



THE ENRICHMENT CENTER

Dysregulation in the Classroom: Students & Teachers

Today we will...

- Define & look at the neurological roots of dysregulation.
- Introduce the window of tolerance and how it impacts teachers and students.
- Identify effective ways to respond to dysregulation in the classroom.
- Address key ways to determine if you are working with dysregulation or a behavior/discipline issue.



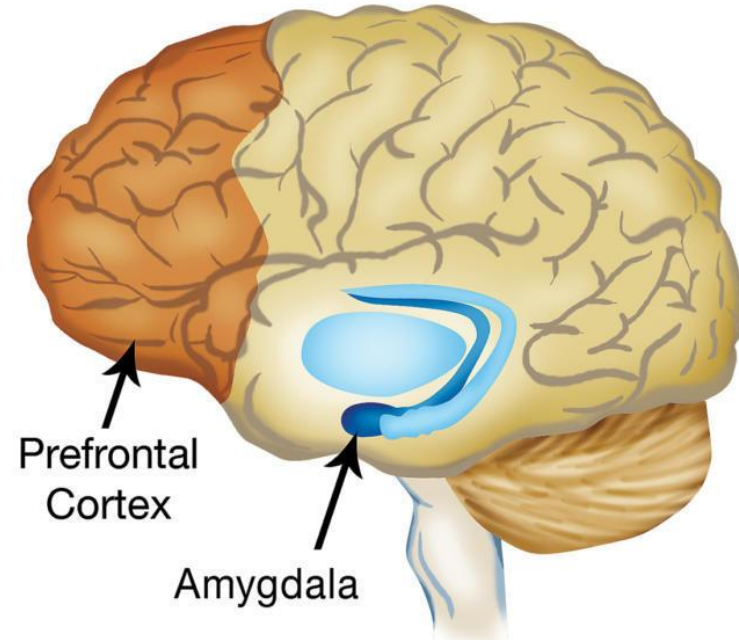
Defining Dysregulation

- A state marked by difficulty or an inability to manage emotions, behavior, and/or impulses.
- Dysregulation is not...
 - A fixed trait.
 - Always loud or obvious.
- Dysregulation is often rooted in trauma, stress, or unmet needs.

Neurological Roots

- The brain is wired for safety first, not logic.
- When the brain perceives danger (real or not) the limbic system takes over:
 1. Amygdala: scans for threat
 2. Pref. Cortex: goes “offline”
 3. Brainstem: drives automatic reactions
(fight, flight, freeze, or fawn)

Dysregulation = the brain reacting to a threat without access to calm, reasoning, or regulation.



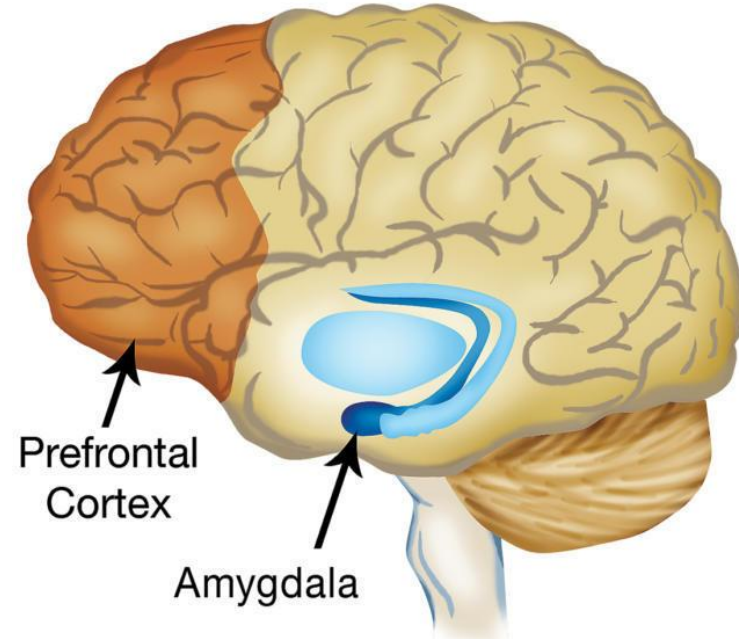
Neurological Roots

Autonomic Nervous System

- Sympathetic - accelerator (fight/flight)
- Parasympathetic - brake (freeze/shut down)

Trauma, chronic stress, unmet needs can cause the autonomic nervous system to become hypersensitive.

This can lead to a small window of tolerance...



Students

Fight

- Crumpling up assignments after a mistake
- Shouting “leave me alone!” when a teacher approaches
- Physical aggression

Flight

- Walking out of the classroom without permission
- Asking to go to the nurse, bathroom, etc. frequently
- Constantly fidgeting, pacing, etc.
- Saying things like “I don’t care”, “This is boring”, etc. to avoid trying

Freeze

- Not responding when called on
- Staring blankly or “zoning out”
- Not completing work or taking an extremely long time to start working
- Avoid eye contact

Fawn

- Excessive apologies
- Try to smooth over peer conflicts even when they are the one being hurt
- Constantly seek approval, “Am I doing this right?”
- Laugh off being teased or bullied

Teachers

Fight

- Using passive aggressive, criticizing or shaming language
- Over-correcting or punishing minor misbehaviors
- Losing patience quickly

Flight

- Ignoring or dismissing misbehavior to avoid confrontation
- Leaving the room or mentally checking out
- Constant busyness or overplanning to stay distracted

Freeze

- Mentally checking out during classroom chaos
- Going silent during difficult conversations with a student, parent, or colleague
- Difficulty or inability to make decisions

Fawn

- Minimizing your own needs
- Being overly accommodating to disruptive students to avoid pushback
- Taking on extra tasks or responsibilities to please admin/peers
- Having trouble saying “no” to requests, even when overextended
- Excessive apologies

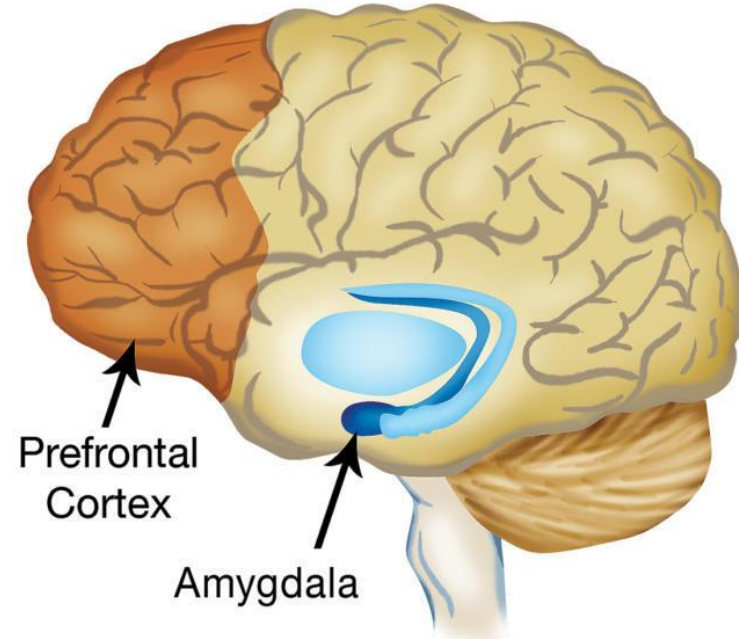
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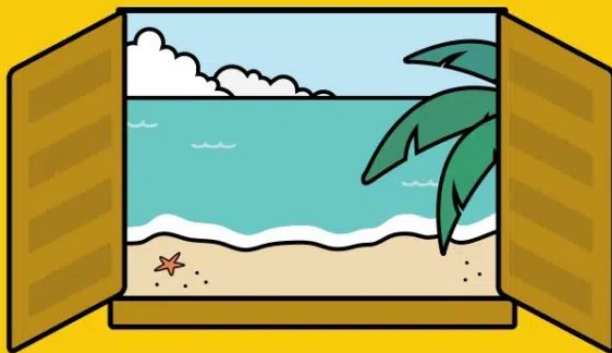




**What is The
Window of
Tolerance?**

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

This is where things feel just right, where you are best able to cope with the punches life throws at you. You're calm but not tired. You're alert but not anxious.

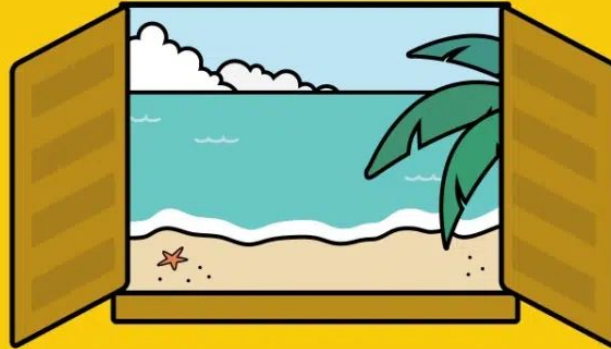


**Stress and Trauma
Can Shrink Your
Window of Tolerance.**

This means that it may be harder to stay calm and focused. When you're outside your window of tolerance, you may be more easily thrown off balance.

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HYPERAROUSAL

This is when you feel extremely anxious, angry, or even out of control. Unfamiliar or threatening feelings can overwhelm you, and you might want to fight or run away.



DYSREGULATION

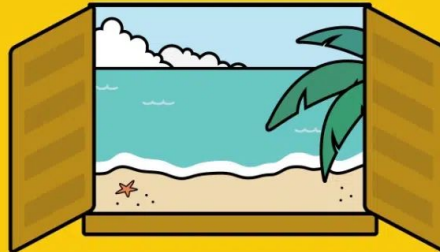
This is when you begin to feel agitated. You may feel anxious, revved up, or angry. You don't feel out of control, but you also don't feel comfortable.

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**Your Work with
Your Practitioner Can
Help to Enlarge Your
Window of Tolerance.**

They can help you stay calm, focused, and alert even when something happens that would usually throw you off balance.

Hyperarousal → Optimal

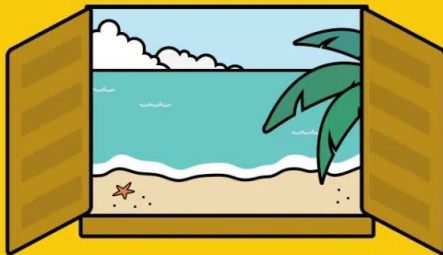
- Take a short break
- Deep breathing
- Grounding techniques (5-4-3-2-1 senses)
- Calming music
- Use humor or calm language
- Set small, manageable goals

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DYSREGULATION

This is when you begin to feel like you're shutting down. You may feel a little spacy, lose track of time, or start to feel sluggish. You don't feel out of control, but you also don't feel comfortable.

HYPOAROUSAL

This is when you feel extremely zoned out and numb, both emotionally and physically. Time can go missing. It might feel like you're completely frozen. It's not something you choose – your body takes over.



Hypoarousal → Optimal

- Movement - stretching, walking, jumping jacks, etc.
- Engage the senses - run hands under cold water, chew gum, listen to upbeat music
- Change environment - step outside, change lighting, change seating
- Partner/group work





How Can Teachers Effectively Respond to Dysregulated Students?

1. Regulate Yourself First

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- Were you just thrown out of your own window of tolerance?
- If so, pause before reacting.
 - Name how you feel: disrespected, angry, overwhelmed, fearful, etc.
 - Ground yourself (deep breathes, feet on the floor, hands on the desk, etc.)
 - Check your tone and lower your voice. Calm is often contagious.

2. Co-Regulate Before You Correct

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- Approach with calm, neutral body language.
 - Soften your face and eyes
 - Lower your voice and slow your pace
 - Sit or stand to the side
 - Offer space, but stay nearby
 - Use open hand gestures (avoid pointing or crossed arms)
- Use non-threatening, relational cues & offer choice when possible.
 - “Hey, I can see that this is a lot right now.”
 - “Would you like to take a quick break in the hall or sit here quietly?”
 - “Here is what I need from you right now _____. How can I help you get there?”
 - “We all have hard moments. Let’s take a minute to reset.”

3. Restore Connection & Address the Issue

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- Once the student has calmed down...
 - Engage in a supportive, private, follow up
 - Ask open-ended questions
 - Set boundaries on behavior
 - Work to establish a plan for the future
 - Provide options for when they feel like they are moving out of their window
- Prioritize connecting with the student when they are not dysregulated. This will help if/when they become dysregulated again. Their nervous system will be less likely to view you as a threat.

**How can I know if I am dealing
with dysregulation or a
behavior/discipline issue?**

Dysregulation or Behavior Problem: How to Tell the Difference

Dysregulation	Behavior/Discipline Problem
Rooted in stress, trauma, or nervous system overwhelm	Rooted in choice, habit, or disregard for rules
Behavior is reactive and emotional	Behavior is calculated, avoidant, or oppositional
Physical signs: red face, shallow breathing, tears, trembling, physical withdrawal	Typically, little or no signs of nervous system overwhelm or emotional flooding
No response to reasoning or consequences in the moment	May stop if there is a visible authority or clear consequence(s)

Key Questions for Teachers to Ask

1. What is the emotional tone of the behavior?
2. Is there a clear trigger or stressor?
3. Can the student reflect and respond logically?
4. How did the student respond after the moment passed?
5. Is their behavior consistent across environments?

* Sometimes both are true at once. A student may have learned to use misbehavior as a coping strategy when dysregulated. That's why regulation must come before discipline. *

To Close Out:

Connection is key.

1. Know your own window of tolerance. Don't ignore it.
 2. Co-regulate first, then address behavior.
 3. Focus on building relationships with students outside of those moments. This is key.
 4. Calm is contagious.
 5. Normalize mistakes and repair.
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THANK
YOU!