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Chapter One: Recognizing Traumatic Stress in the Brain, Body and Mind

3e's Five Markers of Trauma

1st Marker: Self-Regulation, the ability to control emotional responses.

2nd Marker: Self-Worth, internal sense of being good enough and worthy of love and belonging from others.

3rd Marker: Relational Attachment, the ability to establish healthy relationships that promote healthy self-regulation and self-worth.

4th Marker: Capacity, the maximum emotional, cognitive, social, spiritual and even physical ability or power to perform or meet a desired expectation. Capacity overwhelmed by chronic or traumatic stress limits competency, strains character, and challenges connection. How quickly we process stress to the point that we function more fully hinges on capacity and impacts resilience.

Unaddressed chronic and traumatic stress leads to regress and makes a mess. This leads to either temporary constraints which will require temporary adaptation, or permanent constraints, which will require long-term adaptation.

5th Marker: Resilience is often understood as adaptability or the ability to bend and not break. We like to think of resilience as possessing *healthy power* amid vulnerability and uncertainty.

Stress Hormones & Trauma Impact on the Body: The stress hormones (aka adrenaline and cortisol) for people living with trauma take much longer to return to a standard level. Triggers/Activations happen more easily and can be disproportionate to whatever is causing it. There is a hyper-sensitivity at work. Also, stress hormones tend to spike much quicker in comparison to a person not living in trauma response. The long-term effects of stress hormones consistently raised over time can be memory loss, irritability, attention problems, and decreased ability to rest or sleep. They can also contribute to ongoing health issues, both mental and physical.¹

¹ Herman, 46.

Traumagenic Events, Trauma and Traumatic Stress

Traumatic stress is an emotional wounding that results from experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event or events: a highly stressful or horrifying event or series of events where one feels a lack of control, powerlessness, and threat of injury or death. Not everyone who experiences a traumatic event or a traumatic situation experiences traumatic stress.

More shorthand, traumatic stress is best understood as lacking any form of effective control or power in the midst of vulnerability and uncertainty where life feels destabilized or threatened. As Judith Herman puts it, trauma “overwhelm[s] the ordinary human adaptations to life.”² The state of being overwhelmed is not limited to the capacity of character or will because traumatic stress affects the brain and body and is associated with increased cortisol and norepinephrine responses to an external stressor. Something traumagenic is encountered (it doesn’t have to happen to us) or experienced outside of us that produces an involuntary stress-related emotional and physiological response inside of us. When threatened in this way, the brain is unable to “process” or fully assimilate the outside event and responds accordingly. The whole self moves toward trauma-response because “our ability to respond to a perceived threat is in some way overwhelmed. [...] In short, trauma is about loss of connection – to ourselves, to our bodies, to our families, to others and to the world around us.”³ Self-worth and identity, self-regulation (meaning the capacity for impulse control), and relational attachment are diminished, although recoverable. Furthermore, the ability for meaning-making, how a person makes sense of their experience in view of the life they envision, is strained. Since all of this happens inside of an individual, there is a subjectivity to trauma. What may bring a trauma response for one person may not have the same impact on another.⁴ Yet, there is a universal nature to the lessons learned from trauma.

*“Traumatic stress occurs when our ability to respond to threat is overwhelmed.” ~
Dr. Peter Levine, Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*

² Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: the Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, (New York; Basic Books, 2022), 33.

³ Peter A. Levine, *Healing Trauma: Restoring the Wisdom of the Body*, (Louisville: Sounds True, 2005), 9.

Chapter Two: Knowing About Cycles, Capacity & Windows

The Five F's of Fear

After many years of walking with people living through the trauma of homelessness, addiction, and mental illness, I've witnessed the tyranny of fear. It is tyranny because it evokes one of three responses grounded in a will to survive that often produce tyrannical results: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.

Fight

Fight is the response provoked when the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system (which regulates the body's unconscious actions) is put on high alert, preparing the body for self-protection and survival. We fight by going on the defense or offense. We push back. We lash out. We turn against the thing causing fear with a certain aggression. Fight is the kind of fear-driven response that easily creates "us" and "them" categories on neighbor-to-neighbor levels.

Flight

Flight is also provoked by the sympathetic branch of the nervous system. It is when we want to escape or avoid the thing creating the fear. We ignore it and pretend it's not there, or we run from it at all costs, even if it means leaving relationships behind. We dodge the issue with avoidant or redirecting responses. Flight takes away from us the ability to confront the thing we fear. Flight is the kind of fear-driven response that causes us to look away from the plight of others, especially if they are associated with the thing we fear.

Freeze

Freeze is the response provoked by the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, the branch responsible for the activities that happen when the body is at rest. This is a kind of emotional and cognitive paralysis that leads to inactivity. Our knees buckle and our hearts are imprisoned. We feel stuck and helpless. We become inactive in dealing effectively with the fear we face. Freeze is the kind of fear-driven response that leads to virtually no effective response at all.

Fawn

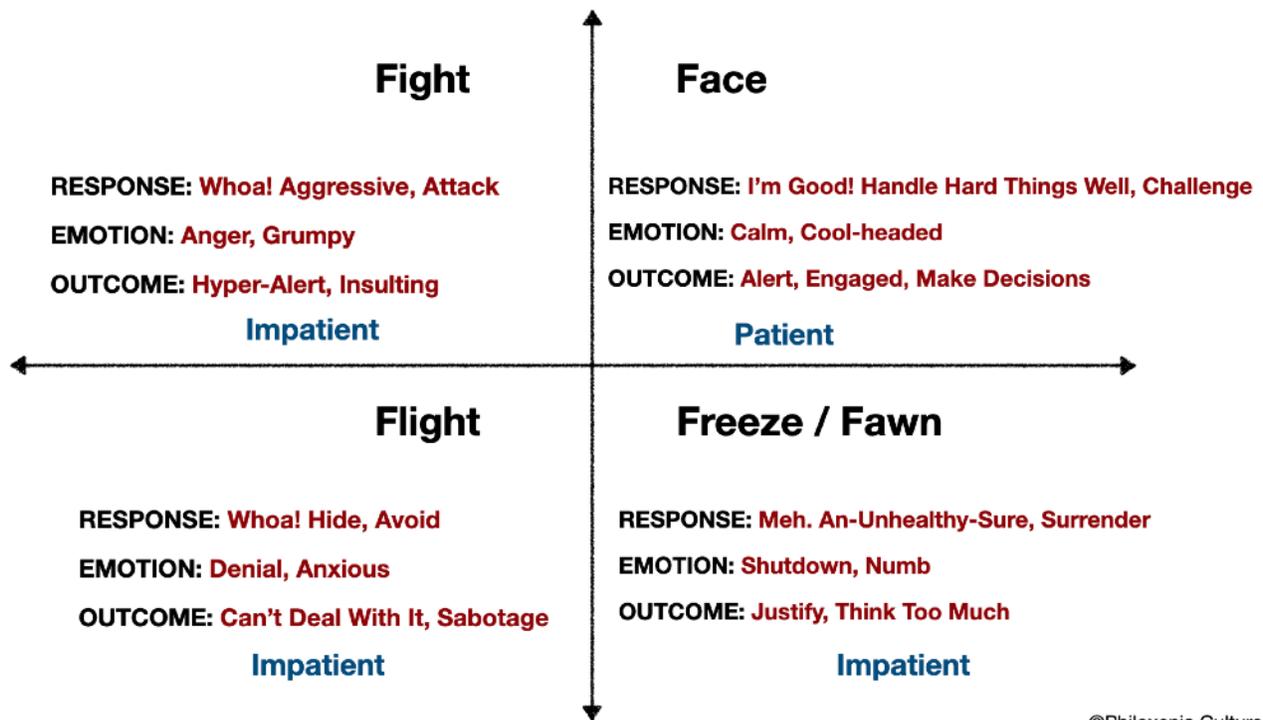
Then there is fawn. Fawn is when we revert to people-pleasing as a way of avoiding conflict to reestablish a sense of safety. Fawning can include clinging to others with self-deprecation and unhealthy submission toward a form of co-dependency.

Fight, flight, freeze or fawn. These are our four predominant impulsive responses to fear for our self-defense. It is our brain and body's way of protecting us, releasing neurochemicals throughout our body to enable us to do what we must to survive or live through the threat. When we do, we face whatever it is provoking fear.

Face

There comes a time when our capacity for resilience deepens and resolve strengthens. We are growing through the experiences we are moving through. We are finding security and support, our voice and choice (covered later in this book). Facing is an internal act of resistance arising from increased resilience and includes moving through it and growing because of it.

When do not process our brain and body's fear-based response, especially when living through traumatic experiences, the outcome will be fear-based living. We are trying to survive and this impacts our way of relating to ourselves and others.



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Window of Tolerance a.k.a. Window of Resilience

Remember, the sympathetic branch is about stress response (activation) and parasympathetic branch is about rest response (relaxation). How does the nervous system function with the brain when it comes to stress and trauma? To help us answer this question, neurobiologists (like Dr's. Pat Ogden, Stephen Porges, and Dan Siegel) formulated a concept called our "window of tolerance," later known in some circles as our window of resilience.

Our window of tolerance is the zone that intersects with what is happening in our brains and nervous systems where intense emotions can be processed healthily. It is where we are calm and able to be present in the present moment. When we are processing stress and anxiety well, responding versus reacting, it is because our brains and nervous systems are processing whatever has happened or is happening to us in a healthy way.

When the demands and stress of everyday life come to us, we can respond with patience because we have the presence of mind and the ability to self-soothe and self-regulate our emotions. The window of tolerance is what allows us to be good to ourselves and others, gentle with ourselves and others, and patient with ourselves and others.

Think of a time when you were in a calm state of mind. You felt relaxed and in control. Do you remember feeling calm, grounded, alert, safe, and present? This is what it feels like when you are in the optimal zone.

When stressors arise and we become anxious to the degree that our ability to regulate our emotions gets difficult, our window of tolerance is beginning to close. When something happens to us and we feel like we just 'can't,' our window of tolerance is closing. When something happens and we feel the stress hormones in our bodies activate, our window of tolerance is closing.

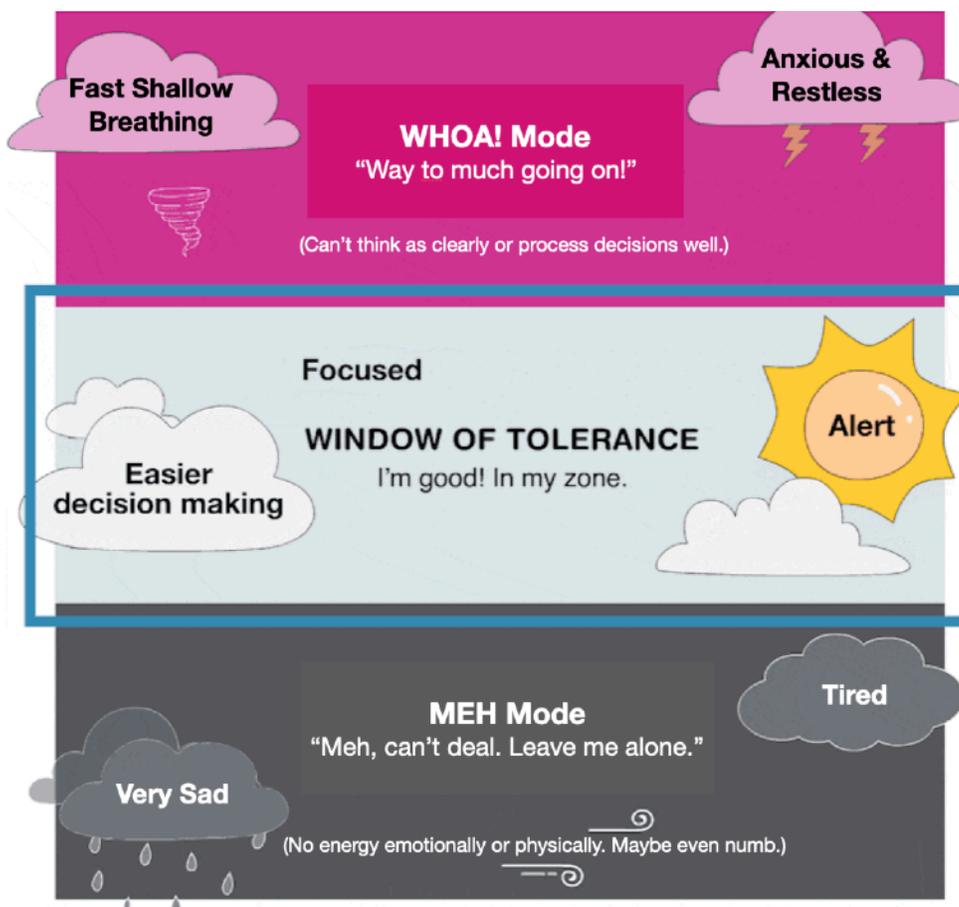
Practically speaking, here is how it works. When we feel edgy or defensive, that is a sign that our window of tolerance is closing. When we are disappointed or let down by others and we feel ourselves becoming cynical about people and relationships, that is a sign that our window of tolerance is closing. When we lack patience and the ability to suffer long, it could be a sign our window of tolerance is closing.

When my window is open, I feel well and grounded, safe or secure physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and socially. When my window is closing and I get activated, I am hyper-alert, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and socially. If I

am prone to the following: angry outbursts, fear, anxiety, feeling overly emotional, overwhelmed, panicked, and hyper-vigilant, consistent tension or tightness in my muscles, "Deer in the headlights," difficulty with sleeping habits, managing emotions or concentrating effectively – this is a sign that my window is closing and my activation system is heightened. I am activated.

When my window is closing and I get overwhelmed, I demobilize physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and socially. I can't get out of bed, feel depressed, feel lethargic, feel numb, feel empty, feel stuck, feel overwhelmed with shame, cannot think or process, or I retreat to people-pleasing or the familiarity of unhealthy relationships–this is a sign my window is closing and that my relaxation system is overwhelmed. I am overwhelmed.

The concept of the window of tolerance can help us gauge where we are in the present moment and help us respond wisely rather than react impulsively.



From Kids Help Phone

Chapter Three: Resilience and Whole Person-Centered Care

Developing a Resilience Strategy

Tend to your whole self: physically, socially, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually.

Resilience: a healthy form of power in the midst of uncertainty or vulnerability; the ability to bend and not break.

PRACTICES | PEOPLE | PLAYFULNESS

PRACTICES: What are some practices that cultivate a healthy form of power?

Identify possible practices by working through a checklist of questions for resilience. Be sure to practice breathing techniques as you reflect.

1. What are my strengths?
2. What has helped me endure past difficult times?
3. What healthy things can I do to soothe myself when I'm faced with uncertainty?
4. Is there something I can do to influence what will happen next? If so, what?
5. What are my resources to increase my resilience?
6. How can I ask for what I need?

PEOPLE: Who is in your Resilience Network?

1. Great listener(s):
2. Inspiring person(s)/visionary(ies):
3. Very practical person(s):
4. Someone who encourages my soul:
5. Someone who can put me in touch with beauty:
6. Mentor(s)/elder(s)-someone who's been through it all:

PLAYFULNESS:

1. What do you find fun?
2. What makes you laugh?
3. What activities give you life (make you feel more alive)?
4. What activities increase your capacity for patience with yourself and others?

Person-Centered Care

Person-centered Care is what some may call, "Self-care." In our view what is missing in the language of "self-care" is the reality that we can't care for ourselves on our own or independent of a resilience network. Sure, there are things we can and must do on our own, but it doesn't mean we do it alone. Sometimes we need the help of others to make "self-care" happen. A single parent may need someone to watch her children so she can tend to herself. A person may need their employer to understand their need for a day off or time away, or someone in their life to love them enough to encourage a day off or time away. So we prefer the language of "person-centered care" because it gets everyone's individuality and personhood without suggesting that we can do it alone for ourselves. We need others.

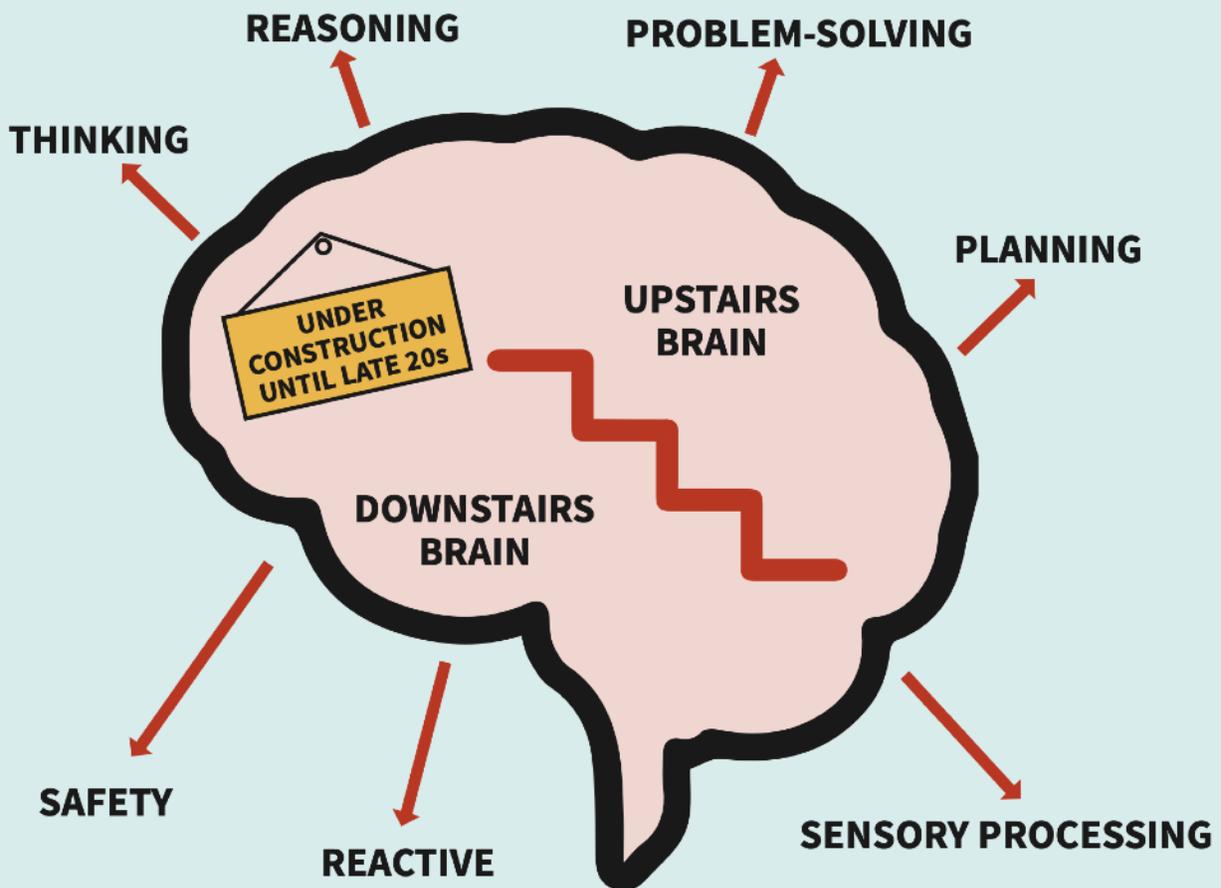
Person-centered care is not self-indulgence, it is self-respect.

- Tend to the possibility of trauma-exposure.
- Tend to the possibility of secondary trauma.
- Tend to the possibility of compassion fatigue.

Six tips for Person-Centered Care.

1. Be honest and gentle with yourself
2. Resist the culture of cure and lean into a culture of care
3. Re-examine your relational and emotional boundaries.
4. Re-examine your "yes" and "no," why you said it and when to you should now.
5. Go back to your resilience network.
6. Go back to your resilience strategy.
7. Keep your window open

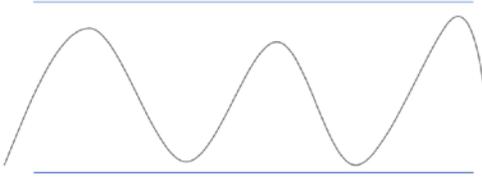
Understanding the Brain Will Help Us Understand Behavior



Source: www.gregsantucci.com Adapted from Siegal and Bryson (2011)

Window of tolerance* worksheet

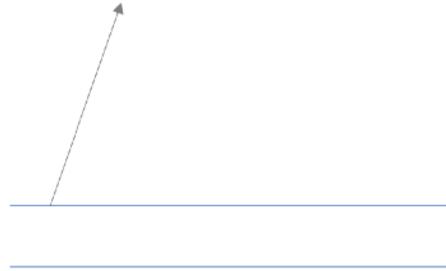
When my window is wide open (I'm feeling well and safe physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually), I....



When my window is closing and I get overwhelmed (demobilized physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually), I....



When my window is closing and I get activated (hyper-alert/in danger physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually), I....



Resources

Practices and people that/who help me open my window of tolerance:

* "Window of tolerance" language draws on the work of Pat Ogden, Stephen Porges, and Dan Siegel.



Opening the window

- Naming
- Deep breathing
- Connection to loved ones
- Sacred practices
- Music, singing
- Dancing, drumming
- All kinds of exercise
- Massage, touch (even self-massage)
- Laughter
- Being in nature
- Playing, having fun
- Gratitude
- "Conscious complaining" (McLaren)
- Mindfulness practices
- What else?