

When You're Numb

We've all heard stories about people in New York City who keep their eyes forward and step over derelicts without looking down. And do nothing to help people who are brutalized, raped, and sometimes killed.

We've all heard stories about people killed as a result of hurricanes, tornados, earthquakes, starvation, drug overdoses, AIDS, cancers, heart attacks, and assaults. And we've all heard about the thousands and thousands of people who are killed and maimed in wars.

Most of us listen to the news, or read the newspaper, or hear about the news from our friends. We are bombarded with death and disaster, and come to believe that what we see on television is an accurate representation of how the world really is.

Adding to our world view is the fact that we may have been abused verbally and physically as children and as adults, usually by the people we care most about. We may have been taken advantage of by self-centered people who exploit our good natures and steal from us, cheat us, and rob us of self-esteem and harmony. We go through divorces, the deaths of loved ones, financial setbacks, and injury-producing accidents, each of which takes its toll.

We tolerate the stress, the trauma, and horror until we can no longer. And then we become numb.

Numbness is your system's way of managing overload. Instead of becoming overwhelmed, you check out emotionally, most likely as a result of biochemical shifts that take place in your brain. Becoming numb is a protective mechanism that keeps you from losing your ability to function and survive. At times of extreme emotional intensity, it is nice to have a means of anesthetizing oneself to keep keeping on.

Numbness serves a useful purpose, but like just about everything, it can be abused. When you rely on it more than you should, numbness can become your enemy.

During the course of my career, I have spoken in depth with many people who have been severely traumatized. Some of these people have been crippled as a result of the injuries they have sustained. Others have been crippled by the protections that they have developed to keep from re-experiencing trauma from the past or experiencing additional trauma in the future.

I knew a man many years ago whose mother died when he was just beginning to walk. He was raised by an alcoholic father who abused him physically and neglected him emotionally.

His father remarried when he was six. His stepmother was an exceptionally kind and empathic woman who loved children. She nurtured the little boy and kept him safe from his father's drunken rages.

When he was ten, his stepmother died suddenly when an aneurysm in her brain burst. The little boy became distraught. He had lost the most important person in his life for a second time. He promised himself that he would never feel that kind of pain again. And so he numbed himself.

The man went through the motions of living only partially alive. He kept his distance from feelings and avoided emotional intimacy whenever the opportunity for closeness presented itself.

Even so, he married and had children. He verbally abused his wife, had trouble relating to his kids, and neglected his family emotionally. He could not see the pain he inflicted on those around him; nor could he see the unhappiness they experienced as a result of his not giving them love and understanding. He could not see because he could not feel.

As a result of his numbness, the man could not sustain relationships, including those with his family. He went through a difficult divorce, lost an important position at the company where he worked, and drank to excess every night to keep himself from feeling. He could not allow himself to feel and stopped coming in.

Six months later, the man called to ask for my help. He said that he had begun to feel suicidal while watching a television show about a child who had lost his mother, and did not know why. He promised that he would call me before he tried to kill himself, but wouldn't come in. As I learned years later, he did not keep his promise.

When the man was a little boy, he learned how to protect himself from pain. He learned to numb himself. Unfortunately, his way of coping with pain was the only one he used. Why not? It seemed to work so well.

The numbness that kept his pain away also kept away his ability to experience pleasure. His life was empty. He ignored himself emotionally, had no close friends, and numbed himself to the hunger for closeness that had lived inside him since childhood. He had little reason to live.

The numbness worked to keep him from experiencing the feelings of loss, but it did not keep him from losing. Indeed, the man's inability to experience his feelings and those of other people led to the loss of his family, his job, and ultimately his life.

We all numb ourselves to some degree to tolerate the hurtful and traumatic parts of life. To some degree, we all lose pleasure in life as a result. Fortunately, most people do not abuse their ability to numb themselves. They remain in touch with their feelings, even those that are unpleasant. When numbness is the problem, the solution is to feel. It is the only way I know for us humans to heal and stay alive.