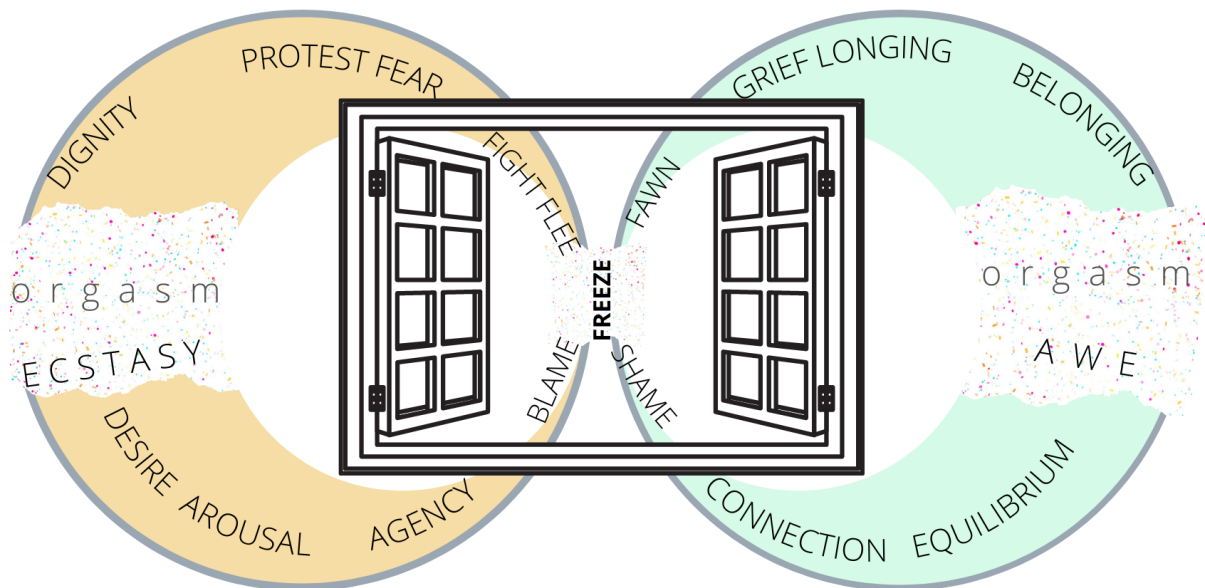


The Neural “Window of Intolerance”

by Caffyn Jesse



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The “Window of Tolerance” is a teaching about the nervous system that was first developed by Pat Ogden and Dan Siegel. It is widely used in therapy. We each have a neural “window of tolerance” where social engagement is easeful. We feel safe, and know we belong. I have found this a useful concept for my teaching and practice, where I emphasize the benefits of exploring our personal neural learning zones. When learning feels uncomfortable, but not unsafe, we are growing our nervous system and expanding our “Window of Tolerance”. When we are in the “danger zone” of hyperarousal or hypoarousal, we are managing danger, reacting to threat. Our neuroendocrine system weaves with our thinking mind; thoughts are often “intolerant”. We may feel rageful or fearful (sympathetic dominance) eager to please and repair, fawning or or dissociated (parasympathetic dominance).

A rhythm of life that integrates brave forays into our neural learning zones helps us grow capacities. But trauma and neglect can overwhelm us. We go deep into the most contracted parts of our nervous system when we are overwhelmed with too much too fast, or neglected with too little too long. Trauma and neglect literally, biophysically harm us. A neuroendocrine feedback loop can get established. We become habitually hypervigilant, seeing danger and threat where there is simply challenge. Or we become habitually dissociated, and do not adequately attend to real dangers. Or we cycle between hypervigilance and dissociation, making enemies of potential friends and not defending against real enemies. Within us, neuroendocrine imbalances make us less and less resilient and courageous. Driven by a fear-based feedback loop, we co-create an evermore dangerous world.

I want conflicts where we use all the parts of our nervous systems, not just the intolerant parts. How do we hold on to diverse possibilities for connection and differentiation, and hold each other with a commitment to love and belonging, if people only know to weaponize emotions, collapse and appease, or blame and punish? We need a map to guide us, when

we are scared, lost and disoriented in a conflict. Conflict around the erotic triggers deep wounds, at both intimate and large-scale social levels. We who have some skills in cultivating safe-enough, exciting-enough ecstatic engagement have something important to contribute to understanding how the arousal of conflict can be generative.

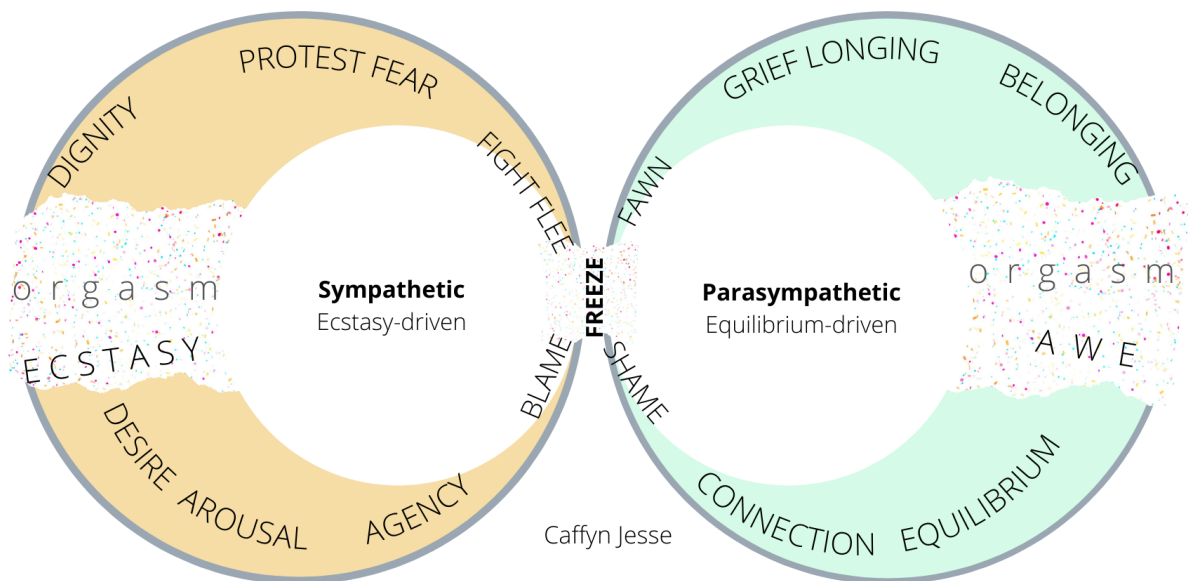
Step one in a conflict could be following the impulse to find support, but instead of looking for help from someone who escalates conflict by taking sides and mobilizing more righteous indignation, find someone who can hear our stories of blame or shame, as a cry for attachment. If people can hold us in our nervous system arousal, lovingly, through a process of listening to high-intensity complaints - without getting drawn into either fixing or denying the conflict - we can often feel resourced enough to move out of our neural window of intolerance and into our window of tolerance. We can reconnect with who and how we want to be. Once we are outside of our neural window of intolerance, we have choices and capacity for effective social engagement. With the help of allies who affirm and anchor our belonging, we can access the full spectrum of our nervous system. We have access to easeful, tolerant aspects of our nervous system, and also more challenging aspects..The neural learning zone is available when we are uncomfortable but not unsafe. In the presence of danger, we contract into our neural “Window of Intolerance”.

Our neural “Window of Intolerance” leaves us with a limited palette of powerful, important options. But we can get stuck there. Without a relational matrix to support us, we will likely find it difficult or impossible to move past the strategies for threat management that are available to us in this neural window. We reach for connection and agency with shame and blame.

Beloved community is not just a dream that exists out there, ahead and apart from us. It is an emergent property of relationships that support the maturing of courage in each one of us. We need space and guidance, so we can practice. We need to make mistakes. We need to get triggered and challenged. We can cultivate a cauldron where we engage in ritual experiences of trauma, so we gradually gain embodied capacity to have courage enough to die with dignity, in the service of what we care about. We cannot do this alone. Individual trauma only becomes meaningful instead of demeaning (literally, physiologically) when we learn to pass through all the body’s most powerful, reactive energies in a relational matrix that wants and needs our courage, and can coach and celebrate it. We can be part of communities and movement spaces that support us in finding developmentally appropriate learning to be courageous, as we face our greatest fears.

We can learn to die courageously, and simultaneously co-create a world where we can fully live - the world that whiteness and colonial, patriarchal cultures would deny us. We need patient, developmentally appropriate learning, and safe-enough relational contexts, so we can learn how to expand from neuroendocrine equilibrium to exploring intensity and ecstasy. In a relational matrix that makes ecstasy matter, we can support the imagining and experiencing of transformative justice, erotic generosity and radical kindness. We are not limited to righting wrongs in the existing system, as passionately as we do demand this. As we learn to welcome and cultivate embodied experiences of the ecstatic, the transpersonal and the interconnected, we are empowered to design and live new paradigms. It’s no accident that our bodies, sexualities, intimacies and erotic pleasures have been so

thoroughly colonized; they are so rigorously regulated. The erotic is a powerful cauldron, where we can cook neuroendocrine capacity for transformative change.



Growing our worst fears into courage, and our greatest needs into longings, requires a relational matrix where we can learn. We need to be held as we navigate the most contracted parts of our neuroendocrine system, far from equilibrium, so we meet our terrifying fears, and feel the residual effects of all our lonely traumas, without having the neural contraction only demean or diminish us. We need a relational matrix that supports us in navigating the most expanded parts of our nervous system, far from equilibrium, to fully access awe and ecstasy. What might we become, if we co-create a relational world where we longer need to be so tolerant, nor desperately make ourselves tolerable, nor create separation instead of courageously engaging in conflicts and connections that challenge us?

With practice and support, we can learn to integrate intolerance into a powerful medicine. As Audre Lorde guides in her essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House":

"Advocating the mere tolerance of difference ... is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must not merely be tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening."

Neural learning windows can be re-opened in adults by radical neurochemical shifts amplifying serotonin, and other feelgood neurochemistry, when we are held in safe and empowering interactions and contexts - like those we cultivate in somatic sex education, and psychedelic psychotherapy, and those processes we could be cultivating in generative conflict. We can re-awaken neural plasticity and create conditions where baked-in neural wiring can melt, and begin to be reconfigured in new shapes.