

When We are Very Young

Episode 8

Window of Tolerance

So, today we are talking about the Window of Tolerance, or, as I sometimes refer to it, Goldilocks and the Three Levels of Arousal. We are combining the work of Stephan Porges and his Poly Vagal Theory and the work of Pat Ogden and her colleagues, who coined the term Window of Tolerance.

The Window of Tolerance is a concept to help us see and understand arousal levels and the behaviours that are natural to arousal levels when a person, a mammal, is under threat. The arousal level is controlled by the midbrain and the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). We have talked about the Bunny Story and we have talked about Fight, Flight, Freeze, which are high arousal and Shut Down, which is low arousal. What we didn't talk about is what's in between.

The Window of Tolerance is a schematic or a concept that helps us understand the three levels of arousal: the just right level of arousal, the too high level and the too low level of arousal. We have levels of arousal that are high, in the middle and low, and the arousal level that is in the middle is called the Window of Tolerance. This is the range of arousal level that is most helpful and optimal for day to day, usual functioning. In the just right window of arousal, not too high and not too low, that is where we can function best: we are calm, we are alert, we are able to learn and use language and logic. The other important aspect of that window where we are functioning well, is that when we are in that window, if we have some distress or threat to our survival, if we can remain in the window, our number one resource when we are threatened, is to reach out and call our attachment figure. So, for me, in my life, my primary attachment figure is my husband. If I was very distressed and I was not able to cope with the distress on my own, the most likely thing I would do right away, is call my husband and in speaking with him, I would get help re-regulating and remaining in the window. For children, most likely, what we want is for them to connect with their parent: call, reach out, cry, approach, even text or facetime...and get help from the parent so that the child can

remain in the window and not go into survival strategies of fight, flight, freeze or shut down. If we are threatened or distressed, we really want our Pre-Frontal Cortex to remain on-line, and for our system to be thoughtful and mindful, not as reactive. As we get more threatened, and we go into a high level of arousal, then we are into Fight, Flight, Freeze. These survival modes, in fact all three levels of arousal, are operated by the ANS through the various branches of the vagal nerve and the midbrain, not the through cognitive processes of the Prefrontal Cortex.

So, high arousal is Fight, Flight, Freeze and then, if those reactions, those behaviours are not effective in protecting us then, as in the Bunny Story, we might shut right down, and go into very low level of arousal which is operated by the dorsal vagal nerve of the Parasympathetic Nervous System. Not that you need to know that, but the important aspect of that is that it is hard-wired and it is in all mammals.

Here is what we are thinking about: when children are in the window, in this just right level of arousal, where they can think and use logic and use words, that's where they need to be in the classroom, for instance, to learn. That's where they need to be in order to understand cause and effect. If you do this, then this will happen. "If you keep hitting your brother, you're going to have a time out." If the child is in the window, then they might be able to take that in. Whereas if they are out of the window, either too high or too low, then they won't be able to take that in as well (or in fact might see that as another threat) because they are not using language and logic effectively because they are not using their prefrontal cortex very much. Their midbrain and ANS are in charge. Again, this is not a conscious choice, this is just how mammalian brains and bodies work together to protect us when we are under threat.

Now, for children who have experienced early trauma and neglect, what has happened is that the window has become very narrow and they don't spend a lot of time in the window. Their system is triggered to over-assess threat and so, often they are too high or too low. Our job as parents and therapists is to widened their window of tolerance so that they spend more time in the window, calm and alert, able to call for help, and able to accept that parental help when it comes. Then, they can stay in the window rather than going into fight, flight freeze or shut down. Children with attachment

difficulties struggle with calling for help and accepting the help when it comes... more about that in another episode.

Reading List

1. The Polyvagal Theory by Stephen Porges.
2. Trauma and the Body by Ogden, Minton and Pain.

These two books are pretty heavy reading, definitely required reading for therapists, however many parents will get a lot of these books too.

3. Born for Love by Maia Salavitz and Bruce Perry. I think it is important that we know which behaviours are part of our mammalian heritage and which are the more complex outcomes of the human pre-frontal cortex.