THE WINDOW OF SELF-CARE

BY: EMILY BEEBE (SHE/HER)
Self-care can be our window to healing.

It is the window that floods the dark room with light, when we gather the strength to open the blinds. 

It is the window that once unlatched, allows for supportive people to reach in and hold our hand.

It is the window that we can trace our fingers along, feeling the cool, smooth glass that grounds us to the here and now.

Self-care is crucial to our mental health and is essential to the healing of trauma. Trauma can be a global pandemic, a sexual assault, domestic violence, or something consistent and relentless like oppression of identity through racism, ableism, heteronormativity, etc. These traumas can severely impact our mental and physical health. In all of these cases self-care can play a role (along with other formal supports) in our healing and regulation. Practicing self-care rarely comes naturally. We may have been told to put others’ needs before our own, to “man-up”, that taking time away from our children is selfish, that we aren’t worth taking care of, or maybe we were not taught how to engage in self-care. Whatever the reason is, I hope you are inspired to get curious about your current self-care routine...or lack thereof. Practicing self-care is not just a tool for regulation and healing, it is also deeply entangled with the concept of self-love. When you choose to practice self-care, you are declaring that you are worth nourishing.

EVERY. SINGLE. ONE. OF. US. IS. WORTH. NOURISHING.
YOU ARE WORTH NOURISHING.
When I refer to self-care, I am referring to any activity that nourishes you. Using this definition, self-care can be found in so many things. Self-care can be drinking water, brushing your teeth, going for a walk, dancing, talking to a supportive friend, taking a mental health day off of work, getting a massage, knitting, spiritual meditation, reaching out to a therapist, and so much more.

There is a concept that I use to show the tangible ways in which we can utilize self-care to help regulate ourselves. It is known as the “Window of Tolerance” (Ogden, et al. (2006); Siegel, 1999). The window of tolerance is a concept that centers around the three emotional/physical/cognitive/behavioral states of being that we can operate from: hyper-arousal, hypo-arousal, and regulation (also known as, our window of tolerance). To help break this down, I want you to be able to visualize what I am talking about. I used one of my favorite self-care activities, painting, to create this visual for you. This is what the bare bones of a typical window of tolerance diagram looks like.
Within our window of tolerance we are regulated. Typically in this state we are emotionally regulated, physically connected to our body, cognitively present/rational, and behaviorally able to engage in meaningful relationships.

In a state of hyper-arousal we are dysregulated and experiencing an extremely high (hyper) amount of physiological activation (arousal). This might mean we are emotionally anxious or angry, physically experiencing an increased heart rate or hot skin, cognitively having obsessive thoughts, or behaviorally impulsive.

In a state of hypo-arousal we are dysregulated and experiencing an extremely low (hypo) amount of physiological activation (arousal). This might mean we are emotionally depressed or unable to identify any emotion, physically numb or experiencing a decreased heart rate, cognitively zoned out, or behaviorally isolating ourselves.

The arrow on the left side represents the spectrum on which our state of being can fall. It ranges from the highest point of hyper-arousal to the lowest point of hypo-arousal, with our window of tolerance falling in the middle. It is possible (and NORMAL!) to function in any of the three states: hyper-arousal, window of tolerance, and hypo-arousal.
While I have given you the cookie cutter version of the window of tolerance, I want to make something clear: our window of tolerances are not the same. What determines the type and amount of stress it takes for us to slip out of our window of tolerance into either a state of hypo-arousal or hyper-arousal (or bouncing back and forth) depends on a number of factors. These are factors such as how we were raised, the resources we have access to, the intricate parts of our identities, and the types of trauma or stress we have survived. When we experience and remember trauma, our window of tolerance closes and it becomes more difficult to remain regulated. We often find ourselves in a hypo-aroused or hyper-aroused state, confused as to how we got there. When we are within our window we have a connected brain that allows us to think and feel together. When we are outside of our window our thinking and feeling brain become disconnected and we operate out of survival mode (fight, flight, freeze, or comply). This makes returning to our window of tolerance extremely challenging.

Practicing self-care is one of the ways in which we can open our window, making it easier to stay within it. If I am well rested and have practiced deep breathing, I am better prepared to handle a person pushing past me in line at the grocery store. I am not claiming that practicing self-care means you will never again experience hypo-arousal or hyper-arousal. If a dinosaur came crashing through the grocery store, for most people, no amount of sleep, yoga, or arts and crafts would stop you from complete and utter dysregulation. What I am claiming is that practicing self-care can help you push open your window to better manage the load of life and can have a healthy impact on your mental health and healing of trauma.

Whether your window is cracking, covered in dust, or stuck shut; it’s never too late to open the blinds, unlatch your window, and feel the smooth glass. You deserve to be within your window of tolerance; self-care can help you do that.
References:
