

# RESPONDING TO STUDENTS' TRAUMA REACTIONS



Foundation  
House

The Victorian Foundation  
for Survivors of Torture Inc.

# RESPONDING TO STUDENTS' TRAUMA REACTIONS

Anticipating and sensitively responding to students' trauma reactions supports their recovery from traumatic refugee experiences.

## WHAT ARE TRAUMA REACTIONS?

Children and young people of refugee backgrounds are likely to experience trauma reactions when they are overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety and fear that were associated with prior experiences of danger.

Trauma reactions occur when the body's alarm system is 'triggered'.

**Common triggers at school** may include:

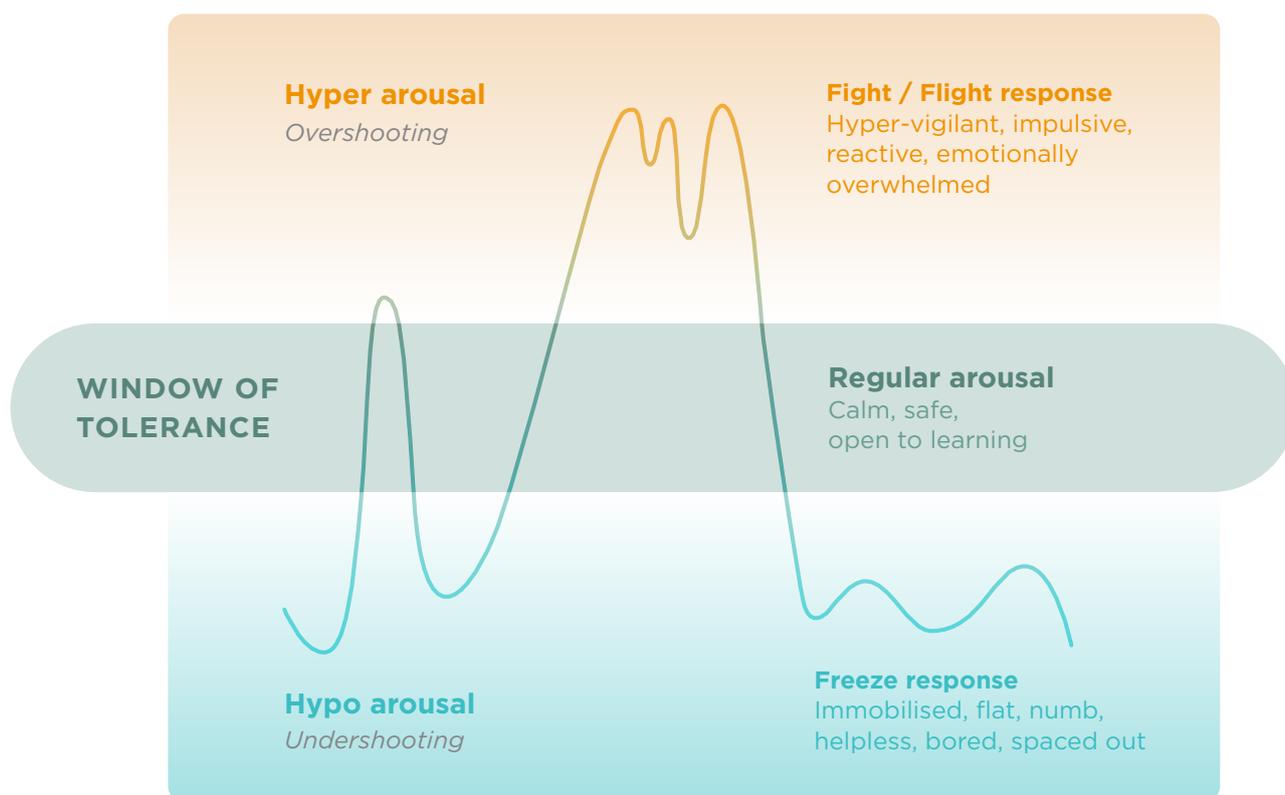
- » Unexplained changes in routine
- » Adult strangers entering the classroom
- » Authoritarian and threatening behaviour (even when unconscious or unintended)
- » Confined spaces
- » Sudden loud noises
- » People in uniforms
- » Particular smells and/or sights which remind students of the past
- » Feeling excluded by peers or peer disagreements
- » Mental exhaustion/frustration with self or the task
- » Experiences of racism or injustice



## THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE: AN APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' TRAUMA REACTIONS

The '**window of tolerance**' (a framework developed by Dan Siegel) is a conceptual tool which can assist us to apply a trauma informed lens when responding to student behaviours. It represents the optimal zone where we feel physiologically, emotionally and socially regulated, with connection between body and mind.

It is the state in which we can best learn, connect, play, be present and self-soothe. When we are within our window, our internal voice is quiet, and we can tolerate challenges and problem solve.



Window of tolerance model, adapted from the work of Dan Siegel

In the instance of danger, it is an automatic survival response for our nervous system to go into either a **hyper aroused (fight/flight)** or **hypo aroused (freeze)** state for safety. However, for individuals with a protracted history of refugee trauma, the body can continue to detect warning signs of danger and respond in this pattern, even though it is no longer required in their current context.

This is where the mind and body become disconnected. In the classroom, this can present as what we refer to as '**overshooting**' or '**undershooting**' the 'window'.

While everyone's 'window' expands and contracts over time, students who have survived traumatic refugee events may spend more time outside of their window, which may have become more narrow and less flexible as a result of these experiences.

## STUDENTS WHO **OVERSHOOT (HYPER AROUSAL)**

### *What is happening for the student?*

- Sympathetic nervous system activates
- Sudden rush of adrenaline and cortisol
- Emotional dysregulation
- Overwhelmed
- Heart racing
- Stress
- Anxiety
- Rage
- Anger

### *What might you observe?*

- Restlessness
- Hyperactivity
- Struggling to concentrate
- Hypervigilant
- Difficulty articulating what's wrong
- Stomach complaints
- Regularly needing a drink or toilet break
- Wide eyes
- Making themselves appear physically bigger

## STUDENTS WHO **UNDERSHOOT (HYPO AROUSAL)**

### *What is happening for the student?*

- Parasympathetic nervous system activates
- Depressed
- Withdrawn
- Disengaged
- Feelings of shame or guilt
- Slowed heart rate
- Lost in time and space, dissociated from their body 'in their head'
- Not forming memories (learning is impacted)

### *What might you observe?*

- Slumped
- Trying to appear smaller
- Looking out the window or staring blankly at the floor
- Looking bored/staring into space
- Startled and confused response

These students will often quickly move through the hyper arousal state and into hypo arousal as their experience has taught them that this is their safest option when confronted with that trigger.

While they do not draw attention in the classroom, appearing subdued, they may be extremely dysregulated, fearful and in need of help.



## WHAT CAN YOU DO TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WHO ARE OVERSHOOTING OR UNDERSHOOTING THEIR WINDOW OF TOLERANCE?

When the student has returned to a regulated state (back in their window): listen, help them understand and then unpack what has happened. This is a more appropriate time to discuss consequences and how to move forward.

Over time, with our patience and compassion, students can develop their awareness and learn to self-regulate more often, expanding their window of tolerance.

Assist student with strategies to **'down regulate'**:

- break/safe space
- walking
- drinking
- breathing techniques

**Avoid questioning and consequences.**

Seek out a **trusted person.**

**Overshooting**  
(hyper aroused)

**Undershooting**  
(hypo aroused)

Assist students with strategies to **'up regulate'**:

- get them into their bodies and the surrounds
- standing
- stretching
- jumping
- tapping or squeezing body parts
- name things in the environment using the senses (what can you hear, see etc.)
- sensory toys
- drink/splash water on face
- balancing games

**Regulate yourself:** be aware you are the student's anchor and it is important you don't become hypo or hyper aroused with them.

**Pace and lead them up or down as needed (co-regulate)** by mirroring and then role-modelling the return to regulation.

**Relate and connect** with the student.

**Teach** students an age-appropriate version of the Window of Tolerance.

**Seek to understand** what works for them.

### EMERGENCY SITUATION

If you think a student may be at risk of harming themselves or others, immediate action is needed. Follow your school's emergency protocol.

### WHEN DO STUDENTS REQUIRE A REFERRAL?

Not all students of refugee backgrounds exhibiting trauma reactions require a referral to Foundation House.

Where problems are persistent and severely disrupt the student's capacity to participate and learn, a [referral to Foundation House](#) may be necessary.

Always follow your school's processes around referral, e.g. speaking with your school's wellbeing coordinator or school leadership before making a referral.

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