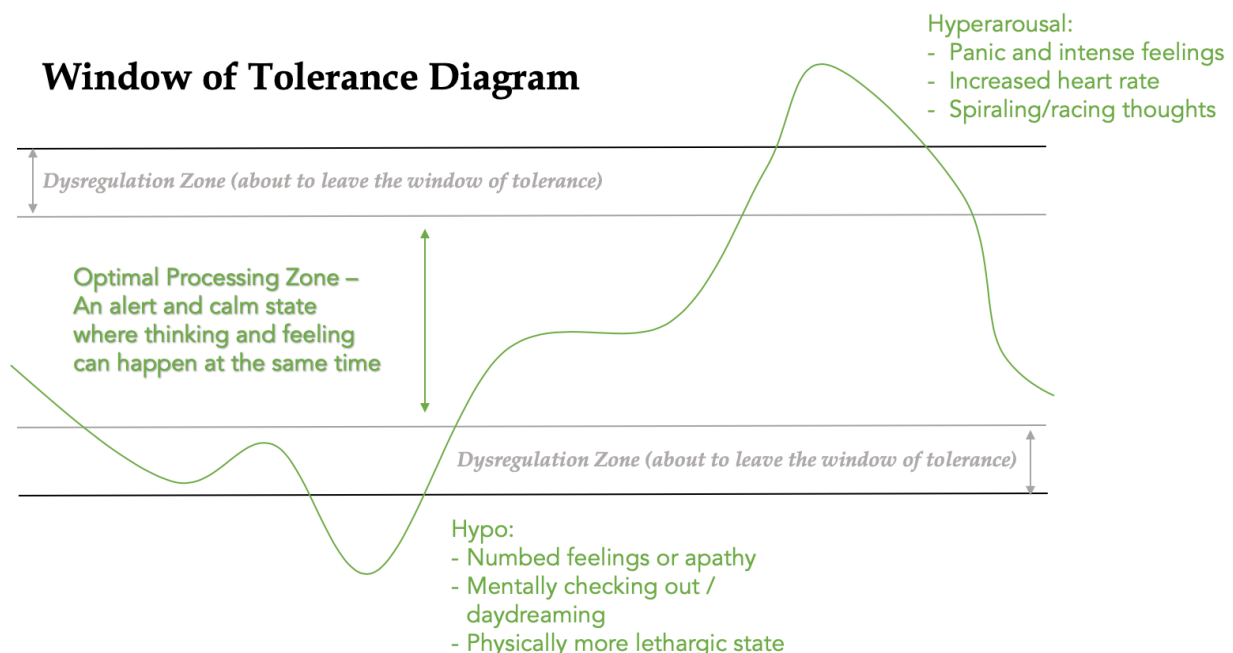


# The Optimal Zone for Processing Experience

When a person is experiencing threat or danger, they will experience dysregulation which means that they are moving outside their optimal zone of tolerance. Inside this optimal zone, a person can experience thinking and feeling at the same time and remain alert, relaxed and coherent. When a person is outside their optimal zone, extremes in thinking and feeling can temporarily take over. Being mindful of where a client is in their current state of tolerance to stress and stimuli can be useful information before guiding them to processing their situations.

*To move from hyperarousal to an optimal zone:*

The hyperarousal state is one where the body tends to be overactive on multiple domains. A person in this zone can experience a racing heartbeat (physical), spiraling thoughts (mental) and intensive feelings (emotional). In this situation, the goal would be to “slow down” the body/mind/emotions to bring the person back to a more present and alert state.



*To move from hypoarousal to an optimal zone:*

The hypoarousal state is one where the body tends to be underactive on multiple domains. A person in this zone can experience drowsiness and lethargy (physical), daydreaming or spacing out (mental) and may experience numbing or muted feelings (emotions). In this situation, the goal would be to “wake up” the body/mind/emotions to bring the person back to a more present and alert state.

*Interventions to help the body come back to the optimal zone:*

### **Controlled breathing exercises**

- Help the person bring attention to their breath and notice its movement and control its pacing. Generally, exhaling longer than inhaled will help slow the heart rate and bring someone to a calmer state.
- For those that prefer visualizations, you can pair this with breathing exercises (such as imagining a balloon that inflates and deflates with the breath) to help stimulate the mind to join the body in slowing down and becoming more alert to the present moment.

### **Bringing awareness to the 5 senses**

- Having a drink of water.
- Slowing down to naming 2-3 sounds that you can hear if you are perfectly still for 30 seconds.
- Naming neutral objects that are in the room and allowing your eyes to “take in” what you are seeing by focusing on them for about 5 seconds.
- Bringing attention to textures. Ask the person to engage with their environment by observing cool surfaces, a cushion or perhaps a journal/book that is within reach.
- Eating a snack or meal if this person has been unaware of their hunger.
- Asking questions that help the person notice sensations (i.e. how does your body respond to being in sunlight/warmth?).

### **Engaging in slowing movements (for hyperarousal) or increasing movements (for hypoarousal)**

- Scheduling in time for a soothing experience to engage with the body and mind (i.e. meditation, journal, going for a walk, exercising, etc.).

Using these interventions can be a starting point to prompt some creativity in your ministry towards those that are experiencing difficulty in their present situation. Next month’s toolkit will discuss how to help people move deeper into Christ-centered processing, having established this optimal zone of tolerance.