

Introduction I: General Strategies for Coping with Stress and Crisis

Hi! My name is Ellen Jepsen. This video presentation is an introduction to regulatory techniques, with a special focus on containment and grounding. Supplementary short videos have been prepared with specific suggestions and ideas for containment and grounding, which can be helpful when you need to 'find a safe foothold in the present moment', not least in difficult times characterized by uncertainty and insecurity!

Given that I am holding this presentation in English, I will be using a manuscript, which means that I may have to look down along the way. I hope this will not cause too much distraction for you!

You may stop the video at any time, not least when you feel first signs of losing focus and concentration. Take time to ground and refocus before you continue.

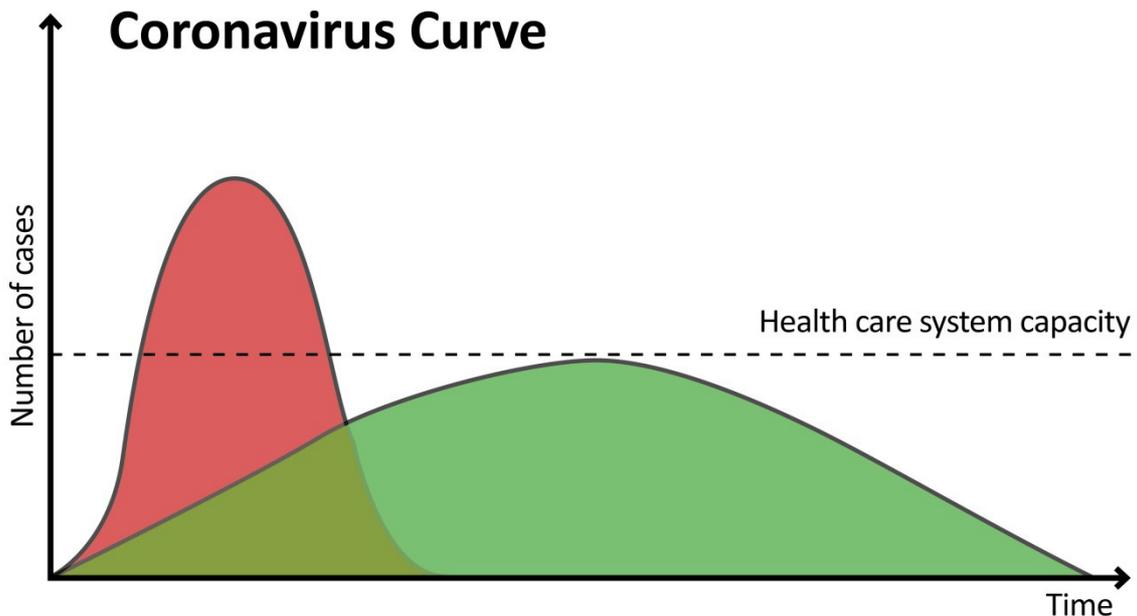
During the pandemic, we all share the experiences of living with far-reaching consequences as a result of the restrictions we have been imposed: limitations in daily life, social distancing, isolation, job layoffs, financial challenges, to name a few. At other times, this is far less a collective experience and rather the experience of selected groups in society. Many traumatized people are familiar with a day-to-day life with significant limitations in their daily life as a result of the traumas. For many traumatized people, the sharing of the experience of a life with many restrictions for most may be a new experience. As a woman put it: 'These days I hear about the despair and insecurity that many people experience. It makes it easier for me to accept my own isolation now. Knowing that I'm not alone in being in involuntary isolation makes me feel a bit stronger and more able to cope with the situation.' - But having said that, there is no doubt that all the uncertainty and unpredictability associated with the epidemic is an added burden for everyone where the mind and body were previously stretched, as is the case for traumatized individuals. The pandemic can be an additional reason to have resources available when you need it, i.e., having the "tools" to help yourself through crises and difficult times with the least devastating consequences.

Are there any common overarching principles for dealing with crises - be it a global pandemic or a crises as experienced by traumatized individuals? Are there any parallels between the strategies that the government has chosen to deal with the corona pandemic and the strategies recommended in trauma therapy for traumatized people overwhelmed by flashback, devastating emotions, impulses, and dissociation?

Window of tolerance:

Most people have probably heard about the corona-virus curve lately and many about the window of tolerance in therapy. Let's revisit both of them here.

Here we have the *corona-virus curve*:



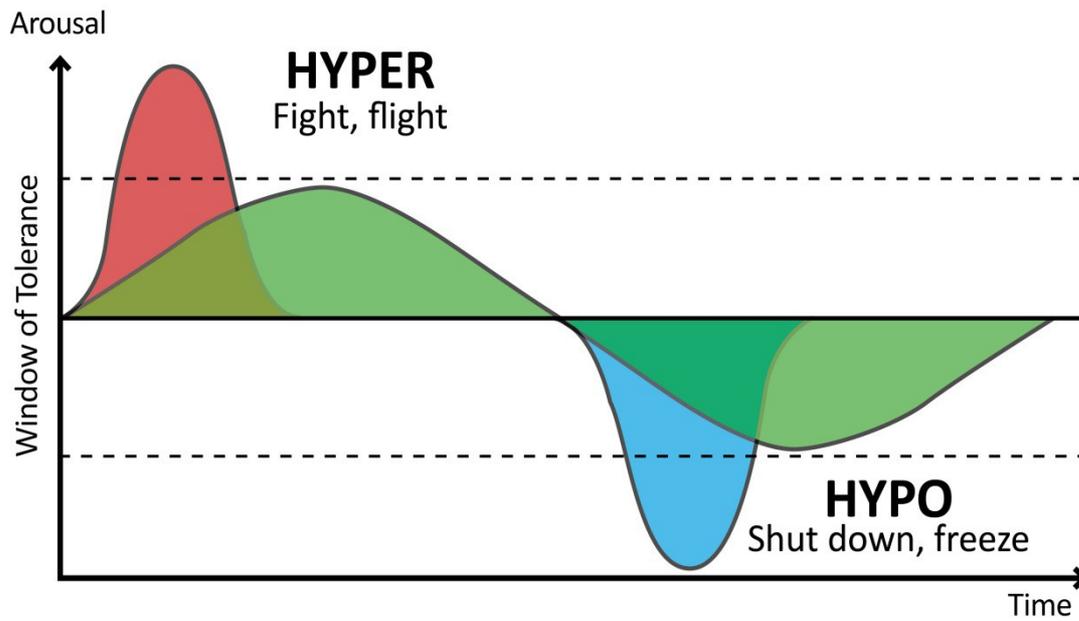
The horizontal black dashed line shows how many patients requiring help the health care system can help at any time. When the number of sick people is below the line, the health care system can cope with the challenge. When the number of sick people is above the line, the health care system is unable to do so. If the pandemic spreads without regulatory strategies, this result in the red curve, with overload and collapse of the health care system, and many patients will not receive the help they need. We can say that the red curve has its “peak” outside the healthcare system's ‘window of tolerance’, and we have seen how devastating this has been in many countries.

Many of you have heard about the ‘window of tolerance’ in the context of trauma therapy: It is the zone of physical activation that is optimal for each of us, where we are able to pay attention to others, concentrate, absorb and integrate new information, learn, reflect, respond in adaptive ways to events in everyday life without excessive costs.

If you have been exposed to trauma, your window of tolerance is likely to become narrower. The trauma has taught the brain that the world is uncertain and unpredictable, and one can

withstand little stress before being overwhelmed. In particular, one becomes sensitive to triggers that evoke memories of the traumas.

Here is a figure that shows *the window of tolerance* in a slightly different way than you probably are used to:



If a trigger awakens bad memories that require more mental capacity to cope with than you have then and there, and you fail to regulate the affects, you may as a result - before you notice it and without you wanting to – exit your window of tolerance: where you 1) either follow the red curve upwards to its peak in a state of hyper-arousal; you are so to speak "taken over" by fight or flight, or alternatively you 2) follow the blue curve downwards until it has its “peak” in a state of hypo-arousal; you are so to speak "taken over" by freeze, immobilization, and dissociation. The goal in treatment is to flatten the curve, to avoid the peaks outside the window of tolerance, to have the flatter green curve.

The window of tolerance is not a ‘static size’, it may change along the way. For example, the line of the health care capacity may sink, as the capacity may decrease during periods because health care workers have become ill or are in quarantine, or it may go upwards as new resources are added. The same goes for trauma therapy. If you are tired, the window of tolerance is narrower than when you are refreshed. In addition to aiming at flattening the curve and avoid the devastating peaks, it is a goal to expand the capacity to deal with the loads and stress you face while slowly and safely expanding your daily life activities.

Just as the authorities at all times assess the capacity of the health care system as well as level of load on the health system, it is an important focus in a trauma therapy to assess one's own mental capacity and the level of stress we are exposed to.

The window of tolerance is individual, no two persons have the same window, no two respond to the exact same triggers and to the same degree. An important issue is getting to know and becoming familiar with your own window of tolerance. You may spend some time to get to know it, become familiar with it: How do you feel, sense and experience yourself when being within the window of tolerance? How is the experience of being "present here and now"? If you do not have an answer now, it is perfectly fine. That is precisely why we have it as a focus in therapy. For some it is easier in the beginning to describe what it's like to be at the limits or outside the window of tolerance?

Register, measure, and evaluate:

Another common principle when it comes to strategy for stress and crises – be it the pandemic or crises related to dysregulation because of trauma - is at all times to closely monitor the development. The authorities are closely monitoring the development of the pandemic at all times: with tests to measure the spread of the virus, the burden at all times on the health care system, etc.? And - further, when it goes well, i.e., the development follows the green curve that even may be declining, yes, then it is time try to carefully open up the restrictions. If we open up and remove the restrictions and regulatory measures prematurely, there is likely to be a new outbreak, a new "peak" with devastating consequences.

It is also important to register and note the degree of activation you have at the present moment in order to be able to capture any development towards the limits of the window of tolerance. Just as the authorities are closely monitoring the spread of the pandemic, it is important focus in therapy on healing from trauma: Where am I now in the present moment in relation to my window of tolerance?

What are the first signs, i.e., warning signals indicating that you have started to move towards the limits of your window of tolerance? - Some people say that the first sign is that they cannot perceive what is being said, or that the senses - for example, sight and hearing change or become distorted, or that the surroundings become distant, unreal, foggy, and one has the experience of being detached from themselves and their surroundings. You can use a scale of 1-10 to record how much you feel present, grounded, and connected to the here and now. This

scaling can be helpful to record where you are in your window of tolerance and the development.

Early intervention:

The principle of EARLY intervention is another basic principle that the authorities have to cope with the pandemic. If the corona curve shows signs that the crisis is moving towards new outbreaks and "peaks, they do not wait to respond with regulatory interventions. The authorities are closely monitoring developments at all times. The principle of early intervention also applies to trauma therapy, and is highly recommended. As soon as the warning signals appear, it is wise to use regulatory techniques and skills.

Regulatory skills and techniques:

Flattening of the corona-curve relies on mitigation techniques administered by the authorities, to lead society and people through the pandemic with least possible devastating consequences. Such mitigation techniques include restrictions like social distancing, reframed in the motto: 'Stay home - stay safe!', hand wash, etc.

The regulatory skills and techniques recommended for traumatized individuals to build early in therapy have exactly the same purpose: to flatten the curve of arousal and activation, so that it stays within your window of tolerance, and you avoid psychological overload and collapse. You may call them 'mitigation techniques' in a psychological context of trauma treatment.

Many traumatized people are used to a daily life with significant limitations and restrictions in terms of life, e.g., in relation to family, education, job, socially - all of which are strategies to avoid being overwhelmed by unsafe emotions and unhealthy behaviors related to the traumas. The costs are often high - with a lot of unwanted loneliness and sadness. By building and practicing regulatory skills it is possible to gradually, step by step, to cope and avoid destructive "peaks" outside of the window of tolerance, and to expand the capacity to tolerate stress in daily life.

Having said all this, it is good to listen to another advice given by authorities around the world during the corona-pandemic: "Don't panic - but be careful!" You may take this advice with you as a general principle in trauma-treatment as well. We can be confident that if we act carefully and acknowledge, respect and follow the advices and recommended strategies, with time and practice, such procedure will lead to competence and mastery!

We now come to a central theme in any trauma therapy: the *building* of regulatory skills that one can use when activation is underway. Everyone has to build his or her own effective techniques and skills that are specific for that person. Such individual skills will help expand your window of tolerance, increase your ability to withstand "stress" without being overwhelmed or dissociating. Gradually you will be able to expand your life radius, and take your life back.

Before we move on, you can stop and reflect on what is already there: What strategies do you already know of that are helpful to you in difficult times? Strategies, that help you ground yourself, and connect to the present moment? Strategies, that help you avoid the destructive "peaks" of your arousal curve? It might be a good idea to write them down: Which ones do you already know about? - and in what situations can they help?

Good luck! Thank you!

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