

SUMMARY

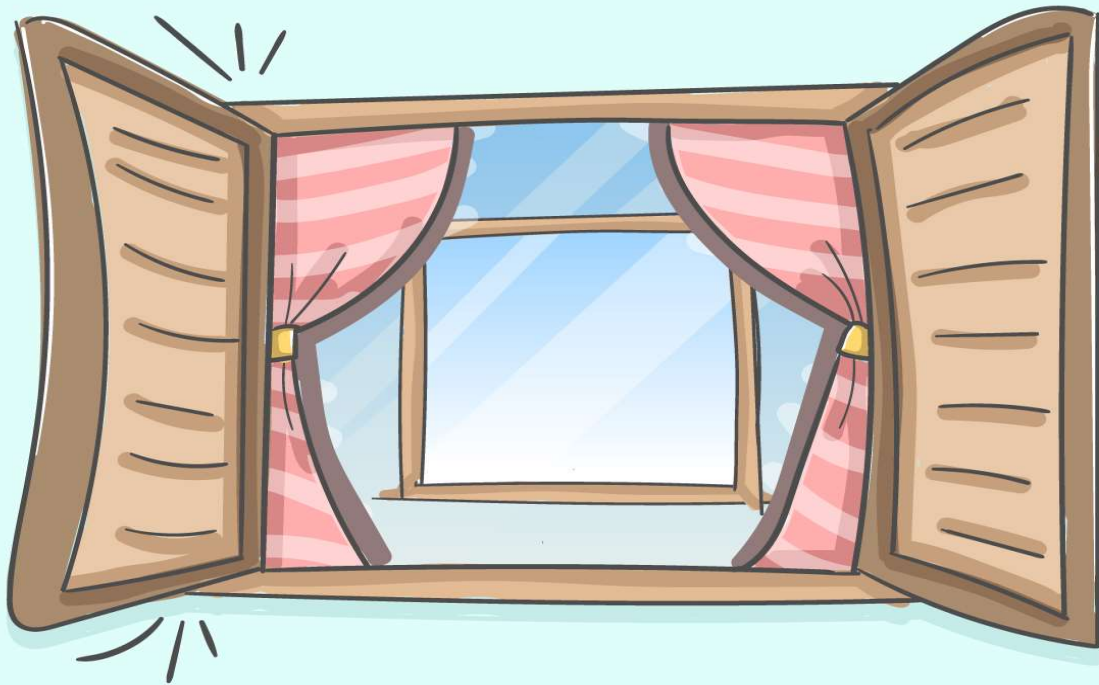
BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

WIDEN

THE

WINDOW

BY ELIZABETH A. STANLEY, PHD



Summary of Widen the Window by Elizabeth A. Stanley, PhD

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Break free from trauma and maximize your potential.

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
The Impact of Stress and Trauma	6
Your Body Remembers Your Stress	8
Widening Your Window	11
Final Summary	14



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Introduction

What would you consider “trauma?” Is PTSD only something that war veterans or battered women can experience? Or would you believe that trauma is actually a universal experience that can affect anyone at any time? If the latter strikes you as surprising, you’re not alone; many people believe that an experience is only traumatic if it falls into the category of “the worst type of thing you could possibly experience.” But the author’s research indicates that this is actually very inaccurate. In fact, trauma is defined as any experience that has been deeply distressing or disturbing.

And although we often think that “stress” and “trauma” are two very different things, the burgeoning stress of college assignments or the pressure of caring for screaming children can also be traumatic under the right circumstances. The universality of trauma means that many people are struggling with unresolved and untreated trauma every day. And over the course of this summary, we’ll explore the author’s research and learn how we can identify that trauma, resolve it, and move on.



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The Impact of Stress and Trauma

When I was in college, students would often compete with one another in a sort of “contest of suffering.” For example, someone might say, “I only got 3 hours of sleep last night!” only for someone else to pipe up and exclaim, “I only got 30 minutes!” Someone else might then chime in for the win by exclaiming, “You guys are getting sleep?” None of these things are healthy but students often competed thusly as if we received prizes for stress. The more stress we were under, the more bragging rights we earned. If this culture strikes you as extremely toxic, you’re right-- it was! But our university only exemplified a fraction of a much wider issue: the social status we award to stress.

Whether it’s in the university or the workplace, our society seems to have accepted that we will all be suffering all the time. And because humans naturally gravitate towards the cultivation of hierarchies, we celebrate those who appear to be under the most stress. This is problematic for a number of reasons! For starters, when we celebrate extreme levels of stress, we communicate that operating under severe pressure is normal. But this mentality is also toxic because it encourages people to associate productivity with pressure. While a certain amount of intensity is definitely healthy for motivation, intensity and stress (or pressure) are two very different things. In fact, intensity can often be pleasant; we crave a certain amount of intensity because it challenges our brains and encourages us to beat our own personal bests. But this is vastly different from the feeling of being ground into dust by the pressure of conflicting responsibilities.

So, when our society sends these deeply mixed signals, we encourage people-- especially young students-- to believe that they’re not succeeding unless they’re suffering. And when stress crosses the line and becomes suffering, we’ve successfully turned that stress into trauma. And after a point, our bodies’ primal fight or flight responses can no longer tell the difference between a looming deadline and a death threat. This means that our bodies are soon conditioned to believe that we are literally under attack at all times. And that persistent state of terror can quickly lead to the hypervigilance and

panic that we observe in people with severe PTSD. So, as surprising as it might sound, a number of seemingly ordinary life experiences are actually not ordinary at all. Rather, we've been conditioned to believe that they are harmless due to a culture that celebrates stress.

However, that's not to say that you can call every little stressful experience traumatic. Daily annoyances and traumatic experiences are two very different things. But trauma does exist on a spectrum. So, for example, it's highly unlikely that a stressful phone call or being stuck in traffic for an hour gave you instant PTSD. But four years of feeling that your entire self-worth and survival depends on your academic performance and your ability to meet crushing deadlines could absolutely leave you traumatized.



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Your Body Remembers Your Stress

If you're like most people, then it's probably pretty safe to say that you don't get a regular 8 hours of sleep every night. For most people, the amount of sleep we should be getting is often cut in half. Sometimes, it's even less, as illustrated by the examples of the sleep-deprived college students who boasted about their suffering. And because this pattern of sleep deprivation is so common, you're probably familiar with the concept of a "sleep debt." According to the American Sleep Association, "sleep debt, also known as sleep deficit, describes the cumulative effect of a person not having sufficient sleep. It's important for people to understand that a large sleep debt can well lead to physical and/or mental fatigue. The two known kinds of sleep debt are the results of total sleep deprivation and the results of partial sleep deprivation. Total sleep deprivation is when a person is kept awake for a minimum of 24 hours, while partial sleep deprivation occurs when either a person or lab animal has limited sleep for several days or even weeks."

As you can see from this example, your sleep debt can have a profound and detrimental impact on your daily life and cognitive function. It's also almost impossible to catch up or "pay off" that sleep debt. That's because your body remembers that lost sleep; the sleep deficit literally accumulates in your body, resulting in physical symptoms. And unfortunately, the same is true of traumatic experiences. So, if your body is constantly in "survival mode," battling perceived danger or experiencing chronic stress, the effects of operating in survival mode will accumulate in your body as well. For example, if you're in a psychologically abusive relationship, you might not receive physical blows every day, but you're still unsafe because you're being gaslighted and abused by your partner. You might feel like you have to tell yourself, "I'm fine! Everything is okay!" in order to survive each day, but ultimately, this strategy won't work. You might be able to trick your brain a little bit, but your body still understands what's going on. Your body knows that you're under attack and it continues to absorb and remember that stress.

And that's why proper recovery is crucial. But in order for you to recover, your mind and body have to believe that they are safe. Unfortunately,

however, sometimes this is more easily said than done. To consider how the recovery process works, we can imagine it in practical application. For example, let's say that you were in an abusive relationship and you finally found the strength to get out. So, you leave your partner, change your number and cut off all contact. Having removed your abuser from your life, you make it to your parents' house, where you can relax and recover. Your parents are nothing but supportive and you have nothing to worry about; all you need to do now is relax and focus on getting better. Unfortunately, however, your body doesn't know that. Even though the threat is gone, your body hasn't quite accepted that it's safe now. In fact, the removal of the threat has actually allowed your body to realize just how much you've been through.

Now, in an environment of relative safety, your mind and body are free to freak out as they fully recognize and process the impact of what happened to you. And that's when dysregulation occurs. Trauma psychologist Laura Angers defines emotional dysregulation as the clinical term used to describe an emotional state that is difficult to control, including unhealthy patterns of emotional coping, a predilection toward outbursts of emotions, and an inability to or a struggle with expressing emotions effectively (if at all). Dysregulation occurs as a result of complex trauma. Because your mind and body were impaired by a deeply traumatic incident or the impact of chronic stress, your physical and emotional responses have been altered or scrambled. As a result, you might struggle to process events or emotional stimuli in a "normal"-- or appropriately regulated-- way.

For example, in the case of the hypothetical scenario described above, dysregulation might mean that your mind and body cannot accept the concept of safety. Even though the threat has passed, your mind and body have been so altered by the prolonged effects of living in survival mode that it struggles to accept the fact that you're safe now. As a result, you might experience hypervigilance, flashbacks, and an exaggerated startle response. You might suffer from unexplained emotional outbursts or emotional responses that do not fit the situation. All of these are commonly seen in victims of PTSD. These responses can make it difficult to facilitate a healthy

and restorative recovery process. Fortunately, however, that doesn't mean that recovery is impossible.



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Widening Your Window

Now that we've explored the nature and impact of trauma on the mind and body, it's time to return to the titular concept of this book: widening your window. But what does a "window" really mean in the context of trauma? And why is it important? Well, the author posits that everybody has their own personal window. Just as we say things like, "They have a lot on their plate," this window is metaphorical in the same sense as the figurative plate. So, this window represents your personal ability to handle the stress that comes your way. However, handling your stress is not the same as being crushed by your stress and continuing to drag through life. In this case, "handling your stress" refers to your ability to manage your stress healthily and comfortably.

For example, if you are coping well with the amount of stress in your life, you might come home from work at the end of a long, stressful day, vent to your friends or family, enjoy a relaxing bubble bath, and go to bed. By contrast, if your stress is too much for you to manage, you might resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms like binge-drinking or risky pleasure-seeking endeavors that provide temporary relief. Understanding this difference helps us contextualize your window. At your best, your window of stress should be wide enough for you to comfortably manage and self-regulate a wide variety of stressful experiences without much difficulty. So, if your window is healthy, it is wide. But what happens to that nice wide window if you are under chronic stress or you experience a trauma?

If your stress becomes too much for you to handle, then your window begins to shrink. You lose the capability to handle stress comfortably. That's because the pressure you are under is so severe that any additional stress is too much for you. And so your window gets smaller and smaller. Because you are unable to self-regulate, dysregulation may take over and cause you to engage in exclusively unhealthy coping mechanisms. You may also experience extreme anxiety or agitation as a result of small things, like tripping over something in the floor or dropping your keys. And as you might have guessed, this narrow window can make it almost impossible to perform well

at your job or pursue healthy relationships. So, what can you do to cope with these struggles? How can you widen your window? The author believes that mindfulness and cognitive exercises can help us resolve traumas, widen our windows, and work towards recovery.

For starters, she recommends engaging your “thinking brain” to help you process your trauma. You can think about your thinking brain as being the opposite of your “survival brain.” Your survival brain is the part of you that’s responsible for identifying and protecting you from threats. It works so well because it relies on primal, physical cues like your stress responses. But unfortunately, that also means that your survival brain can’t process logical, rational cues like “the threat has been removed and I’m safe now.” And that’s where your thinking brain comes in. Your thinking brain can’t tell your survival brain to shut up or ignore the signals it’s receiving, but it can help to balance them. And using your thinking brain to understand and work through your trauma is a great place to start.

To initiate this process, the author recommends that you write down a list of all the traumatic things you’ve experienced. You can even go as far back as your childhood and you can include seemingly “little” things that had a profound impact on you. Even if it makes you feel silly or you think it shouldn’t be a big deal, remember that your trauma is valid. If it had a traumatic effect on you, then it should be on the list. Once you’ve catalogued your trauma, the next step is to list all the sources of stress in your life. For example, maybe the traffic on your morning commute really makes you angry. Maybe you’re under pressure to take care of your kids, cook a full-course meal, and meet project deadlines all at the same time. Whatever your stress is, it should go on the list! The next step is then to identify the coping mechanisms you employ for that stress. Even if they’re unhealthy or they embarrass you, write them down.

This exercise might seem simple, but it’s an awesome starting place for your recovery. Because once you identify your trauma and your coping mechanisms, you’re one step closer to thinking through it instead of being overwhelmed by it. When you start thinking through your trauma and your

coping mechanisms, you can tell yourself, “I’m doing ____ because ____ makes me feel frightened, scared, or re-victimized.” Articulating this thought process will then help you to reclaim control of the cycle and avoid being swept up in toxic trauma responses and coping mechanisms. If you can simply apply this mindful strategy consistently, then your survival brain will eventually begin to understand that you are safe. Your thinking brain can take the wheel and direct your responses accordingly. And as you replace your negative coping mechanisms with positive strategies, you can widen your window over time.



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Final Summary

When it comes to stress, everybody has a window. That window represents your capacity for coping with that stress in a healthy way. If your window is wide enough, you can deal with regular amounts of stress without feeling overwhelmed. But if that window is restricted by the pressures of trauma or chronic stress, then dysregulation takes over. As a result, you may be unable to cope with even the smallest amount of stress and your emotional responses may not be appropriate for what you're experiencing.

That's why it's important to learn to widen your window. By engaging your thinking brain, you can identify your trauma and your coping mechanisms. This will help you to lead with your thinking brain, replace unhealthy coping mechanisms with helpful strategies, and enable your survival brain to neurocept safety. And as a result, your brain will be able to facilitate a full and healthy recovery process.



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