone has a window, and its size changes. When you are rested and feeling safe, the window is wider and more can happen before you tip out of it. When you are tired, stressed, or reminded of something painful, it narrows, and it takes much less to push you out.

If you have lived through trauma or chronic stress, your window is often narrower than it would otherwise be. That is not a flaw in you. Your nervous system learned to react fast because, at some point, that kept you safe. The work now is to slowly widen the window again.

#### **UP AND OUT — Hyperarousal (too much energy)**

Anxiety, panic, racing thoughts, anger, pounding heart, the urge to run or fight. Your system has hit the gas.

#### **YOUR WINDOW OF TOLERANCE — calm enough + alert enough**

Clear thinking, feelings you can manage, connection to others, choice instead of reaction.

#### **DOWN AND OUT — Hypoarousal (too little energy)**

Numb, blank, foggy, disconnected, exhausted, shutting down, wanting to disappear. Your system has hit the brakes.

Neither state means something is wrong with you. They are both protective reflexes. The goal is not to never leave your window, it is to notice when you are leaving and to find your way back.

### Mapping your own window

Knowing your early signs is what lets you catch the slide before it becomes a fall. The aim is to catch yourself at a 3 out of 10, not a 9. Take a moment to fill in your own:

When I am inside my window, I notice (in my body, thoughts, mood):

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My early signs of heading up and out (hyperarousal):

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My early signs of heading down and out (hypoarousal):

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Things that tend to narrow my window on a given day:

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## Coming back to your window

Different directions need different tools.

### When you are heading up and out, slow down and discharge the extra energy:

- Lengthen your exhale, so the out-breath is longer than the in-breath
- Cool water on your face or hands
- Move the energy through your body with a walk or by shaking out your arms
- Name what you feel, out loud or in your head, plainly: “this is fear”

### When you are heading down and out, gently bring energy and connection back:

- Stand up, stretch, push your feet into the floor
- Splash cool water or hold something with texture or temperature
- Orient to the room by naming five things you can see
- Reach toward connection, a text to a safe person, the sound of a familiar voice

When you are not sure which direction you are in, slow attention to the breath and the feeling of your feet on the ground is a safe starting place for either.

## A few things to hold onto

- Leaving your window is human, and it is not failure.
- Trauma narrows the window, and steady practice widens it back over time.
- You do not have to talk yourself out of a feeling, you only have to help your body feel safe enough for the feeling to settle.
- Practicing these skills when you are calm makes them easier to reach when you are not.

## Ready to talk it through?

My Mental Climb is a telehealth therapy practice serving clients across California with secure video sessions. We offer a free 15-minute consult to see if we are the right fit.

**Book a free consult:** [calendly.com/mymentalclimb-info/15min](https://calendly.com/mymentalclimb-info/15min) | **Call or text:** (925) 414-0192

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Mailing & licensing address: 1460 Maria Ln #300, Walnut Creek, CA 94596 (not a client-facing office)

**If you ever feel unsafe or in crisis, you do not have to wait for your next session. Call or text 988 for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline • text HOME to 741741 • or call 911.**