

Understanding Your Nervous System in Recovery

The Window of Tolerance

Your "window of tolerance" is the zone where you can handle life's stresses without becoming overwhelmed or shutting down. In recovery, this window is often narrower than usual.

Signs you're ABOVE your window (hyperarousal):

- Racing thoughts
- Anxiety, panic
- Irritability, anger
- Can't sit still
- Heart pounding

Signs you're BELOW your window (hypoarousal):

- Feeling numb or empty
- Brain fog
- Exhausted but wired
- Disconnected from your body
- Wanting to isolate

Why This Matters in Recovery

Years of substance use dysregulates your nervous system. Your brain learned to rely on external chemicals to manage stress. Now it's recalibrating.

This is why:

- Mornings feel harder (cortisol spike without alcohol's dampening)
- Small stresses feel bigger
- You might swing between anxiety and numbness
- Sleep is disrupted

Quick Regulation Techniques

To calm hyperarousal (anxiety, racing thoughts):

1. Slow exhale - breathe out longer than you breathe in (4 in, 6 out)
2. Cold water on face or wrists
3. Name 5 things you can see right now
4. Hum or sing (activates vagus nerve)

To lift hypoarousal (numbness, shutdown):

1. Splash cold water on face
2. Move your body - even just shaking hands
3. Strong taste (lemon, ginger)
4. Push against a wall for 30 seconds

The Good News

Your nervous system CAN heal. Neuroplasticity is real. Every time you use a healthy regulation technique instead of a substance, you're literally rewiring your brain.

Most people notice significant improvement in nervous system stability by 3-6 months of recovery. It gets easier.

When to Seek Help

If you're spending most of your time outside your window of tolerance, or if you're experiencing:

- Flashbacks or intrusive memories
- Persistent numbness
- Thoughts of self-harm

Please reach out to a trauma-informed therapist or your healthcare provider.