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Coping with stress

COPING WITH STRESS

How can you stay within your Window of Tolerance, and which practical strategies can help?

The Window of Tolerance

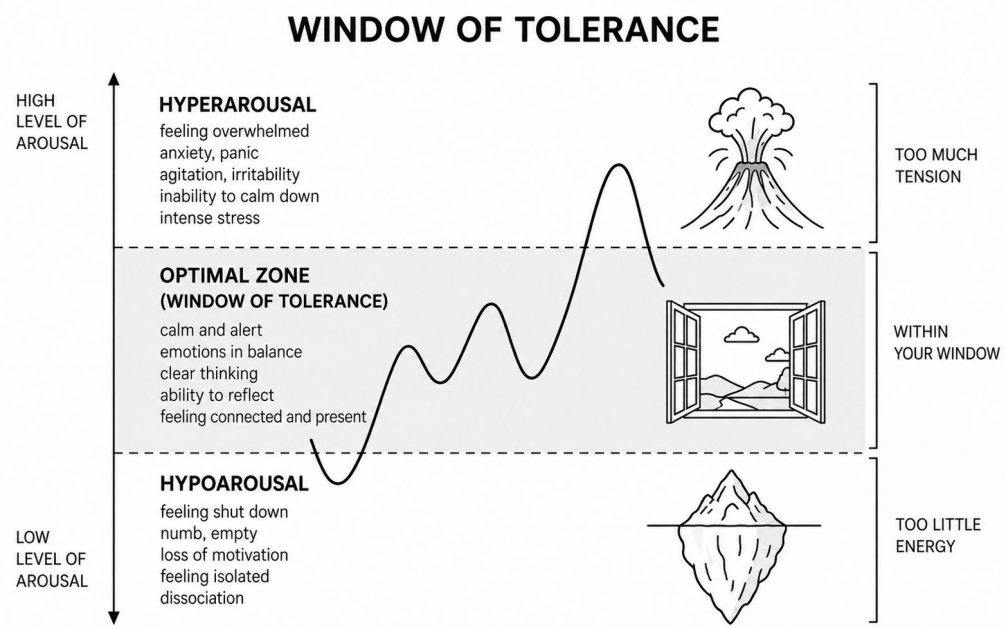
Not everyone responds to stress in the same way. The concept of the Window of Tolerance, developed in 1999 by psychiatrist Dr Dan Siegel, helps explain why some people are able to cope well with challenges, while others become overwhelmed more quickly.

The Window of Tolerance describes the range of emotional and physiological arousal within which a person can generally function effectively. Within this window, we are alert enough to deal with challenges without feeling overwhelmed. We can think clearly, regulate our emotions, make decisions and respond appropriately to what is happening around us.

When our level of arousal becomes too high, we may move above our window. This can involve restlessness, irritability, anxiety, panic or feeling overwhelmed. The body may remain in a heightened state of alert. When our level of arousal drops too low, we may move below our window. We may feel exhausted, empty, lacking in energy or emotionally numb. It can become difficult to find motivation, take initiative or stay engaged with the world around us.

A person's Window of Tolerance differs from one individual to another and is influenced by factors such as personality, life experiences, health, social support, and opportunities for recovery. Prolonged stress can also narrow the window, making it easier to become unbalanced.

Making time for recovery, relaxation, physical activity, balanced nutrition, sleep and social support can help us regulate stress and build resilience. These habits may also help us remain within, or return to, our Window of Tolerance when faced with challenges.



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THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES

Stress is part of everyday life, including working life. Busy periods, unexpected changes and heavy workloads can create tension. How we feel depends not only on the amount of stress we experience but also on how we respond to it. This is known as coping.

Coping refers to the thoughts and behaviours we use to manage difficult or stressful situations. Some strategies help reduce stress and build resilience, while others may make stress worse over time.

When stress accumulates, it can be tempting to ignore the signs or simply keep going. While this may seem effective in the short term, insufficient recovery can lead to exhaustion, reduced performance, and an increased risk of overload.

Healthy coping strategies can help people manage pressure at work, preserve their energy and support their physical and mental wellbeing.

Practical ways to cope with stress

Recognise your signs of stress

The first step is to recognise the signs that your stress levels are rising. Fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, persistent worrying or physical symptoms may indicate that you are under strain. Noticing these signs early gives you an opportunity to act sooner.

Set realistic expectations

Many employees set very high standards for themselves. While commitment and responsibility are valuable qualities, it is also important to remain realistic about what can be achieved with the available time and resources. Perfection is not always necessary to do a good job.

Learn to set boundaries

Setting boundaries does not mean being less motivated. It means making conscious choices about how you manage your energy and workload. Speak up when your schedule is full, priorities are unclear or you need additional support. Open communication can help prevent stress from building up.

Ensure sufficient recovery time

Our bodies and minds need time to recover in order to function well. Short breaks during the working day, regular physical activity, relaxation and good-quality sleep can help reduce accumulated tension. Recovery is not a luxury; it is essential for maintaining health and wellbeing over time.

Pay attention to physical activity

Regular physical activity can be an effective way to manage stress. It can help relieve tension, improve sleep quality and support a more positive mood. There is no need to take part in intensive sport. Walking during a lunch break, cycling to work, taking the stairs or simply getting up and moving regularly throughout the day can all make a difference.

Healthy nutrition supports resilience

During busy periods, healthy eating habits can fall by the wayside. However, nutrition plays an important role in how we feel and function. Regular meals, adequate hydration and a varied diet can help maintain steady energy levels.

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Too much caffeine, energy drinks or sugary snacks may provide a temporary boost but can also contribute to fluctuations in energy and concentration.

Focus on what you can influence

Not every source of stress can be removed. Some decisions and circumstances are beyond our control. It may help to focus on what you can influence, such as how you organise your work, plan your time or respond to a situation.

Seek support from others

You do not have to deal with stress alone. Talking to colleagues, a manager, a trusted contact or a psychologist can help you gain perspective and explore possible solutions. Social support is an important protective factor against prolonged stress.

Avoid unhelpful coping strategies

Some ways of coping with stress offer temporary relief without addressing the underlying problem. Examples include consistently working longer hours, avoiding difficulties, suppressing emotions or increasing the use of alcohol, nicotine or other substances. Over time, these strategies can make stress worse.

Building resilience

Resilience does not mean never experiencing stress. It means being able to cope better with challenges and recover more quickly after difficult periods. Resilience can be strengthened through self-care, social connections, physical activity, adequate rest, and a healthy work-life balance.

A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Although employees can take steps to manage their own stress, the working environment also plays an essential role. An open culture in which people can talk about stress, expectations are realistic and support is available contributes to everyone's wellbeing. Recognising the signs of stress early and using helpful coping strategies can support employees' wellbeing, even during demanding periods.