

MAP CYCLE



MODULE 4:

CONTROL

ANIMAL INSTINCTS

(Regulating the Nervous System)

What are Animal Instincts and How Do We Control Them?

The autonomic nervous system (ANS) plays a significant role in our emotional and physiological responses to stress and trauma. The ANS is understood to have two primary systems: the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system.

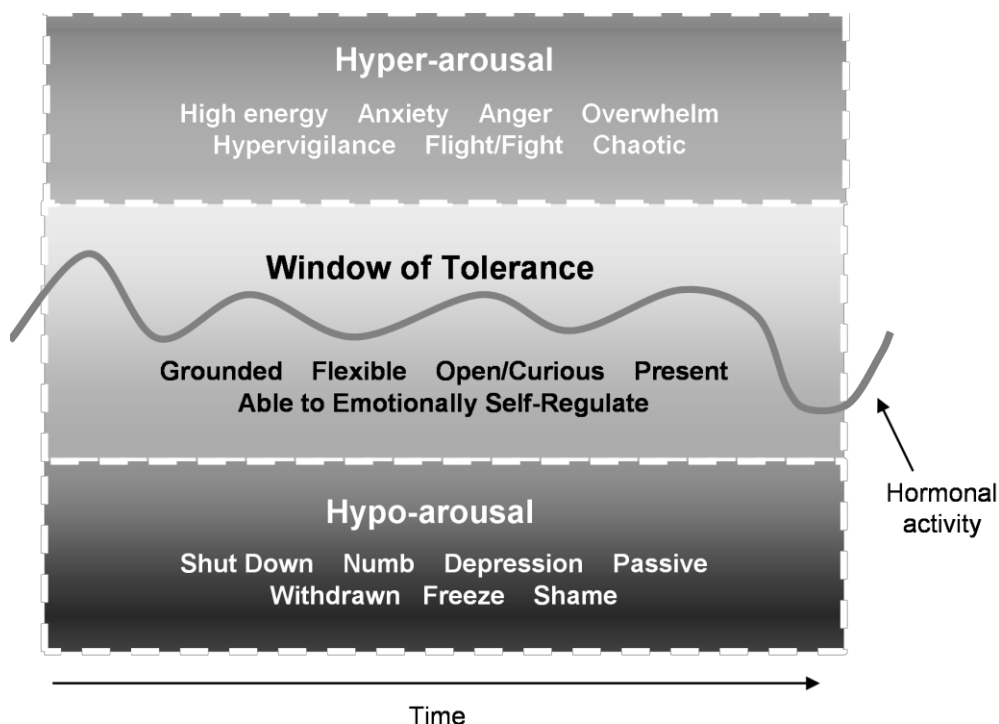
The **sympathetic nervous system** is associated with the fight or flight response and the release of cortisol throughout the bloodstream. When released into the body, these messengers propel you into a state of arousal - ready for anything, real or imagined!

- **Freeze:** The initial stage of responding to potential danger involves freezing. Like a deer caught in the headlights, freezing involves the orienting reflex, an inborn impulse to turn your sensory organs towards a source of stimulation. Here the goal is to “stop, look, and listen” to better understand the situation and to determine if there is a threat. Your pupils will dilate as you turn your head towards the sound or sights that sparked your interest or concern. Most importantly, freezing occurs in preparation for action and is short-lived.
- **Flight and Fight:** The second and third stages of responding are maintained by the sympathetic nervous system in which you are mobilized into flight or fight responses. This process involves initial attempts to flee danger. However, if it is impossible to escape, you will resort to fighting. The sympathetic nervous system increases blood flow to the heart and muscles of the arms and legs accompanied by faster breathing. Simultaneously, skin will become cold and digestion is inhibited.
- **Fright:** The fourth stage sets in when flight or fight do not restore safety. When there is no escape, a “fright” takes over with feelings of panic dizziness, nausea, lightheadedness, tingling, and numbing. It is in this stage that we see the initial symptoms of dissociation (see below).

The **parasympathetic nervous system** puts the brakes on the sympathetic nervous system, so the body stops releasing stress chemicals and shifts toward relaxation, digestion, and regeneration. The sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems are meant to work in a rhythmic alternation that supports healthy digestion, sleep, and immune system functioning.

Latest research also shows us that the parasympathetic nervous system is not only associated with regenerative functions but is involved with immobilization and dissociation. Dissociation is a biological protection mechanism that separates your conscious awareness from frightening feelings or memories. Symptoms exist on a continuum from relatively mild sensations of fogginess, sleepiness, or difficulty concentrating, to feeling numb or cut-off. If this happens during practice, then focusing on exteroceptive sensations may help you ground in the present moment.

Window of Tolerance



Window of tolerance is a term used to describe the zone of arousal in which a person is able to function most effectively. When people are within this zone, they are typically able to readily receive, process, and integrate information and

otherwise respond to the demands of everyday life without much difficulty. This optimal window was first named as such by Dan Siegel.

What is The Window of Tolerance?

When a person is within their window of tolerance, it is generally the case that **the brain is functioning well** and can effectively process stimuli. That person is likely to be able to reflect, think rationally, and make decisions calmly without feeling either overwhelmed or withdrawn.

During times of extreme stress, people often experience periods of either hyper- or hypo-arousal.

- Hyper-arousal, otherwise known as the fight/flight response, is often characterized by hypervigilance, feelings of anxiety and/or panic, and racing thoughts.
- Hypo-arousal, or a freeze response, may cause feelings of emotional numbness, emptiness, or paralysis.

In either of these states, an individual may become unable to process stimuli effectively. The prefrontal cortex region of the brain shuts down, in a manner of speaking, affecting the ability to think rationally and often leading to the development of feelings of dysregulation, which may take the form of chaotic responses or overly rigid ones. In these periods, a person can be said to be outside the window of tolerance.

Each individual's window of tolerance is different. Those who have a narrow window of tolerance may often feel as if their emotions are intense and difficult to manage. Others with a wider window of tolerance may be able to handle intense emotions or situations without feeling like their ability to function has been significantly impacted.

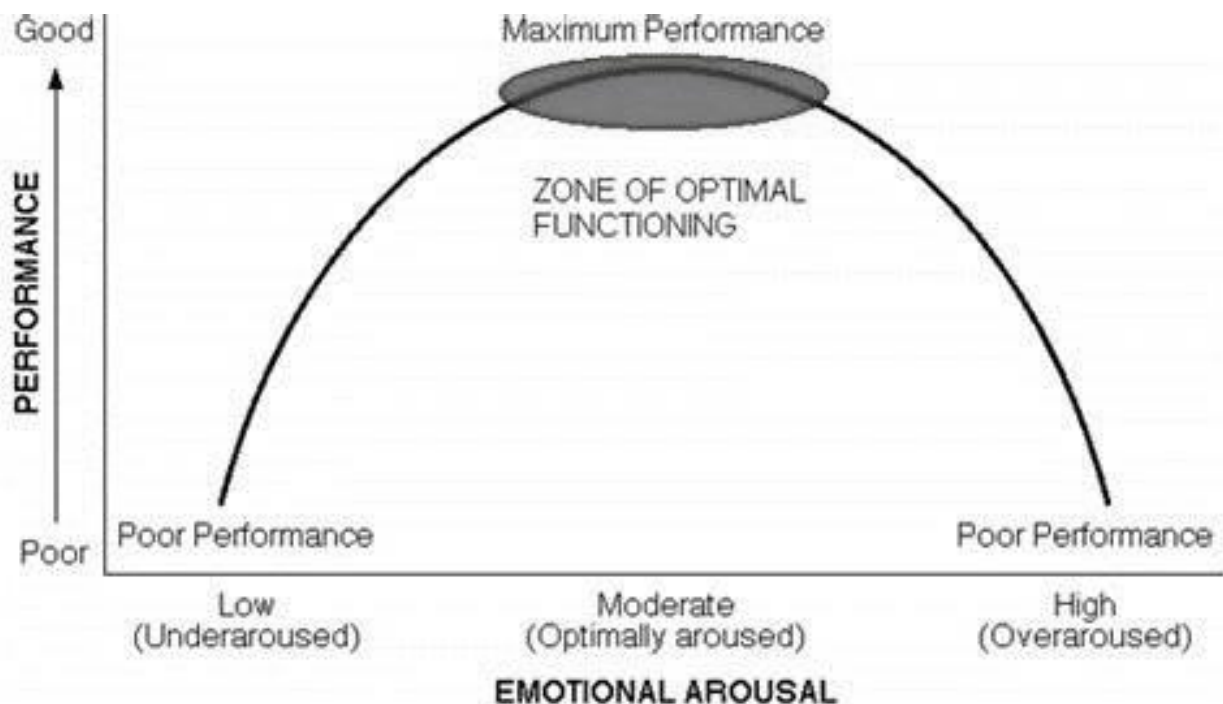
Managing the Window of Tolerance

When we have become dysregulated, we can **use techniques** to return to our window of tolerance. Grounding and mindfulness techniques can often help us remain in the present moment. By focusing on the physical sensations currently being experienced, we are often able to remain in the present. Calming and regulating our nervous system helps us to effectively manage extreme arousal. These techniques, and others, can be learned.

Many individuals are able to widen their window of tolerance and by doing so, increase their sense of calm. They become able to deal with stress in more adaptive ways. We can learn to make contact with our emotions, to observe them without becoming so dysregulated that we cannot integrate them. Increasing emotional regulation capabilities in this way can lead to a wider window of tolerance and prevent dysregulation.

Zone of Optimal Functioning (IZOF)

The range of physiological arousal within which an individual can perform at the peak of physical, mental, and skillful ability.



Breath Awareness and Conscious Breathing

Breath Awareness: Being the Breath

Breath Awareness means paying close attention to the breath as you allow it to come and go on its own, by itself. The idea is to simply observe your breathing, watch the breath, and witness it. There is no need to breathe in any particular way. This is the passive aspect. It is the practice of pure awareness applied to breathing.

The awareness we are talking about is meditative awareness. It is not thinking, not judging, not comparing, not analyzing; you are not trying to figure out anything or do anything right. In fact, Breath Awareness is not really something you "do." We are talking about being soft, open towards alertness and presence. Breath Awareness is mindfulness practice. We also call it "breath watching." In fact, we use the terms interchangeably. It is attention training. All you need to do is decide to focus on your breathing and to observe it, sense it, moment to moment.

Conscious Breathing: Doing the Breathing

The second basic aspect of breathwork is Conscious Breathing. This is where you come in. You are an active participant in the breathing process, more than the witness. Conscious Breathing means that you deliberately control, direct, and regulate the breathing in some way. You give the breathing a certain quality or a specific pattern. You breathe with a conscious intention. You are creative.

With Breath Awareness, the breath breathes you; with Conscious Breathing, you breathe the breath.

An example of a Conscious Breathing exercise is to breathe at a rate of four to eight breaths per minute, which is considered to be a "therapeutic zone," since it has so many naturally therapeutic benefits.

Practice going back and forth between those two basic elements of breathwork. It is essential for us to learn to go back and forth between active and passive, between doing and being, between breathing the breath and letting the breath breathe us.

Practice both Breath Awareness and Conscious Breathing. Integrate both into your everyday activities and interactions.

Get into the habit of observing your breath and taking control of it before, during, and after various activities, events, and interactions.

By observing the breath, we can learn a lot about our lives. Sometimes control is necessary, and sometimes the call is to surrender.

Heart Rate Variability

Heart Rate Variability (HRV) is the ability of the heart to accelerate and decelerate in relation to changes in your internal and external environment. The range of this variability reflects your capacity to adapt to and cope with change.

Heart chaos is the natural state of the HRV curve. The heart accelerates and decelerates as it adapts moment to moment to our internal and external environments. A healthy heart rate is irregular. It is resilient, responsive, adapting moment to moment.

Heart coherence is a specific state of increased heart rate variability induced by paced breathing. It represents inner harmony and balance, and it results in many beneficial effects on health and well-being.

Heart resonance is a specific state of heart coherence attained when breathing consciously and deeply at a frequency of six times per minute.