

BUILDING CONTAINERS *for* HEALTH EQUITY WORK



**Integrating the Head and
the Heart**



OVERVIEW

“...[W]hite-body supremacy doesn’t live in our thinking brains. It lives and breathes in our bodies. ... The body is where we fear, hope, and react; where we constrict and release; and where we reflexively fight, flee, or freeze. If we are to upend the status quo of white-body supremacy, we must begin with our bodies.”

—From My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies, by Resmaa Menakem

Public health, like many fields and professions, prides itself on its data collection, analytical rigor, and evidence-based decision making. And yet, at its heart, public health is about people. It’s about lived experiences, embodied expressions of those experiences, care and community, and wholeness and wellbeing.

Our dominant cultures, rooted in white supremacy, capitalism, cisheteropatriarchy, ableism, colonialism, thrive on separating us from each other and from ourselves — or, as we think about it, divorcing our head from our heart. In our work to advance racial and social justice, and to create a future where everyone is healthy and free, we have to bring our focus back to the heart — to our feelings, our embodied experiences, and our relationships with each other.

This is why integrating the head and heart is a core principle of containers for equity work. It brings us back to our full humanity, allows us to feel and heal the wounds of racism and other systems of oppression, and helps us build a radical counter culture to the systems we are trying to dismantle. The importance of honoring feelings, energy, and embodied experiences is central to Black, Indigenous, and other cultures of the global majority, and it is essential in racial justice work.¹

When we say integrating the head and the heart, we mean connecting our intellectual understanding with our embodied experiences and giving space for attending to those embodied experiences. Our intellectual understanding of racism must be connected with how our body feels living in a world shaped by white supremacy, racism, cisheteropatriarchy, ableism, capitalism, colonialism, and other systems of oppression.

[1] Kivel, Paul. *Uprooting Racism. How White People Can Work for Racial Justice.* 1996.

Racism and other systems of oppression are forms of trauma. Trauma lives in the body and requires us to recognize and feel it, in order to heal from its impacts. It is typical in professional settings, where we are trained to think intellectually and analytically, to not make space for feelings, physical sensations, or healing from trauma. If we only intellectualize systems of oppression, we will not be able to engage in a long-term commitment to racial justice.

An important way to begin (re)integrating the head and heart is through practices that help bring awareness to the fullness of our being — our bodies, minds, spirits.

In bringing this awareness to our full selves, and inviting others to do this, we need to take care and understand that different people have very different relationships with their bodies. People's bodies are politicized across various identities and axes, which shapes how we relate to our bodies and how it feels to engage in practices that bring awareness to the body. For some people, the body is a source of trauma they experience. For some people, disability, chronic illness, and other sources of body-related trauma require being highly aware of physical sensations all the time.

Given these diverse experiences, not all of the practices below will be helpful for all people. Take time to understand the access needs of your group, and always offer any practice as voluntary and an invitation to participate as people are able.

Heart-centered practices are about giving space and time to slow down and notice: In this moment, what is going on for us? What feelings and emotions are coming up?

Once we notice these feelings, we can start to name them, pause, and then reflect on what might be contributing to these physical and emotional responses.



HEART CENTERED PRACTICES

The practices below are some ways that you and your group can take time to slow down and notice what is happening for you, and to help you care for those feelings, individually and collectively. Remember, not all of these practices may be helpful for all people, so take care to make any practice optional, and choose to offer practices that meet the access needs of your group.

- Invite people as they are able to breathe together paying attention to how it feels to slow down and pay attention to our breath
- Develop a vocabulary to express what's happening in the body as we engage in this work
- Pause and make space in conversations and group work to express how we feel, and to acknowledge those feelings, reflecting on how equity work affects us as people
- Reflect on how we have suffered, and continue to suffer, the trauma of participating and living within harmful systems
- Listen deeply to those who have been most impacted by systems of oppression, and notice what it feels like in our bodies to hear their experiences
- Notice and share with others whether we are emotionally regulated or not as we engage with this work

Heart-centered practices are important in all of our work and relationships. We can (and should!) incorporate these practices in all collective spaces where we are learning and working together — on staff teams, in workshops, within organizations, with our partners. And while all members of the group have responsibility for helping to bring in and center the heart, it is often folks in roles of team leader, facilitator, convener, or organizer who have responsibility for initiating and guiding these practices.



WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

As we move through professional and institutional settings that center and value “head space,” we might find it challenging to know where and how to bring “heart space” to the forefront of our work and relationships. One framework that can help us begin to notice, share, and normalize connecting with our physical and emotional sensations is called the Window of Tolerance.

The Window of Tolerance is a concept originally described in the book, *The Developing Mind*, by psychiatrist Dan Siegel. It describes the “optimal zone of arousal for a person to function in everyday life,” which includes being able to “effectively manage and cope with their emotions.”² When we are in this zone, or window, we are usually able to receive, process, and integrate information, and respond to the inputs of daily life effectively.³

The Window of Tolerance is not static or the same for everyone. Our individual Windows are shaped by past and present experiences; skills and practices we have to manage and cope with emotions and stressful situations; and the support we have in our lives (e.g. relationships, resources, professional supports) to stay within our window. All of these factors vary person to person, and change across an individual’s lifetime, in turn, shifting and changing the size of our window. And because our windows are unique to us, what helps one person stay regulated and in their window may not work for another person.

Our window might be narrow at times, meaning we get dysregulated easily and have difficulty returning to a regulated state. And at other times it might be quite large, meaning even when faced with stress, discomfort, or other difficult emotions, we are able to stay regulated.

When we are dysregulated, often due to high levels of stress, we are outside our window. And when this happens, we often fall back on a conditioned stress response — fight, flight, freeze, or faun — in response to what is happening around us. These responses can also be described in terms of hyper- and hypo-arousal.

[2] “How to Help Your Clients Understand Their Window of Tolerance,” blog post for the National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine:
<https://www.nicabm.com/trauma-how-to-help-your-clients-understand-their-window-of-tolerance>

[3] Window of Tolerance. Good Therapy Blog.
<https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/window-of-tolerance>



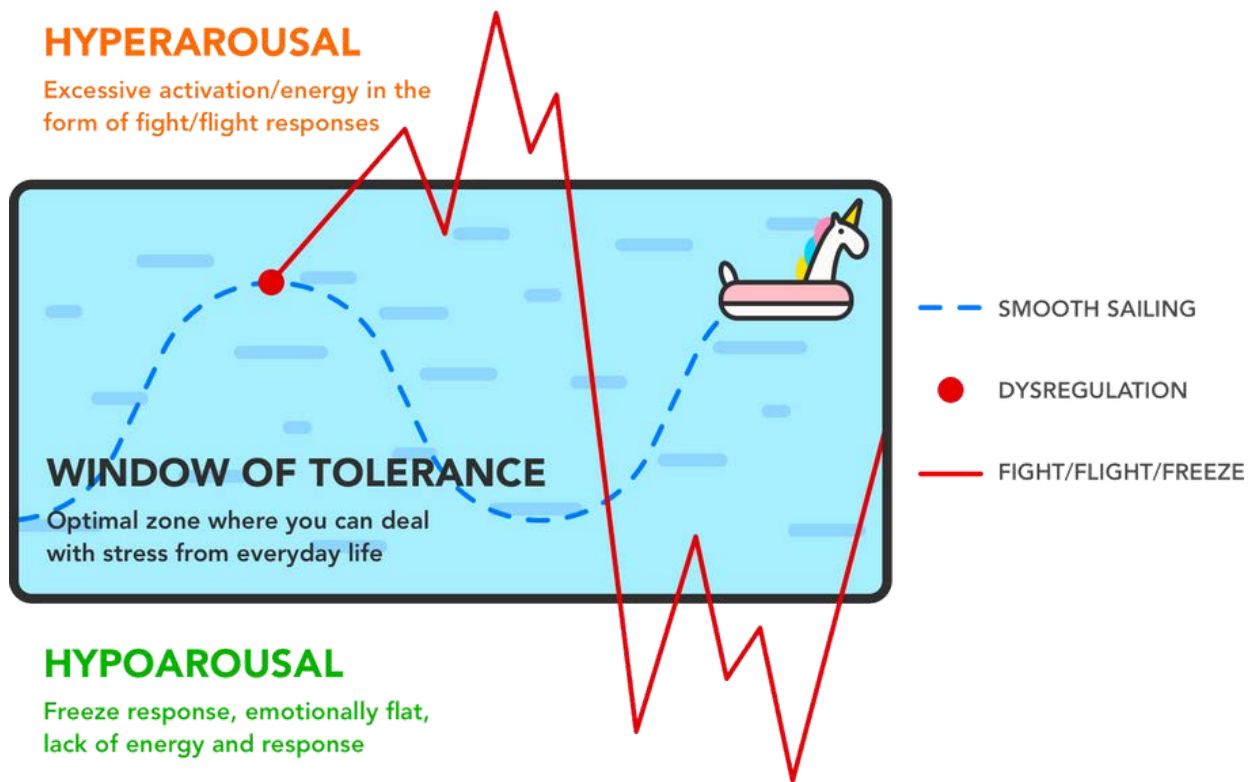


Image source: <https://www.mindmypeelings.com/blog/window-of-tolerance>

Hyperarousal

Being in the zone above your window is characterized by extremely heightened energy and activation. You might feel a heightened sense of anxiety, be more sensitive or reactive to things happening around you, and feel like you are unable to turn your mind off. Sensations in the body might be sweaty palms, upset stomach, heart beating fast, muscle tension. In this state, you might present as sweating, agitated, raised voice, turning red, or crying.

Hypoarousal

Being in the zone below your window is characterized by extremely low energy. You might feel like you are numb to emotions and slow to think clearly and critically. Sensations in the body might be slumped shoulders, stillness, exhaustion, and headache. In this state, you might show up as despondent, lethargic, checked out, glazed over, numb, passive, disconnected, or shut down.

WHY USE THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE?

Sharing how we are feeling and where we are in our window helps create a culture shift where relating in this way is the norm and not an exception or reserved for outside of the workplace. It allows people to bring their full selves and full humanity to their work. People can share if their car broke down, children are home sick, or they have a big presentation coming up which causes them to shift in their window.

The Window of Tolerance also helps create a shared language for colleagues to acknowledge how they are showing up at any given moment. It can offer a simple way of saying what you need from the group to help you feel more regulated.

Using and sharing the Window of Tolerance in our racial justice work can also bring self and collective awareness to the trauma of racism and other systems of oppression.

It can help us process how we all experience and embody these systems — albeit differently based on how we are racialized and socialized — and how that affects us in our work and relationships. This awareness can lead to deeper understanding, dialogue, and care in our groups as we do this difficult work.

Additionally, the Window of Tolerance can be a useful tool for our individual self-work, to reflect more deeply and mindfully on:

- How we move through the world and work
- What helps us regulate and stay regulated
- What pushes us into a dysregulated state
- What our conditioned stress or trauma responses are when we are dysregulated

Through this reflection and self-work, we can build skills for regulation and see our windows expand, allowing us to better tolerate the challenges and stressors of racial justice work.

RESOURCE FOR HEAD AND HEART INTEGRATION:

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE CHECK-IN

Why:

The purpose of this activity is to introduce the Window of Tolerance to a group. It will help build a shared vocabulary and practice of noticing and reintegrating the body and emotions with the “headspace” of health equity work.

Using the Window of Tolerance is an opportunity to make an explicit commitment to honoring the energy and feelings in the room.

Who:

Anyone can integrate a Window of Tolerance check-in into any team or group space — especially in spaces where you are in relationship with others, engaging in challenging equity and justice work, and want to have more tools to connect embodied experiences and feelings with the actions of your work. This could be your staff team, an equity committee or workgroup, an external partnership or collaboration, a coalition, or another group you work with to advance health and racial equity.

When to use:

Any time you are together! It can be a quick go around at the opening of a staff meeting or part of an in-depth introduction in a workshop. You can also use it in the middle of something — after watching a film clip, or reviewing new mortality data, or receiving good news.

Sometimes it’s as easy as naming for yourself, “Wow, I feel a shift in my window (up or down) as a result of [what someone just said/what we just saw/etc.]” You don’t always have to go around and share. As you become more comfortable with the tool, it’s ok to just pause and invite folks to check their window, invite a deep breath or other practice to help people regulate, and then move forward.

What you’ll need:

This resource, which shares an introduction and explanation to the Window of Tolerance.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1) When using the Window of Tolerance for the first time with a group, spend time at the beginning of your meeting or workshop to introduce the concept — what it is and how you will use it.
- 2) Set up check-ins, either as a full group or in small groups, where group members will share where they are in their window of tolerance as they enter the space and conversation with the group. Model for participants how to reflect on where they are in their window by sharing your check-in first and then passing to the next person.

Set-up:

The purpose of this check-in is to know if group members are regulated so we can work together in this moment. The check-in will have two parts: Where are you in your window, and what support do you need in this moment to feel more regulated?

Question prompts:

- Where are you in your window? Are you inside or outside of your window?
- Are you feeling high or low in ways that might impact your presence and effectiveness now?
- Is there something you need at this moment to get more regulated?

Reminders to help folks reflect and respond:

- This is a check-in of your internal body thermometer at the moment when it's your turn, so take a breath and tune in before answering. Notice both physical sensations and emotional responses.
- You can share just whether you are “in your window” or not. You do not have to add context or explanation, unless you want to.
- It is also possible and ok to be both high and low in your window. Different stressors can trigger varying physical and emotional responses. Remember the goal is to practice being mindful of how you are showing up to a space, however that might be.

- We will all be in different places in our windows, and that's okay. How you are feeling is important information for you and the group — it is not good or bad, it just is.
- Let others know if there's something you need from the group to stay regulated. It is ok to not know what you need at the moment, and to come back to it later.
- One person's expression of being high or low in their window may look different than someone else's.

If someone shares that they are out of their window, care should be taken to make sure that person is safe from harm (to self or others) and to identify someone to help them regulate. Ask them what would help them and change the plan to meet that need.

If the entire group shares that they are out of their window, this presents a great opportunity to pivot the meeting agenda, reschedule, and support the group's energy levels.

3) Thank everyone for sharing. Acknowledge needs that group members expressed and name how folks can care for themselves and each other.

Some ideas for how care for the group if people are generally feeling out of their windows:

- Pause and do a breathing exercise together
- Do a stretching video or some other energizer exercise together
- Invite participants to turn off cameras (if virtual), or to leave the meeting/call, if they need to
- Play music and give folks a few minutes to settle themselves in ways that feel good to them and their body
- Given open space for sharing and processes, if folks want to talk through their feelings more
- End the meeting early and come back to the agenda at another time

Also, remind folks that they can use the language of the window throughout your time together as they notice their reactions to what others are saying or their energy shifting, and share any new feelings or needs that arise.

GENERAL REMINDERS

- The more you use it and practice it, the more you will be aware of what regulation and dysregulation look and feel like for you, and be able to identify needs and supports to help you stay regulated. So keep practicing!
- Introduce the importance of head and heart integration and embodied awareness and practice to racial justice work before asking people to use the Window of Tolerance.
- Don't spring this tool on a group that hasn't talked about how racial justice work requires us to engage with ourselves and each other differently! It's important to set the Window up so people understand why they're engaging with it.
- Everyone gets to decide how much or how little they share about their feelings and sensations. You don't have to share more than you are comfortable sharing.
- It's ok to not be able or ready to ascribe feeling words to the sensations in the body. Noticing is the first step before naming, so focus on the noticing in the beginning.
- Use the Window of Tolerance as a practice to bring to life group norms and commitments about centering the heart, connecting with our embodied and emotional experiences, taking risks in a supportive environment, and being explicit about how we are showing up in a space.
- While all feelings are ok and important information for individuals and the group, not all behaviors are ok. Be sure to have clear, explicit group norms about how to address and be accountable for the impacts of your actions, especially when you are in a dysregulated state.
- Noticing and naming our feelings, and listening to how others are feeling, may be uncomfortable. That is not the same as being unsafe. Imagine and trust that you can feel dysregulated and uncomfortable and still be safe.
- If it starts to feel like just a task to start the meeting and is void of the depth of welcoming the body and heart, it's good to revisit the intention of using it. You might revisit the whole explanation of it periodically, even with groups who have been using it for a while. This reminder can help everyone re-center, remember, and recommit to centering heart practices.

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About Human Impact Partners

[Human Impact Partners](http://HumanImpactPartners) transforms the field of public health to center equity and builds collective power with social justice movements. For more information about this resource, or to inquire about HIP's [Capacity Building](http://CapacityBuilding) services, please contact cbinfo@humanimpact.org.

To learn more about container building, view our introductory resource, [Building Containers for Health Equity Work: Introduction to Container Building](http://BuildingContainersforHealthEquityWork:IntroductiontoContainerBuilding).

