

# **SELF - CARE**

**A RESOURCE FOR THOSE  
WORKING WITH SURVIVORS  
OF TRAUMATIC REFUGEE  
EXPERIENCES**



**Foundation  
House**

The Victorian Foundation  
for Survivors of Torture Inc.

# SELF - CARE; A RESOURCE FOR THOSE WORKING WITH SURVIVORS OF TRAUMATIC REFUGEE EXPERIENCES

## UNDERSTANDING OUR OWN REACTIONS

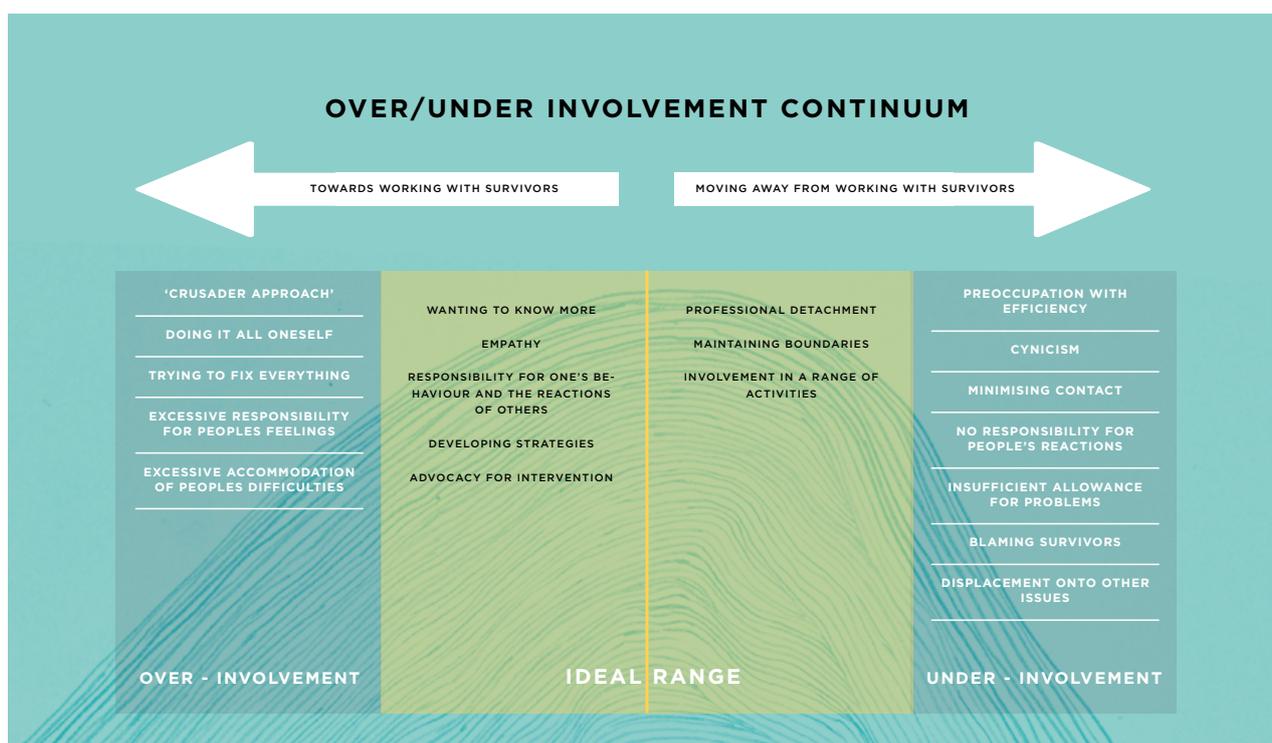
Working with trauma survivors can bring about a range of emotional responses. Anger, helplessness and guilt may be common emotions experienced by all people who work with survivors of traumatic refugee experiences.

When we experience a strong emotion, it is normal to have a reaction. This might include moving towards or away from what is making us feel this way.

These emotions and reactions have flow on effects for the people we work with and systems we work in.

In seeking to provide high quality, effective support for the people we work with it must be a **priority** to look after our own wellbeing too. Having an awareness of both proactive and responsive strategies can help us to sustain our practice and minimise risk of burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma.

The continuum below was developed by FH for people working with survivors of refugee experiences. It supports understanding of workers' reactions and encourages personal reflection of what helps and does not help workers, which in turn supports refugee communities.



## AN EXPLANATION OF THE CONTINUUM

A strong emotion like guilt may lead us to become **overinvolved** – to try to fix everything, do it all ourselves, take full responsibility. However this of course has an impact on us as workers, leading to us feeling overwhelmed, like we are doing it all on our own. It also leads the children and family to be in a position where they may not be empowered to do things for themselves, practice what they are already good at, learn a new skill or develop a network of other supports.

A feeling of helplessness may lead us to behave in an **under involved** way; we may stop contacting a family as often as we should be or blame families for their circumstances.

**We will all fluctuate** along the continuum; pressure from external factors may push us momentarily to the overinvolved side. It is when we are “stuck” in being overinvolved or under that we need to use our strategies or seek help as this is likely to be unhelpful to both survivors and workers.

Our aim should be to sit in the **ideal range**, in the green part of the continuum. We want to remain curious, know more, have empathy as well as maintain our boundaries and a work/ life balance. We want to be able to be in control of our own responses; because this is what children and families who have experienced trauma need for their sense of safety and development.

**So how might we do this?** This of course requires some self-awareness, self-care, and support at an organisational level.

## WORKPLACE AND SYSTEMS AND STRATEGIES

A **whole of organisation** approach to sustainable practice has benefits for everyone involved. It can reduce feelings of shame or guilt around seeking help and encourage prevention and early intervention, leading to stronger outcomes for all.

**Employee Assistance Programs** (EAP) provide free, confidential counselling support for workers. Your Occupational Health and Safety leader is responsible for making the service known to staff. The EAP provider for each organisation is different and it is important that the contact details are available. If you are not aware of how to contact the provider for your workplace EAP, your organisation’s website or intranet, OHS, HR or leadership will be able to help you to access it.

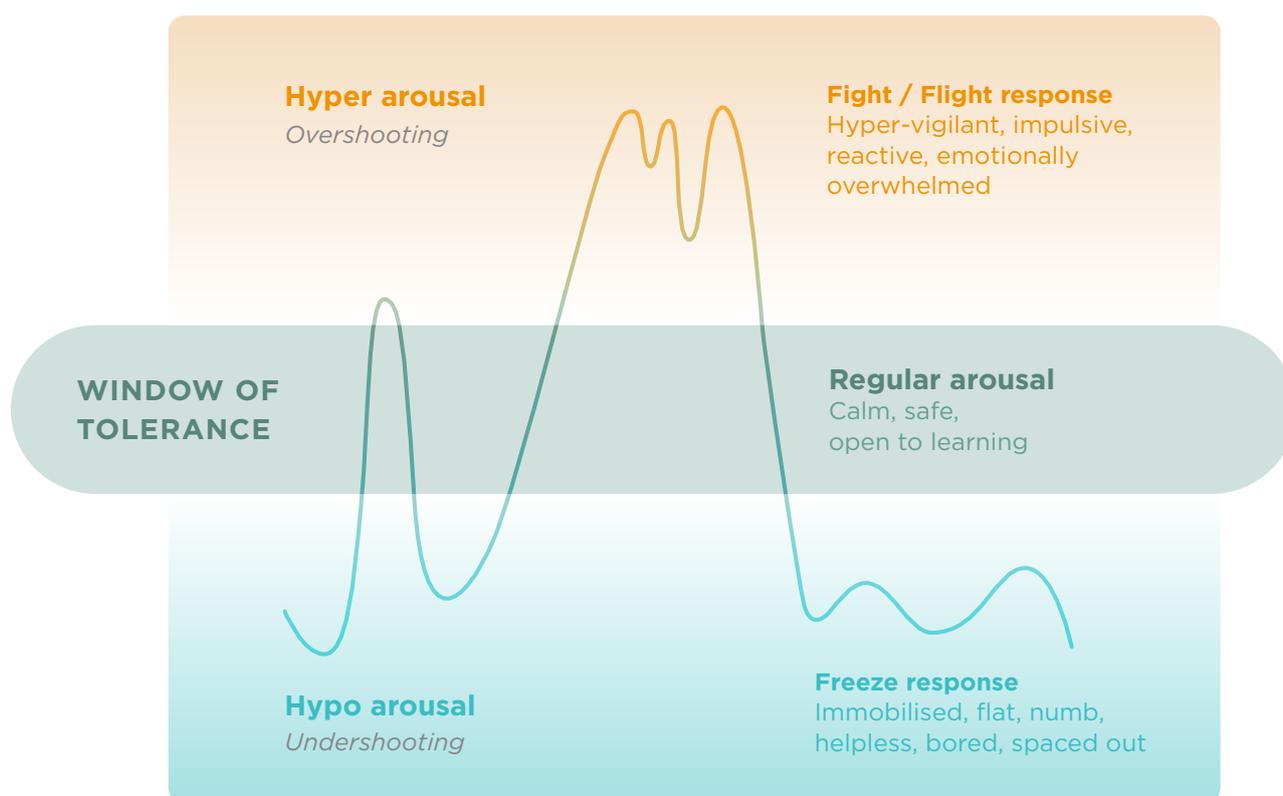
Another way that some organisations provide support for workers is through access to **supervision**, a formally structured program of reflective practice, debriefing, professional support and learning which might be done individually or in small groups. Regular supervision can be useful in both preventing risk to workers and managing issues after they occur, providing a space to work through challenges so they don’t become overwhelming.

A less formal way some organisations might support workers is through a **debrief** upon request with a **buddy system** or nominated go-to person in the organisation. To keep everyone safe, it is important that your service actively develops a support plan for staff so that there is a shared understanding of protocols, expectations and outcomes.

## THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE; A USEFUL WAY TO CONCEPTUALISE OUR OWN REACTIONS AND THE REACTIONS OF OTHERS

When adults are aware of their own emotional responses, they can help children and young people to regulate. The **'window of tolerance'** (a framework developed by Dan Siegel) is a tool which can assist us to apply a trauma informed lens. 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, engage, 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 physical or psychological danger (or perceived 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.

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

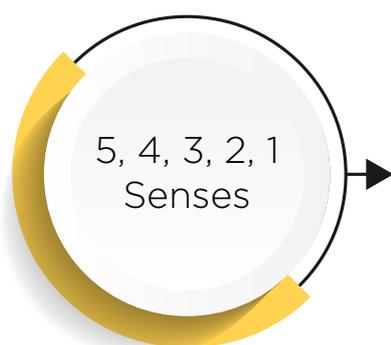
While everyone's 'window' expands and contracts over time, people working with those impacted by trauma may notice that they begin to spend more time outside of their window, which may have become more narrow and less flexible as a result of these experiences.

**This might be particularly true for workers who:**

- » have their own lived experiences of trauma
- » are experiencing stress outside of work impacting on their level of tolerance

## PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR REGULATION

There are many strategies which help to ground and centre us. You can find ideas by researching **mindfulness activities** or **somatic practices**. These can be utilised as part of a preventative routine or in the moment to assist with feelings of dysregulation. At times, it may be useful to employ these as a group, as an individual or even with children and young people. Here are some of our favourites:

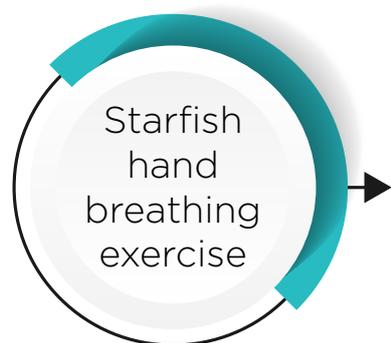


### 5, 3, 2, 1 SENSES

Imagine your body is an **anchor dropping into the ocean**, except you are planting yourself into the **here and now**.

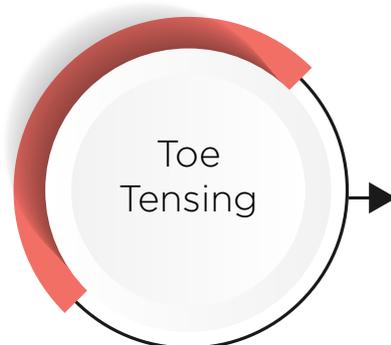
Name and describe:

- 5 things you can **see**
- 4 things you can **feel**
- 3 things you can **hear**
- 2 things you can **smell** and
- 1 thing you can **taste**.



### STARFISH HAND BREATHING EXERCISE

1. Close your eyes and breathe deeply.
2. Spread your fingers out like a starfish on one hand.
3. Take your finger from the other hand and trace around your fingers and hand, continuing to breathe mindfully as you follow the shape of your fingers up and down.
4. Continue until you feel relaxed and calm. As you do this, concentrate on only how it feels and let other thoughts float away.



### TOE TENSING

Toe tensing **draws tension** down from the rest of your body. This simple exercise should be repeated ten times.

1. Lie on your back or sit at your desk and allow yourself to sense your toes.
2. Use your toe muscles to pull all ten toes in the direction of your face and hold to the count of ten.
3. Relax your toes and hold to the count of ten.

*References: Kaplan, I Rebuilding Shattered Lives 2nd Edition 2020*

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