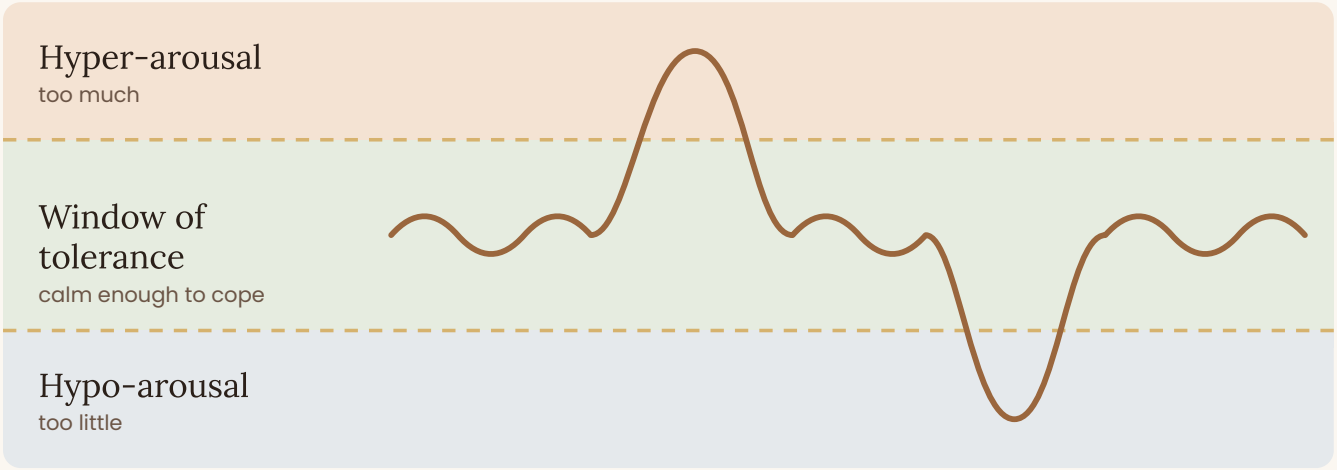
The *window of tolerance*

A gentle guide to your nervous system in motherhood

MOTHER GROUND
YOUR VILLAGE

Psychiatrist Dan Siegel described a "window of tolerance": the zone where we can feel our feelings, think clearly and respond rather than react. Everyone drifts in and out of it. Broken sleep, shifting hormones and the constant needs of little ones can make the window narrower, so it takes less to tip us out of it.



We all move up and down through the day. The aim isn't to stay in the middle all the time, but to notice when you've left it and find your way back.

ABOVE THE WINDOW

Hyper-arousal

Fight or flight

IT CAN FEEL LIKE

- Anxious, on edge, panicky
- Irritable, snappy, tearful
- Racing heart and thoughts
- Can't settle or switch off

AS A MUM, IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE

- Snapping, then the guilt
- Awake, listening for the baby
- Touched out, wanting to run
- Planning for every worst case

INSIDE THE WINDOW

Your window

Rest and connect

IT CAN FEEL LIKE

- Present and grounded
- Able to think clearly
- Feelings felt, not flooding
- Connected to others

AS A MUM, IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE

- Staying calm beside a tantrum
- Asking for help
- Laughing at the chaos
- Repairing after a hard moment

BELOW THE WINDOW

Hypo-arousal

Shut down

IT CAN FEEL LIKE

- Numb, flat or foggy
- Exhausted and heavy
- Zoned out, on autopilot
- Far away from yourself

AS A MUM, IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE

- Scrolling, not really there
- Going through the motions
- Distant from baby or partner
- "I should be happy, but..."

Widening your *window*

Your window isn't fixed. It shrinks under strain and widens with rest, safety and support. Noticing where you are, without judging yourself, is the first step.

What can narrow it in motherhood

- Broken or very little sleep
- Hormonal shifts in pregnancy and after birth
- A difficult birth, or loss
- Being touched out, rarely alone
- Old feelings stirred up by parenting
- Isolation, or too little support

What can help widen it

- Rest, even in short pockets
- Eating and drinking regularly
- Time with people who feel safe
- Movement and fresh air
- Naming what you feel
- Talking it through with someone

Finding your way back

Small, body-based steps can help your nervous system settle.

If you're above the window

Too much: help your body slow down

- Breathe out longer than you breathe in
- Feel your feet on the floor
- Name five things you can see
- Sip a cold drink slowly
- Put baby down safely and step away for two minutes

If you're below the window

Too little: gently wake your body up

- Move gently: stretch, walk, sway
- Something with taste or scent
- Open a window, change the light
- Hum, sing or play music
- Text or call someone you trust

Gentle questions to sit with.

Where do I tend to go: up, or down?

What are my early warning signs?

What helps me come back, even a little?

Who helps me feel safe?

If you often feel outside your window, or low mood or anxiety lasts more than two weeks, please speak to your GP, midwife or health visitor. If you need to talk to someone now, call **Samaritans on 116 123** (free, 24 hours) or **NHS 111** and choose the mental health option. In an emergency, call **999**.

This information sheet offers general support and is **not intended to replace therapy, or medical or professional advice, diagnosis or treatment.** Based on the window of tolerance model by Dr Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind* (1999). © Velvet Couch Therapy. For personal use only.