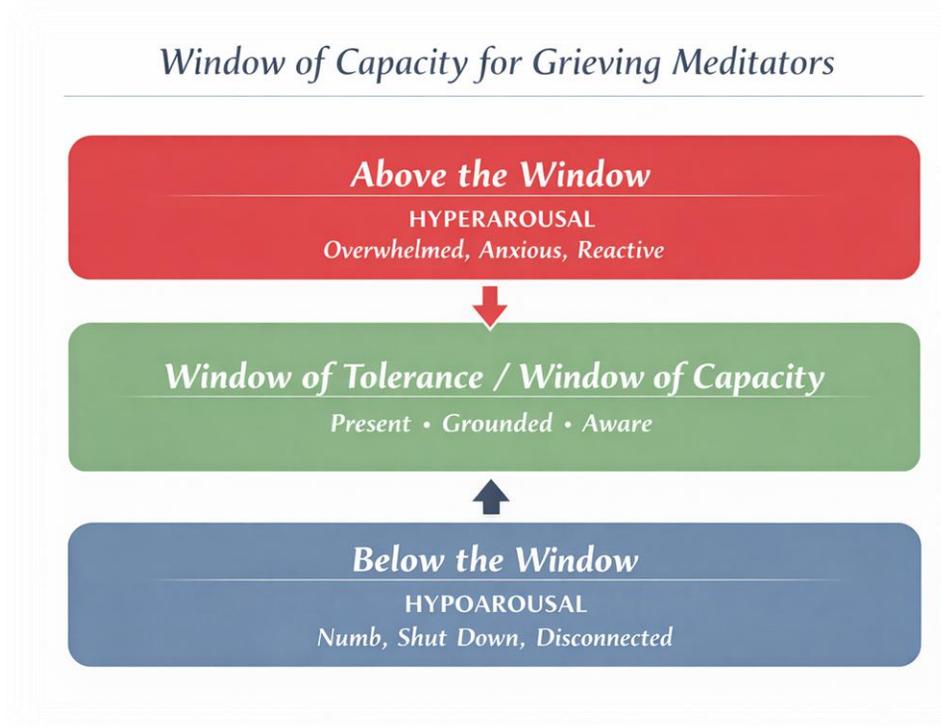


## Practicing with Grief and Capacity

Grief asks a great deal of the heart and the nervous system.

Even experienced meditators often find that practice changes when grief is present. At times we may feel steady and able to sit with what is here. At other times we may feel overwhelmed, restless, or disconnected. Meditation may feel supportive one day and difficult the next.



This is a natural part of grieving.

Grief can move us in and out of what is sometimes called the **Window of Tolerance**, or the **Window of Capacity** — the range where we can stay present with experience while still feeling steady and supported.

Within this window we can feel grief and remain connected to the body, the breath, and the present moment.

Outside this window we may feel flooded with emotion, or we may feel numb or far away. These are natural protective responses of the nervous system.

Nothing has gone wrong when this happens.

\*AI generated image

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This handout offers a map to help you recognize where you are and choose practices that support balance, steadiness and care.

Zone	Common Experiences	Practice Suggestions	Helpful Reminders
<p><b>Above the Window</b></p> <p>– <b>Overwhelm</b></p> <p><b>Fight/Flight</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intense waves of grief</li> <li>• Anxiety or panic</li> <li>• Tight chest</li> <li>• Racing thoughts</li> <li>• Urge to escape</li> <li>• Shallow/rapid breathing</li> <li>• Tense muscle/jaw clenching</li> <li>• Vigilant/easily startled</li> <li>• “Wired”/irritable/reactive</li> <li>• Meditation feels overwhelming</li> </ul>	<p><b>Grounding</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel feet on floor</li> <li>• Feel chair support</li> <li>• Palms touching thighs</li> </ul> <p><b>Containment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hand on heart</li> <li>• Self-hug</li> <li>• Blanket</li> <li>• Pet</li> <li>• Comfort Object</li> </ul> <p><b>Regulation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longer exhales</li> <li>• Gentle humming</li> <li>• Slow rocking</li> <li>• Cup of tea</li> </ul> <p><b>Movement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comfortable walking</li> <li>• Gentle stretching</li> </ul>	<p>Regulation before insight</p> <p>Sometimes the most skillful practice is not meditating.</p> <p>Opening the eyes can help.</p>

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Zone	Common Experiences	Practice Suggestions	Helpful Reminders
<p><b>Window of Capacity</b></p> <p>– <b>Steadiness</b></p> <p><b>Regulated Presence</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able to feel grief without overwhelm</li> <li>• Breath accessible</li> <li>• Some steadiness present</li> <li>• Curiosity possible</li> <li>• Emotions move naturally</li> </ul>	<p><b>Mindfulness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gentle breath awareness</li> <li>• Body awareness with kindness</li> <li>• Naming emotions</li> </ul> <p><b>Compassion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RAIN practice</li> <li>• Self compassion phrases</li> <li>• Hand on heart</li> <li>• Loving Kindness</li> </ul> <p><b>Balanced Awareness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open awareness meditation</li> <li>• Pendulation grief ↔ resource</li> </ul> <p><b>Reflection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gentle journaling</li> <li>• Remembering with kindness</li> </ul>	<p>Staying within capacity is the practice.</p> <p>No need to push deeper.</p>

Zone	Common Experiences	Practice Suggestions	Helpful Reminders
<p><b>Below the Window</b></p> <p><b>– Numbness and Disconnection</b></p> <p><b>Freeze</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional numbness / lacking sensation</li> <li>• Heavy body</li> <li>• Foggy thinking</li> <li>• Disconnected from self, surroundings and others</li> <li>• Feeling far away / flat affect</li> <li>• Muscles weak / flaccid</li> <li>• Hopelessness / helplessness / apathy</li> <li>• Sleepiness in meditation</li> </ul>	<p><b>Gentle Activation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walking meditation</li> <li>• Standing meditation</li> <li>• Stretching</li> <li>• Squeezing hands</li> <li>• Pressing feet</li> <li>• Shaking</li> </ul> <p><b>Sensory</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cool water on face</li> <li>• Hold textured object</li> <li>• Notice colours</li> </ul> <p><b>Orienting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look around slowly</li> <li>• Name objects</li> <li>• Notice pleasant surroundings</li> </ul> <p><b>Connection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Music</li> <li>• Photos</li> <li>• Writing letters</li> </ul>	<p>Stillness meditation may deepen shutdown.</p> <p>Movement can be meditation.</p>

### Suggested Resources for Further Exploration

You may find it helpful to explore teachings that integrate mindfulness, compassion, and understanding of the nervous system.

Below are a few suggested resources that many meditators find supportive when practicing with grief and strong emotions. You might explore whatever feels supportive and leave aside what does not.

These are simply a few suggestions among many possible paths.

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### Mindfulness and Compassion

#### Kristin Neff — Self-Compassion

Kristin Neff's work on self-compassion offers practical ways to bring kindness to difficult experiences, including grief.

Self-compassion practices can help stabilize the nervous system and support meditation during times of loss.

You may find it helpful to explore:

- Self-compassion practices
- The Self-Compassion Break
- Gentle phrases for difficult moments

#### Website:

<https://self-compassion.org>

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### Jack Kornfield — Compassionate Mindfulness

Jack Kornfield teaches a warm and relational approach to meditation that emphasizes patience, kindness, and the unfolding of the heart.

Many meditators find his teachings reassuring during grief because they emphasize that healing happens gradually and naturally.

Themes that may resonate:

- Compassionate awareness
- Wise effort in practice
- Patience with the heart

**Website:**

<https://jackkornfield.com>

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### Tara Brach — Mindfulness and Emotional Healing

Tara Brach integrates mindfulness and compassion in a way that many meditators find deeply supportive when working with grief.

Her teachings on RAIN and radical compassion can be especially helpful during times of loss.

Themes that may resonate:

- RAIN meditation
- Radical acceptance
- Compassionate presence

**Website:**

<https://www.tarabrach.com>

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### Sharon Salzberg — Loving-Kindness Practice

Sharon Salzberg is known for her teachings on loving-kindness and compassion meditation.

Her work emphasizes gentleness and friendliness toward experience, which can be deeply supportive in grief practice.

Themes that may resonate:

- Loving-kindness meditation
- Compassion practice
- Beginning again

**Website:**

<https://www.sharonsalzberg.com>

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### Mindfulness and the Nervous System - Dan Siegel — Window of Tolerance

Dan Siegel developed the concept of the Window of Tolerance, which helps explain how the nervous system responds to stress and emotion.

Understanding the nervous system can help meditators adjust practice in ways that support steadiness and safety.

Themes that may resonate:

- Window of Tolerance / Window of Capacity
- Nervous-system regulation
- Integration of mind and body

**Website:**

<https://drdansiegel.com>

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### **Foundational Mindfulness Teaching - Jon Kabat-Zinn — Mindfulness in Everyday Life**

Jon Kabat-Zinn developed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which helped bring mindfulness into modern healthcare and psychology.

His teachings emphasize practicing gently and returning to the present moment.

Themes that may resonate:

- Present-moment awareness
- Mindfulness in everyday life
- Gentle persistence in practice

**Website:**

<https://www.mindfulnesscds.com>

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### **Thich Nhat Hanh — Gentle Mindfulness**

Thich Nhat Hanh taught a gentle and accessible approach to mindfulness rooted in compassion and presence.

Many grieving meditators find his teachings especially supportive because of their warmth and simplicity.

Themes that may resonate:

- Breathing with emotion
- Tender awareness
- Compassionate presence

**Website:**

<https://plumvillage.org>

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### **Pema Chödrön — Practicing with Difficulty**

Pema Chödrön teaches a compassionate and courageous approach to meeting difficulty and loss.

Her teachings resonate deeply with meditators learning to stay present with grief and uncertainty.

Themes that may resonate:

- Staying present with difficulty
- Tender courage
- Opening to loss

#### **Website:**

<https://pemachodronfoundation.org>

### **Structured Mindfulness Practice - Shinzen Young — Unified Mindfulness**

Shinzen Young developed the Unified Mindfulness system, which offers a clear and structured approach to mindfulness practice.

Many meditators find these tools especially helpful when working with strong emotions such as grief because they provide practical ways to explore experience in manageable steps.

Unified Mindfulness emphasizes flexibility in practice — adjusting attention in ways that support steadiness and clarity. This approach fits well with practicing within the Window of Capacity.

Themes that may resonate:

- Working skillfully with strong emotions
- Breaking experience into manageable parts
- Flexible attention practices
- Sensory clarity and equanimity

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Some meditators find the following practices especially helpful:

- Focus on sensory experience (seeing, hearing, feeling)
- Labeling or noting experience gently
- Shifting attention between inner and outer experience
- Using structured techniques when emotions feel strong

**Website:**

<https://unifiedmindfulness.com>

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### Gentle Closing Note

These are only a few suggested resources among many helpful teachings.

The most important guide is your own experience.

You are always in choice about how you practice.

Practicing gently and within capacity is itself a form of wisdom.

### Closing Reflections

- Practice isn't about enduring grief no matter what.
- The practice is learning to stay within your window of capacity while grief unfolds.
- Sometimes meditation is the practice.
- Sometimes grounding is the practice.
- Sometimes movement is the practice.

The intention is to practice in a way that supports steadiness with compassion and care.

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Sometimes the most skillful practice is sitting quietly with the breath.

Sometimes the most skillful practice is opening the eyes and feeling the feet on the floor.

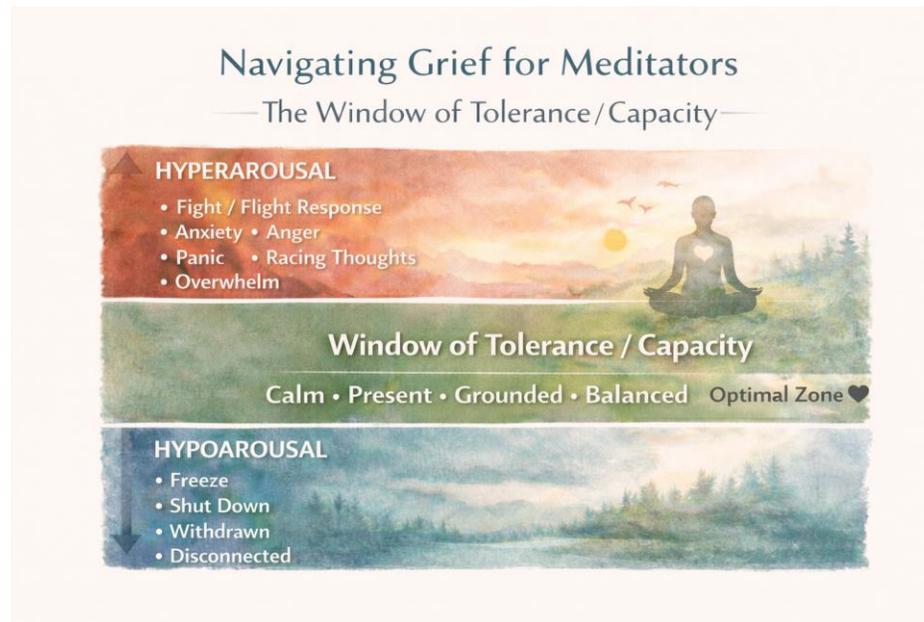
Sometimes the most skillful practice is movement, rest, or reaching for support.

All of these are forms of mindful practice.

Buddhist teachings describe the Middle Way — a path that avoids both forcing and withdrawing.

In grief practice, the Middle Way means learning to stay within our capacity and treating ourselves with patience, kindness and care.

Over time, this gentle way of practicing naturally strengthens our capacity to be with grief.



\*AI generated image

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