

RESONANT EMPATHY & WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

The left hemisphere of the brain handles moderate amounts of emotion. The right hemisphere takes over when stronger emotions are activated. Resonant empathy helps us regulate moderate and strong emotions so we can remain self-connected, instead of getting overwhelmed by emotions or dissociating from them.

Resonant empathy is empathy that connects with the right hemisphere and includes a tone of voice and body language that resonate with the receiver of the empathy. When it comes to communication, the left hemisphere makes sense of words and the right hemisphere makes sense of body language and tone of voice, as well things like metaphors and images.

When empathizing with someone, if you are within your window of tolerance for the emotions being expressed, then resonance will likely come easily and naturally with your words: tenderness and warmth and soothing sounds in your voice when there is sadness for the other; aliveness and exuberance in your voice when there is excitement and celebration for the other; intensity in your voice when there is anger for the other; and so on. With this resonance, the amygdala in the right hemisphere gets the sense of being understood that it needs to process the emotions and calm.

If resonance is not included with your words, it is likely a sign that you have gone outside of your window of tolerance, either because implicit memories are stimulated for you or because you don't have the energy or time to offer resonant empathy in that moment, or both.

Shifting from empathy to non-empathic responses like advice, educating, sympathy, humour, and so on, may be a sign that you are leaving your window of tolerance for the emotions expressed. When we leave our window of tolerance we either get overwhelmed with our own emotions, or we dissociate, escape to the left hemisphere and try to fix the situation and shift emotions to a more comfortable state. When we've left or are leaving our window of tolerance, we need empathy.

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Whether it's anger or sadness or joy or excitement or any kind of emotion, if there is more intensity of emotion than the right hemisphere can regulate, then the amygdala in the right hemisphere will shift the vagus nerve (aka vagal nerve) from Social Engagement toward Fight/Flight or Freeze. Social Engagement is the ventral pathway of the vagus nerve. Fight/Flight is the central pathway of the vagus nerve. Freeze is the dorsal pathway of the vagus nerve.

Our amygdala gets activated or triggered to varying degrees. If our amygdala is mildly or moderately triggered, then we are partly in Social Engagement and partly in Fight/Flight or Freeze, probably oscillating between the pathways of the vagus nerve. When our amygdala is mildly or moderately activated, we still have some access to the prefrontal cortex and its regulating/soothing capacity. The more activated the amygdala gets, the more we go into Fight/Flight or Freeze and the less access we have to the middle prefrontal cortex.

When we go toward Fight/Flight or Freeze, we need empathy and regulation/soothing of the amygdala. The more resonant empathy we get, the wider our window of tolerance for bigger or more intense emotions and experiences, allowing us to stay more present with intensity of emotion instead of going into fight/flight or freeze.