



THE EMOTIONAL ANCHOR

MODULE 2

FOR PRACTITIONERS WORKING WITH PEOPLE WITH FLIGHT EXPERIENCE

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Authors

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THE EMOTIONAL ANCHOR



Emotional Intelligence

Emotional awareness

Self-regulation

This module explores Emotional Intelligence (EI) as a fundamental survival and adaptation tool for people with a refugee experience. In the context of forced displacement, emotional regulation is often compromised by prolonged stress and survival instincts. This section equips practitioners with a trauma-informed framework to support refugees in recognising, understanding and managing their emotional responses. By fostering emotional awareness and self-regulation, the module helps individuals move from reactive patterns to more conscious and adaptive behaviours, ultimately strengthening their resilience, wellbeing and capacity for social and professional integration.

This module is grounded in *Goleman's* Emotional Intelligence (EI) framework, adapted through a trauma-informed care perspective to respond to the specific realities of refugees. In contexts of forced displacement, EI should not be understood merely as a set of interpersonal competences, but as **a core survival and adaptation mechanism.**

Refugees often face prolonged uncertainty, loss, and exposure to traumatic events, which directly impact their ability to regulate emotions, make decisions, and engage with new environments. Therefore, this module prioritises the development of **self-awareness and self-regulation** as foundational capacities for resilience and integration.

Goleman's model identifies five components of EI: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. However, trauma can disrupt these capacities, particularly the ability to recognise and manage emotional states. For this reason, the module focuses first on helping individuals **identify internal experiences** and gradually build strategies to respond rather than react. This shift—from automatic reaction to conscious regulation—is essential in high-stress integration scenarios such as administrative procedures, job interviews, or social interactions.

STRESS AND WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

To understand these emotional responses, it is necessary to explore the functioning of the **nervous system under stress**. People with refugee experience often operate within survival modes due to past and ongoing experiences of threat. These responses are not pathological but **adaptive mechanisms** that have become chronically activated. A key concept here is the **Window of Tolerance**, which refers to the optimal zone of emotional arousal where individuals can think clearly, process information, and respond effectively. Within this window, people are able to learn, communicate, and engage socially.

However, many people with refugee experience frequently function outside this window. In states of **hyper-arousal**, individuals may experience anxiety, anger, irritability, and hypervigilance. These reactions are often triggered by situations that involve uncertainty or perceived authority, such as interactions with institutions.

Conversely, in states of **hypo-arousal**, individuals may feel numb, disconnected, or withdrawn. This response typically occurs when the system becomes overwhelmed and shifts into a protective shutdown mode. Recognising these states allows practitioners to reinterpret behaviours not as resistance or lack of motivation, but as **physiological responses to stress**.



How Trauma Can Affect Your Window Of Tolerance

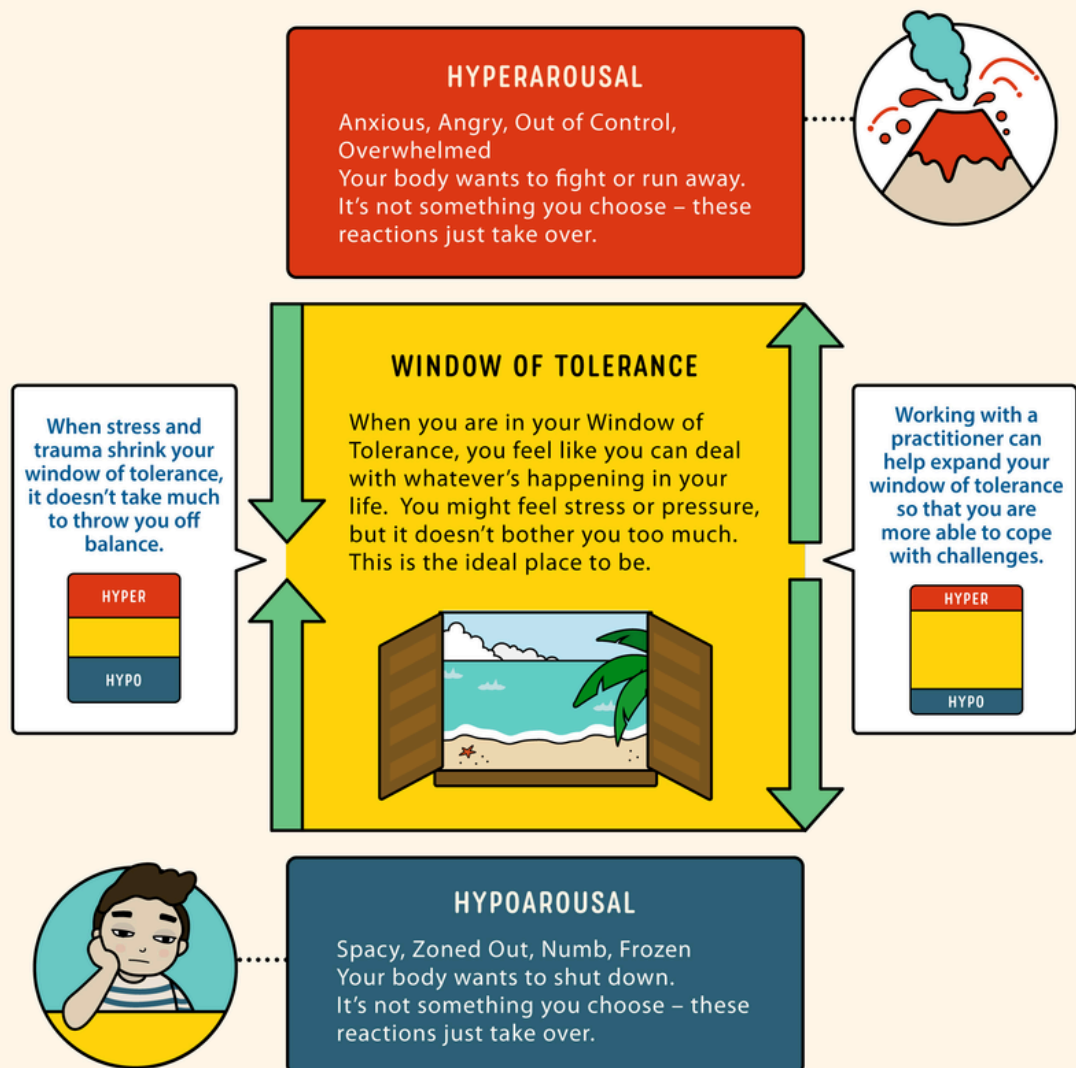


Photo Source: The National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine
from <https://mentalhealthcenterkids.com/blogs/articles/window-of-tolerance>

nicabm
www.nicabm.com

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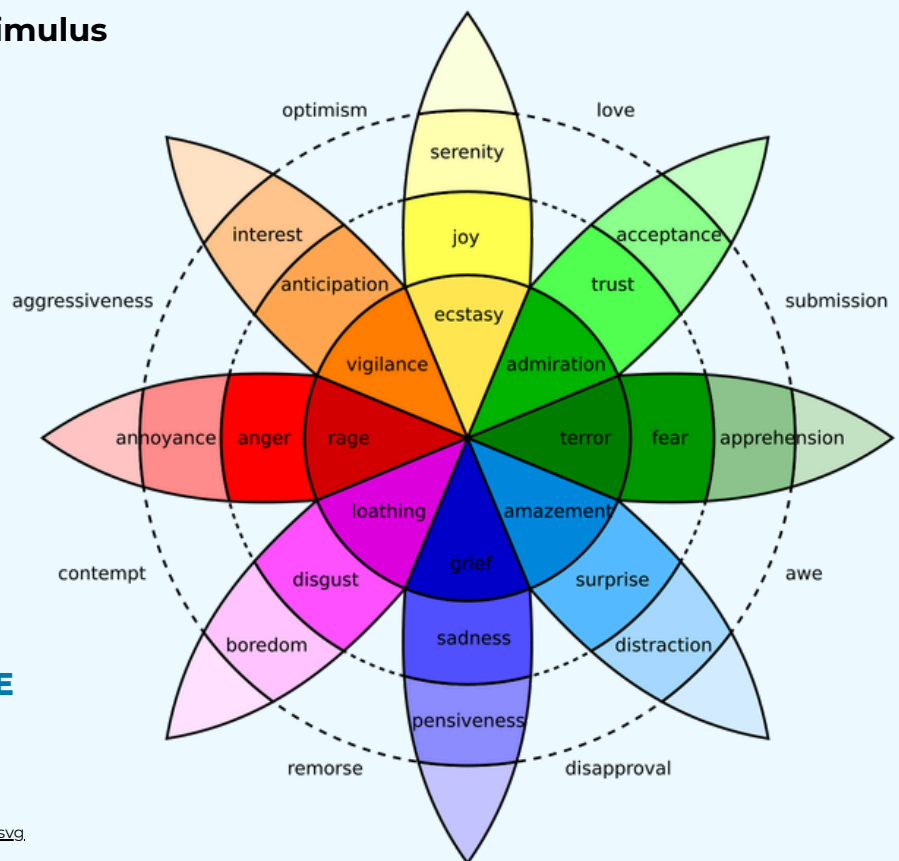
Closely linked to this is the concept of the **Amygdala Hijack**, which describes how the brain's threat detection system can override rational thinking. The amygdala, responsible for processing fear and danger, reacts rapidly to perceived threats, often before the individual is consciously aware of what is happening. In such moments, the prefrontal cortex—responsible for reasoning and decision-making—is temporarily less active.

For people with refugee experience, everyday situations such as receiving official documents or facing bureaucratic delays can trigger this response, as they may unconsciously resemble past experiences of danger or loss of control. During an amygdala hijack, reactions tend to be immediate and intense, including anger, panic, or withdrawal.

The goal of EI in this context is not to suppress these reactions but to **create a pause between stimulus and response**.

One of the most effective tools to achieve this is **Affective Labeling**, which involves identifying and naming the emotion being experienced.

Neuroscientific research shows that labeling emotions reduces amygdala activation and increases activity in brain areas associated with regulation. In simple terms, when individuals can say “I feel anxious” or “I feel helpless,” they begin to regain a sense of control over their internal state.



WHEEL OF TOLERANCE

Wheel of Tolerance
from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Plutchik-wheel.svg>

For people with refugee experience, this process can be particularly challenging due to language barriers and cultural differences in emotional expression. Practitioners therefore play a key role in facilitating emotional literacy, using simple vocabulary, **visual tools such as emotion wheels**, and connections to physical sensations. For instance, a person who initially describes feeling “angry” may discover underlying emotions such as fear or uncertainty. This differentiation is essential, as it allows for more appropriate and effective coping strategies.



VALIDATION OF FEELINGS

Another central principle is **emotional validation**. People with refugee experience frequently experience complex emotions such as grief, anger, guilt, and despair, which are sometimes misunderstood or minimised. From a trauma-informed perspective, these emotions should be seen as **functional responses to extreme circumstances**, rather than as signs of dysfunction. Grief reflects the loss of home, identity, and social networks; anger may signal a need for dignity or justice; fear is a natural response to uncertainty; and emotional numbness can serve as a protective mechanism against overwhelming pain.

Validation involves acknowledging the legitimacy of these emotional experiences without judgment. This does not mean agreeing with all behaviours, but rather recognising that the emotional response makes sense given the person's history. For practitioners, this requires active listening, empathy, and the ability to reflect emotions back to the individual. By reducing shame and fostering trust, validation creates the conditions necessary for emotional regulation and growth.

Building on these concepts, the idea of moving from **reactive states to regulated responses** is here introduced. Regulation does not mean eliminating emotions, but developing the capacity to experience them without becoming overwhelmed. This is where the concept of the **Emotional Anchor** becomes particularly relevant. An emotional anchor refers to any strategy or resource that helps an individual return to a state of balance. These may include breathing techniques, grounding exercises focused on sensory awareness, or internal self-regulation statements.

Samir experiences intense anxiety before job interviews, often leading him to cancel at the last minute. By using the Emotional Compass, he identifies fear linked to past failure and uncertainty. Practitioners support him in reframing these emotions and developing an emotional anchor (breathing and self-affirmation). As a result, Samir attends interviews with greater confidence and improved emotional regulation.

SUPPORTIVE PRACTITIONERS

Practitioners are encouraged to support individuals in identifying and practising these anchors, especially in preparation for stressful situations. Over time, these tools can help expand the individual's Window of Tolerance, allowing them to remain present and engaged even in challenging contexts. This process is gradual and requires repetition, but it is fundamental for long-term resilience.

It is also important to consider the role of **cultural context** in emotional expression and regulation. Emotional norms vary widely across cultures, influencing how individuals interpret and communicate their feelings. Some cultures may discourage open emotional expression, while others may emphasise collective emotional experiences. Therefore, EI training must be culturally sensitive and adaptable, avoiding the imposition of a single model of emotional expression. Practitioners should instead work collaboratively with participants to ensure that the tools provided are meaningful and applicable within their cultural framework.

Within this approach, the role of the practitioner is that of a **facilitator rather than a therapist**. Their task is to create a safe and predictable environment, model emotional awareness and regulation, and guide individuals in developing their own strategies. The relationship itself becomes a key element of the process, as a consistent and empathetic presence can help restore a sense of safety that is often disrupted by trauma.

Finally, this theoretical framework connects directly with the practical tools presented in the module, such as the Emotional Compass and the STOP technique. These tools operationalise the core components of EI: **identifying emotions, understanding their meaning, and choosing a regulated response**.

By integrating neuroscience, emotional intelligence, and trauma-informed care, the module provides a holistic and accessible approach to supporting people with refugee experience.

In conclusion, this theory promotes a shift from viewing refugees through a deficit-based lens to recognising their adaptive capacities and potential for growth. Emotional Intelligence becomes not only a skill but a pathway to rebuilding agency, dignity, and connection in the context of displacement.



2 THE EMOTIONAL ANCHOR

Road to Resilience

ACTIVITY 'EMOTIONAL COMPASS'

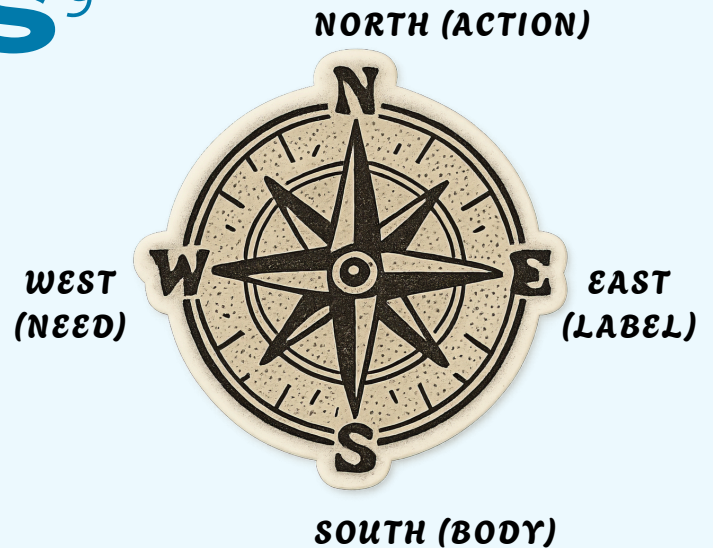
PURPOSE

01.

The Emotional Compass is a practical tool that practitioners can use both as a training exercise in safe, low-stress environments and as an intervention during high-stress situations.

Practicing the method in calm moments helps individuals—including people with refugee experience—internalize the steps, making it easier to apply under pressure (e.g., during interviews, appointments, or social interactions). It combines body awareness, emotional labeling, needs identification, and action planning.

To understand the activity in depth practitioners are invited to do the activity themselves regardless their own emotional situation.



CREATE A SAFE AND FOCUSED SPACE

02.

Invite the participant to pause and take a moment of stillness. Encourage slow breathing to bring attention to the present moment. This helps reduce immediate reactivity and prepares the individual for reflection.

IDENTIFY PHYSICAL SENSATIONS (SOUTH – BODY)

03.



Ask the participant to notice what is happening in their body. Guide them with simple questions:

- Where do you feel tension?
- Is your heart beating fast?
- Is your breathing shallow or deep?

This step builds awareness of the connection between body and emotions.

ACTIVITY

‘EMOTIONAL COMPASS’

LABEL THE EMOTION (EAST – LABEL)

04.



Support the participant in naming the emotion linked to those sensations. Use an **emotion wheel** or simple vocabulary if needed. Encourage specificity:

- Instead of “bad,” is it fear, frustration, sadness or shame?

This step activates cognitive processing and reduces emotional intensity.

IDENTIFY THE UNDERLYING NEED (WEST – NEED)

05.



Explore what the emotion is signalling. Guide the participant to reflect:

- What do you need right now?
- Is it safety, clarity, respect, or support?

This helps reframe emotions as meaningful signals rather than problems.

CHOOSE A REGULATING ACTION (NORTH – ACTION)

06.



Help the participant select a simple, achievable action to regain control. This may include:

- Applying the STOP technique (Stop, Take a breath, Observe, Proceed)
- Deep breathing or grounding
- A self-regulation statement (e.g., “I am safe, I can handle this”)

REFLECTION AFTER THE SITUATION

07.

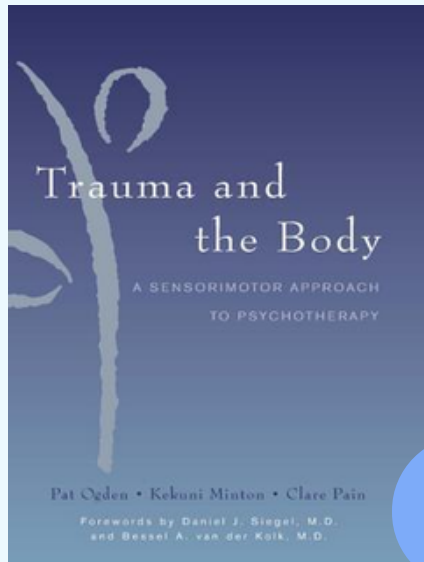


After the experience, invite the participant to reflect:

- Did naming the emotion change its intensity?
- What worked well?
- What could be done differently next time?

This final step reinforces learning and promotes continuous improvement. Encourage the participant to use the Emotional Compass regularly, especially before stressful events. Repetition strengthens emotional awareness and builds long-term regulation skills.

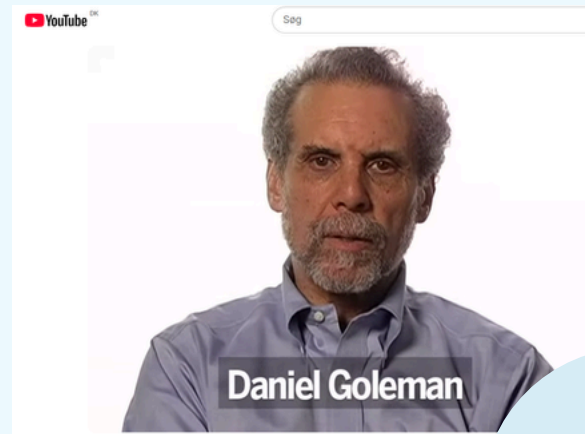
GET INSPIRED



BOOK

by Kekuni Minton, Pat Ogden and Clare Pain

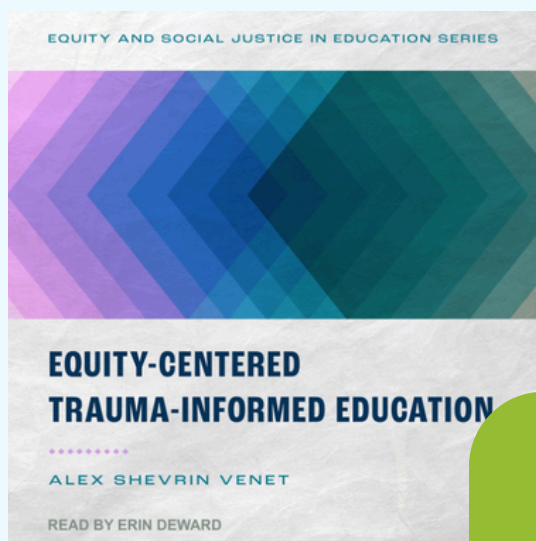
A detailed review of research in neuroscience, trauma, dissociation, and attachment theory that points to the need for an integrative mind-body approach to trauma



VIDEO

Daniel Goleman

"The Power of Emotional Intelligence" – Daniel Goleman
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7m9eNoB3NU>



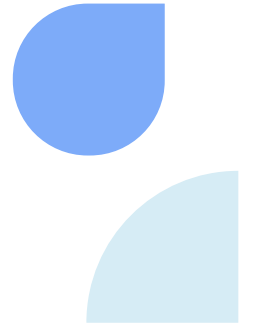
PODCAST

Trauma-informed Education

Episodes focused on applying trauma-informed practices in educational and social contexts.

<https://open.spotify.com/show/6Dw9a1MaL7zdxVtN0TIXa?si=365542542c544a6a>

CURRICULUM



Links, references and further investigation

Practical **EI exercises**, worksheets and explanations useful for both practitioners and participants:

PositivePsychology.com

<https://positivepsychology.com/emotional-intelligence/>

Clear explanation of **hyper- and hypo-arousal** with visual tools for practice:

“What is the Window of Tolerance?” –

NICABM

<https://www.nicabm.com/trauma-how-to-help-your-clients-understand-their-window-of-tolerance/>

Explains how naming emotions reduces amygdala activation and improves

emotional control:

“Affective Labeling and Emotion Regulation” – American Psychological Association

<https://www.apa.org/monitor/nov06/labeling>

MORE INSPIRATION

Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center

SAMHSA

Comprehensive guidelines and tools for implementing trauma-informed approaches.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma-violence>

TOOL

Plutchik Emotion Wheel

Visual resource to support emotional labeling and vocabulary development.

<https://www.garyvaynerchuk.com/emotion-wheel/>





RESILIENCE FOR REFUGEES

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