

# Trauma, Stress and Caregiver Well-Being

**Participant  
Manual**



## Learning Objectives

1

Describe trauma and its impacts on children, Identify sources of stress for yourself

2

Identify sources of stress for yourself

3

Understand what secondary traumatic stress is and how it might impact you

4

Explore your window of tolerance and how to widen and stay within it to address stress

5

Develop a personalized "stress buster" action plan



## Understanding Trauma



## What is Trauma?

A traumatic experience is one in which an individual experiences an intense, recurring and/or ongoing event or events that threatens or causes harm to them emotionally or physically.

- This event is frightening, dangerous, or violent and poses a threat to a person's life or bodily integrity.
- Witnessing a traumatic event that threatens life or physical security of another can also be traumatic.

Abuse, neglect, experiencing natural disasters, community violence, are all examples of potentially traumatic experience



## What is Trauma?



Wamser-Nanney, R. (2016). Examining the complex trauma definition using children's self-reports. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 9(4), 295-304.



## Reactions to Trauma Exposure

Reactions to traumatic experiences may differ depending on many factors including:

- age
- how in danger someone felt
- whether they were the victim or witness
- their relationship to the victim or perpetrator
- past experience of trauma
- adversities person faced prior to and following the trauma
- support systems to help them after the trauma



## A Note on Resilience

- Long term negative effects from trauma are not inevitable
- Opportunities to adapt in healthy ways after experiencing trauma exist
- Caregiver's providing safety and support helps with the healing process
- As a caregiver understanding how you can build resilience is important to:
  - Positively coping with your own trauma exposure
  - Helping the child(ren) and families cope



## Trauma Responses Discussion



Discussion: Imagine that you were a victim of a robbery, everyone was okay, but you were terrified. How might your brain and body keep you safe in the coming weeks and months?

- Reliving the Traumatic Event
- Avoiding Reminders of the Traumatic Event
- Mentally Separating Oneself from the Event
- Experiencing Intense Reactions
- Having Changes in Mood or Thoughts



## Trauma Reminders

Things, events, situations, places, sensations and even people that are connected with a traumatic experience.

- Reminders can make you withdraw from things that remind you of the trauma which can impact your ability accomplish everyday activities.
- Reminders can also make you re-experience the feelings associated with the trauma - terror, fear, helplessness, etc.



# Caregiver Stress and Coping



## 9 Elements of Trauma-Informed Parenting

- Recognize the impact trauma has had on your child
- Help your child to feel safe
- Help your child to understand and manage overwhelming emotions
- Help your child to understand and manage difficult behaviors
- Respect and support the positive, stable, and enduring relationships in the life of your child
- Help your child to develop a strength-based understanding of his or her life story
- Be an advocate for your child
- Promote and support trauma-focused assessment and treatment for your child
- Take care of yourself (Trauma, Stress, and Caregiver Well-being)





### 1. Recognize the impact trauma has had on your child

Psychological traumas are extremely frightening, horrifying and confusing experiences, especially for children. Loss of control is a hallmark feature of trauma leading children to feel helpless, fearful, and desperate and for their bodies to react in ways to self-protect them from perceived danger. Restoring their basic ability to calm down, and trust becomes very important, and rarely does this occur if they feel physically or psychologically unsafe. When we view children's challenging behavior through the lens of trauma- we begin to see their behavior in a new light, and it begins to make more sense. This workshop is designed to give you the tools to take that information and use it through some specific strategies to decrease negative behaviors instead of inadvertently reinforcing them or making them worse.

### 2. Help your child to feel safe

Safety is critical for children who have experienced trauma. This is both about being physically safe as well as psychologically safe. For some, they have never lived in a safe environment, and may have difficulty trusting something that is unfamiliar and inconsistent. A child who has experienced trauma may be physically safe in foster care, but still not feel psychologically safe because of visitation arrangements, the uncertainty of their future, sibling interactions, bullying at school, or fear of intimacy. Remember, trusting adults may not have always worked out for them in the past and may feel dangerous.

### 3. Help your child to understand and manage overwhelming emotions

Traumatic stress in its worse form is a condition of remembering and forgetting. Children can alternate between being driven by but unable to recall trauma details, and recalling too much, being flooded by painful memories, as well as powerful and intense emotions such as fear, anger, shame, and helplessness. Many children lack the skills to identify, express or manage their emotional states. Either because they didn't have appropriate role models, healthy caregiver interactions, or simply because of their age and stage of development. RPs can provide corrective emotional experiences to help children self-regulate.

### 4. Help your child to understand and manage difficult behaviors

People who do not know how to manage their thoughts, feelings and physical responses to trauma are always on a roller coaster- a state of extreme stress. They depend on avoidance, discharging anger, addiction, self-harm, shutting down to relieve their suffering. Helping children feel safe and teaching them how to manage these overwhelming thoughts, feelings and body sensations can help them control their behaviors. A trauma informed parent is one who can guide them through this process.



### **5. Respect and support the positive, stable, and enduring relationships in the life of your child**

Children learn about the world through relationships with other people. These connections help define expectations, demonstrate how people treat one another, whether they are deserving of benevolence and what is possible for them. Positive, secure relationships play an important role in helping them heal from trauma. Sometimes children who have been maltreated with have insecure relationships with those around them. These connections may have sent messages that the world is unsafe, that adults cannot be trusted, and those who love you will hurt you. Even so, children might cling to these relationships even if they are harmful. This can be very difficult to witness.

### **6. Help your child to develop a strength-based understanding of his or her life story**

Children who have been exposed to abuse and neglect have been told to keep the secret and may believe that what has happened to them is their fault. We want them to develop a strong and healthy sense of self, to understand that what happened to them is not who they are, that they are worthy of good things and a bright future.

### **7. Be an advocate for your child**

Helping a child recover from trauma takes a team. As a foster parent, you are most intimately and consistently connected to your child, and in the best position to be a powerful advocate for them, insisting on and teaching others about the trauma lens and how to apply it to your child's situation.

### **8. Promote and support trauma-focused assessment and treatment for your child**

It is important to know what constitutes a good trauma assessment and why you might need one, what an evidence-based trauma treatment entails, what other professionals should be sharing with you, and how to talk to therapist and teachers and others about what your child needs

### **9. Take care of yourself (Trauma, Stress, and Caregiver Well-being)**

This work is not easy and almost no one goes through the experience of foster parenting a trauma exposed child without feeling some powerful emotions. You have heard the advice you get when traveling by airplane, secure your own oxygen mask before helping others. Taking care of ourselves as foster parents is one of the most important gifts we can give a foster child. It's a commitment to do what I can to keep myself healthy and able to be there for you.

## Emotional Container



## What is Empathy?

In order to connect with another person, you need to connect with something in yourself that knows that feeling- putting yourself in the shoes of someone else

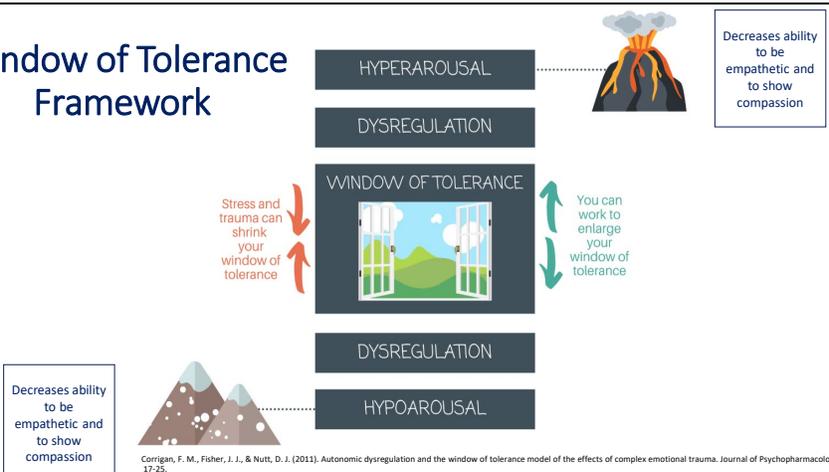


# What is Compassion?

An understanding of another's suffering and the desire to somehow help make it better



## Window of Tolerance Framework



Cortigan, F. M., Fisher, J. J., & Nutt, D. J. (2011). Autonomic dysregulation and the window of tolerance model of the effects of complex emotional trauma. *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 25(1), 17-25.  
 Graphic from the Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit (NCTSN 2020)



## Stress Buster: Mindful Self-Awareness

- Take regular check-ins of your stress level
  - Add reminders into your calendar to check-in during the day or pair a check-in with a daily activity (when you brush teeth, wash hands or dishes etc.)
- Be aware of what you are doing & try to do just that (stay in the moment)
- Know your window-narrowers and signs you are getting out of your window



## Sources of Stress



## Traumatic Stress

### Primary Traumatic Stress

The emotional distress that results from your own experience of a traumatic situation

### Secondary Traumatic Stress

The emotional distress that results when you hear about the firsthand trauma experiences of another person.



## Sources of Secondary Traumatic Stress



## Stress Buster: Managing Exposure to Trauma

- Being a Resource Parent will likely expose you to the trauma of the child(ren) that come into your life and you need to be the Emotional Container for them.
- It is important to manage what additional trauma inputs that you have and have awareness of how they may be impacting you.
- Think about what you are:
  - reading
  - watching (movies, tv shows, news etc.)
  - how you spend your time (what volunteer work or causes are you taking on)



## Cultural and Historical Trauma

Parenting children and working with families who have experienced discrimination, racism or have high levels of trauma and do not have equal access to culturally appropriate resources can bring additional challenges for resource parents. If you have experienced similar challenges this might be a trauma reminder for you, and if you have not it may make it more challenging for you to be empathetic to them.

Do you hold identities and experiences that are similar to those of your children in your care or not?

If you do share common identities and experiences as the children, how might that impact your ability to empathize with them and care for them?

If you don't share common identities and experiences as the children in your care, how does that impact your ability to empathize with them and care for them?

How might having similar or different identities to the children in your care impact you and your experience of secondary traumatic stress?

## Activity: Coping Cups



## Signs of and Reactions to General Stress

- ⊕ Irritability
- ⊕ Feeling frustrated
- ⊕ Feeling overwhelmed
- ⊕ Mood changes
- ⊕ Feeling like you are losing control
- ⊕ Having difficulty relaxing and quieting your mind

- ⊕ Feeling bad about yourself (low self-esteem)
- ⊕ Loneliness
- ⊕ Depression
- ⊕ Low energy
- ⊕ Not wanting to socialize
- ⊕ Physical symptoms

[https://www.medicinenet.com/stress\\_symptoms\\_and\\_signs/symptoms.htm](https://www.medicinenet.com/stress_symptoms_and_signs/symptoms.htm)



## Signs of and Reactions to Secondary Traumatic Stress

Thoughts and  
Feelings that Intrude  
on Daily Life

Avoiding  
Reminders of the  
Traumatic Events

Numbing Out  
and Feeling  
Nothing

Feeling Physically Upset,  
Irritable, Fearful and Reactive  
to People and Situations

Negative Changes in  
Ways a Person  
Feels and Thinks





## Thoughts and Feelings that Intrude on Daily Life

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- Nightmares
- Disturbing thoughts
- Replaying the trauma in your head like a movie
- Feeling reactions in your body
- Intense or bad feelings all of a sudden

## Avoiding Reminders of the Traumatic Events

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May avoid reminders of the traumatic event(s) such as:

- Thoughts
- Feelings
- Tastes, Smells, Sounds etc.
- People
- Places
- Situations
- Certain times of the day or year

## Numbing Out and Feeling Nothing

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- Daydreaming
- Appearing spacy or out of it
- Feeling as though you are in a dream or movie or like you are in a fog

## Feeling Physically Upset, Irritable, Fearful and Reactive to People and Situations

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- Irritable or aggressive behavior
- Often in a bad mood
- Self-destructive or reckless behavior
- Jumpiness or quick to startle
- Problems with concentration
- Difficulty Sleeping
- Feeling exhausted
- Having a racing heart

## Negative Changes in Ways a Person Feels and Thinks

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- Difficulty remembering parts of event
- Decreased interest in activities
- Not feeling connected to others
- Always thinking bad things will happen
- Feelings of blame toward oneself

## Stress Buster: Identifying Physical Reactions

Learning to identify physical reactions connected to the trauma exposure gives you the awareness needed to:

- recognize reactions
- respond to the reactions in healthy ways to help stay in your window of tolerance



Examples of physical reactions:

- tension in your body
- headaches
- stomachaches
- trouble sleeping
- changes in appetite/eating habits



## Stress Buster: Understanding and Expressing Feelings



- Being able to identify feelings that are a result of trauma exposure helps us to express them in healthy ways.
- We may have learned to avoid unpleasant feelings, but facing them and putting them into words takes away their power and helps us stay in our window of tolerance.
- When something is overwhelming:
  - learn to pay attention to what it is
  - what feeling it brings up
  - work to overcome it by
    - writing down feelings
    - identifying the safe people that you have to talk to (identify your emotional container)



## Activity: Your "Invisible Suitcase"

Write down 2-3 invisible suitcase thoughts about yourself as a caregiver for children who have experienced trauma.

Consider:

- Changes in how you view yourself
- Changes in how you view the world
- Changes in how you view others
- Changes in how you view being a caregiver



## Group Reflection - Repacking My Suitcase

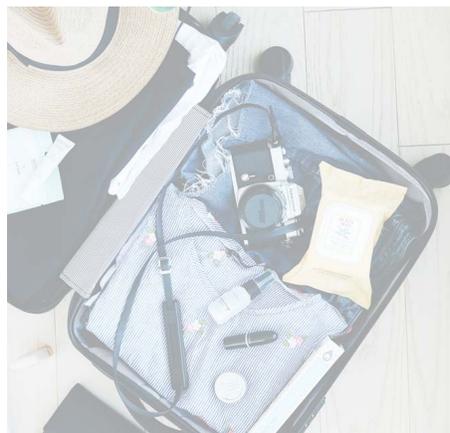
Cross out the invisible suitcase statement and replace it with one that is trauma-informed.

Consider these questions as a way to help guide you.

What strengths do I bring to handling really tough situations with my child?

What personal strengths do I bring to the table?

What are some ways that my expectations need to shift to match my current reality (expectations of myself, my child, or other people)?



## Stress Buster: What's My Story?

- Ask yourself: What's the story I'm telling myself?
- Without taking time to reflect and understand your story, your brain may keep reacting to reminders of the unresolved traumatic material which can take you out of your window of tolerance.
- Look for your go-to Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs) and try to reframe them






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The National Child  
Traumatic Stress Network



## Stress Buster: Support Systems

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Know who you can lean on to provide support when you are having trouble staying in your Window of Tolerance

May be different people for different stressors or for different needs

Professional Support




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## List of Stress Busters for Addressing Caregiver Stress and Wellness:

### Coping strategies for general stress

- What you can control (making changes to the situation itself)
- How you react in situations
- Healthy living (exercise, nutrition, sleep)
- Taking time for yourself/self-care (reading, going for a walk, spending time in nature etc.)

### Specific coping strategies for Secondary Traumatic Stress

- Engaging in Mindful Self-Awareness
- Managing Exposure to Trauma
- Identifying and Confronting Physical Reactions
- Understanding and Expressing Feelings
- Creating a Story that Helps you Make Sense of your Trauma Exposure
- Support Systems

<https://www.cbciences.com/about/8ccc/cognitive-flexibility/>





## Engaging in Mindful Self-Awareness

Being mindful is the basic human ability to be present, aware of where you are and what you are doing, and being able to be in your window of tolerance (not over or underreacting to what is going on around you). By paying attention or being self-aware, you can keep tabs on how you are being impacted by exposure to traumatic material, as well as recognizing the warning signs that you are moving out of your window of tolerance.

- Noticing that your body is tensing up and you are getting angry (hyperarousal)
- Noticing when you are feeling disconnected or numb (hypoarousal)
- Being aware when you are experiencing a trauma response

## Identifying and Confronting Physical Reactions

The overwhelming experiences of trauma exposure leave their mark in your mind and your body. Learning to identify physical reactions connected to the trauma exposure gives you the awareness needed to recognize, respond to, and alleviate those reactions.

- Be aware of: Tension in your body
  - Headaches
  - Stomachaches
  - Trouble Sleeping
  - Feeling overly fatigued
- Counteract by:
  - Getting enough sleep
  - Eating healthy
  - Taking time for yourself
  - Developing hobbies, activities outside of parenting
  - Exercising/physical movement

## Understanding and Expressing Feelings

Feelings fire very quickly in the brain, but they often take much longer to organize and process. Being able to identify feelings that are a result of trauma exposure helps us be able to express those feelings in healthy ways.

- Name your own experience surrounding the trauma exposure. For example, you can tell yourself that "I just heard upsetting details" or "I just read details about my child's abuse" and the exposure made me feel "disgusted, overwhelmed, angry" etc. Allowing yourself to respond to those feelings of disgust, overwhelm, and anger, navigating those feelings, and then bringing yourself back into your window of tolerance is a very powerful process!
- This kind of self-regulation can look like:
  - Having a good cry
  - Taking some deep breaths
  - Going for a walk
  - Talking with loved one, friend or another resource parent
  - Doing a grounding exercise.



### Engaging in Cognitive Flexibility (adapted from <https://www.c8sciences.com/about/8ccc/cognitive-flexibility>)

When you are exposed to your children's trauma, cognitive flexibility is the ability to change what you are thinking about, how you are thinking about it, and even what you think about it.

- Letting go of unhelpful thoughts to generate new ones.
- Learning to view the children in your care as capable, competent, and caring.
- Viewing yourself with that same lens- you are capable, competent and caring!
- Focus on the positive and have gratitude for what is going well.

### Creating a Story that Makes Sense of Your Traumatic Exposure

Traumatic exposure can fragment your memories and understanding of events. Overwhelming experiences can get paired with everyday experiences, such as the first-time riding in a car after a bad car wreck, or for your child, riding past a former home where they were hurt. Your brain wants to create a story to help make sense of your experiences, both positive and negative. Without this story, your brain may keep sending reminders of the unresolved traumatic material and cause you to continue to have trauma responses. Making sense of your experiences provides a powerful way to organize your thoughts and memories, stay mindfully aware, and maintain the type of cognitive flexibility and emotional expression needed to help make meaning out of the trauma exposure and those of the children in your care. It can be helpful to allow yourself to accept that the trauma event "was not okay" but to remind yourself that "I'm okay."

- Writing or journaling about the traumatic exposure and how you felt
- Spending time thinking about and making meaning of the experience
- Talking with a supportive person about how you think this event impacts you in your life today

### Formal Treatment

- Know when you might need more support than friends, family members or other parents can provide.
- It is okay to reach out for help and is a sign of strength.
- Being healthier as an individual will make you better able to provide the care that your children need.
- Look for a provider who has a background and understanding of trauma.
- It is important that this person is a good fit, you may need to try a few providers before you find one that meets your needs and that you feel comfortable with and that is okay.

## When – Any Recurring Event Can Serve as a Cue to Engage in a Micropractice

- Waiting at a red light
- Wait time on a call
- Before answering a call or email
- While brushing one’s teeth
- First thing in the morning or before bed
- Before picking kids up at school
- Before walking into the house



## What – Examples of Individual Micropractices

- Focus on one’s breath, center one’s mind and body, and visualize the kind of presence, empathy, and calmness one would like to bring to the next moment
- Self-connect—Am I well hydrated? Hungry? How do I feel physically? Am I carrying an unreasonable emotional or mental load?
- Taking a moment to name one’s emotions, especially challenging emotions. For example, when I notice that I am feeling upset, is it anger? Concern? Exhaustion? Such naming helps self-awareness and self-management.
- Writing down three things one is grateful for several times a week or taking a moment to acknowledge something you are grateful for
- During busy day – be aware of tension levels and say, “I just need a minute.” This simple phrase gives time to settle and then offer a more connecting response, rather than a reflexive reaction
- Diaphragmatic breathing – inhaling deeply by expanding the lungs downward rather than inhaling using the abdomen or rib cage alone. Inhaling is done through the nose, with a pause before exhaling slowly and completely through the mouth. Make the inhale shorter than exhale, such as in 4-7-8 breathing. (Count to 4 as you breathe in, hold for 7, 8 counts as you breathe out)
- Stretching – get up for a movement break
- Dancing – take a moment to dance to the music
- Look out a window and notice how the light is filtering through the trees or hitting the ground



## What – Examples of Group/Family Micropractices

- Extend gratitude practices into groups, such as starting a meal by sharing a positive can also help stimulate positive emotions and positive relationships among family members
- Pause before you begin a group activity and invite everyone to take 1-minute to focus attention on their breath, allowing the body and mind to settle and focus
- Dance or stretch together with your family
- Do some deep breathing together
- Write down things you are grateful for together



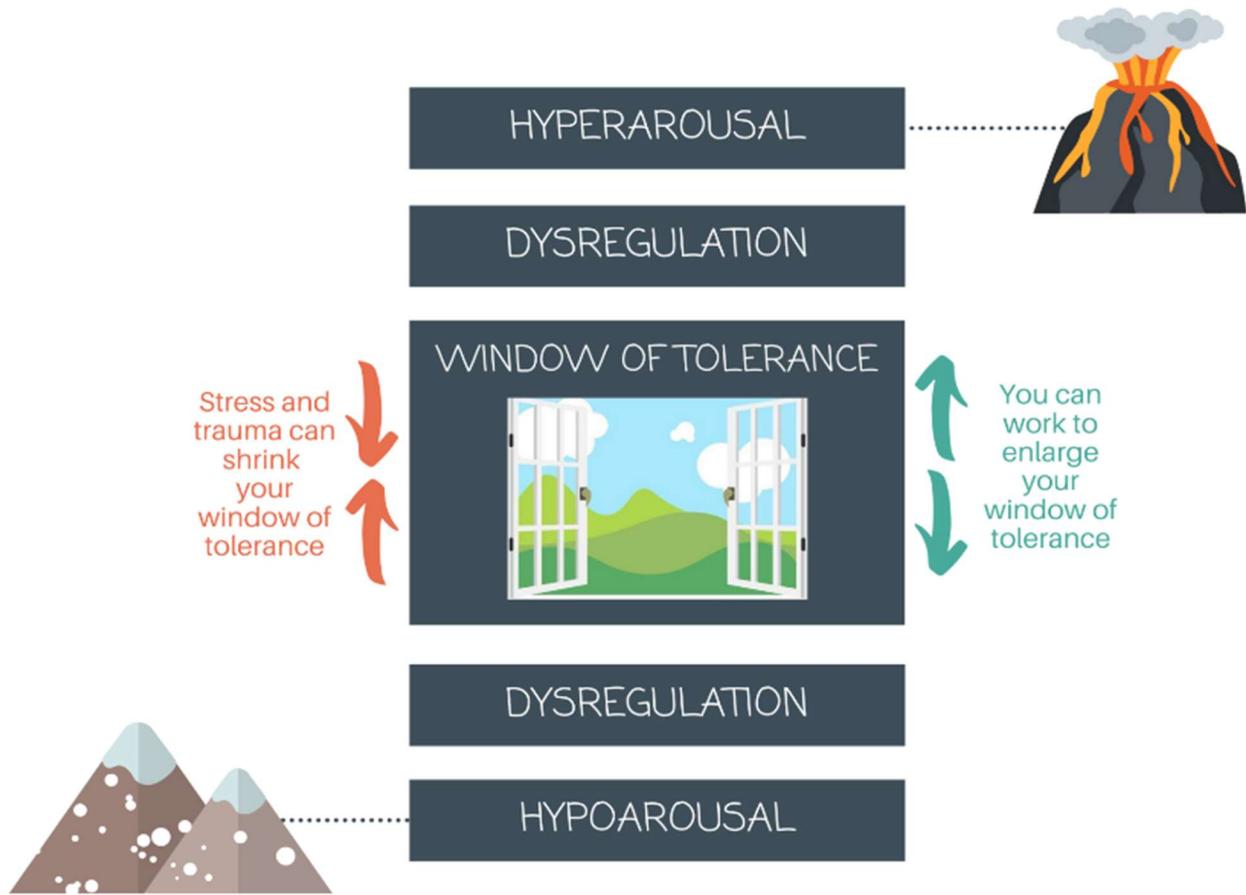
## Share Out

Share one thing you will do to widen your window of tolerance or to address the impact of trauma that you are committed to trying in this next week



- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) resources on Secondary Traumatic Stress includes fact sheets, articles, and self-care tips: <https://www.nctsn.org/trauma-informed-care/secondary-traumatic-stress/nctsn-resources>
- Phone Apps and other websites with information on mindfulness
  - Headspace [www.headspace.com](http://www.headspace.com)
  - Calm [www.calm.com](http://www.calm.com)
  - Insight Timer [www.insighttimer.com](http://www.insighttimer.com)
  - Mindfulness Coach [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/mindfulcoach\\_app.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/mindfulcoach_app.asp)
- PTSD Coach App: developed by the Veteran’s Affairs National Center for PTSD and the Department of Defense's DHA Connected Health: The PTSD Coach app can help you learn about and manage symptoms that often occur after trauma. Features include tools for screening and tracking your symptoms, convenient, easy-to-use tools to help you handle stress symptoms, and direct links to support and help. [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/ptsdcoach\\_app.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/ptsdcoach_app.asp)
- *Resource Parent Self-Care and Secondary Traumatic Stress*, article from 5/2015 in *Fostering Perspectives*: <https://fosteringperspectives.org/fpv19n2/STS.htm>
- *Vicarious Trauma + Self Care for Foster Parents*, blog article by Kindred + Co <https://kindredand.co/vicarious-trauma-self-care-foster-parents/>
- Secondary Traumatic Stress Solutions and Innovation Center (STS-ISC): This is the Center that created the Trauma, Stress and Caregiver Well-Being Training. They have other supports and resources for STS as well. <https://ctac.uky.edu/projects-and-programs/secondary-traumatic-stress-innovations-and-solutions-center-sts-isc>
- Three-Minute Breathing handout with Diana Tikasz from Tend Academy <https://www.tendacademy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Three-Minute-Breathing-Space-postcard-TEND-2020.pdf>
- Grounding Technique- Feet on the Floor video with Diana Tikasz from Tend Academy <https://www.tendacademy.ca/videos/>

# Action Plan #1 - Window of Tolerance



What are the triggers that might make your window even smaller?

What am I like when I am stressed, upset or overwhelmed:

What are my hyper arousal symptoms?

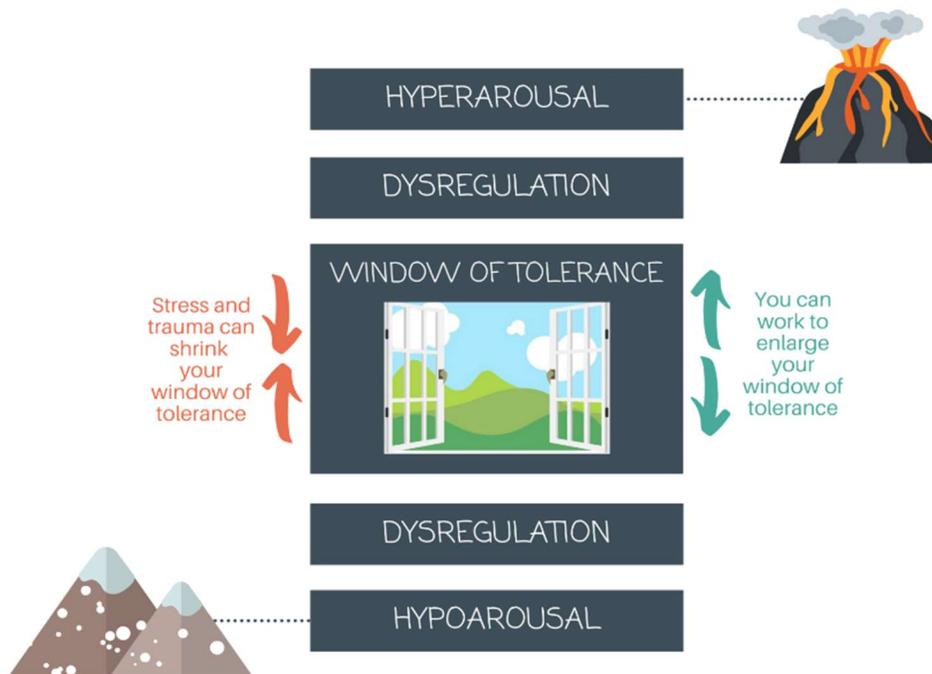
What are my hypo arousal symptoms?

## Action Plan #2 - Signs of, Reactions to, and Strengths around STS

These are the areas of secondary traumatic stress for me:

- Hearing traumatic stories
- Seeing traumatic material
- Experiencing trauma-related behaviors from child
- Having to share information on child's trauma with others
- Other (use the box below)

Describe any specific hyperarousal symptoms you experience related to secondary traumatic stress.



Describe any specific hypoarousal symptoms you experience related to secondary traumatic stress.



## **Action Plan #3 - Strategies to Cope with General Stress and STS**

**Strategies that I can use:**

...when I am not in my window of tolerance:

...to feel safe when my child is talking about trauma:

...to address my trauma reminders:

...to look positively to the future:

...to recognize my strengths and build on them (for example: having self-awareness, strong social support, support to develop parenting skills, skills to calm my stress response, feeling valued by others, being able to identify unhelpful thoughts and replace them with trauma-informed ones):



## **Action Plan #4 - My Support System**

This might be your current support system, or what you would like your support system to look like, or a combination of both!

**Name of Individual or Group**

**Role in My Life**  
(friend, family member, community resource, faith based, etc.)

**How They Support Me**  
(accountability partner, provide respite, help me find solutions etc.)

What are changes you can make to bolster or build up your support system?