

Numbing the pain is the antidote to joy



I want you to think about your vices. What do you turn to during times of discomfort, that have become habits in your life? These are things that generally provide temporary pleasure at the cost of your long term goals. It might be eating

“comfort” food, shopping for something you don’t need, self-medicating with drugs and alcohol, or spending hours in front of the TV. Your rational mind tells you these things aren’t a good idea, but some other, stronger, force takes over and you engage in these behaviors anyway. Usually, after you are done, you don’t feel too good about yourself. And what’s worse, the emotional discomfort you tried to run away from not only sticks around, but it often gets a lot worse.

“Numbing the pain for a while will make it worse when you finally feel it”

J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Why do we repeat this pattern over and over again? The answer is that we are engaging in emotional numbing. Emotional numbing is a concept that Dr. Brene Brown discusses in her book, [The Gifts of Imperfection](#). She describes this action as something we all resort to as an attempt to escape emotional pain. Think about your vices again. Can you identify triggering events that lead to the behavior? Maybe it was a stressful day at work that you coped with by going on an online shopping spree. Or it was being cut off in traffic and nearly getting in an accident that preceded going home and ordering a pizza, that you ate by yourself. Our numbing behaviors are mechanisms we have developed in order to cope

with difficult emotions. This, in and of itself, isn't the problem – it's the behavior we choose that becomes the problem, often leading to long term unfavorable outcomes with no resolution to the original pain. Not only that, the process of emotional numbing limits our experience of joy in our lives.

This last point is especially critical to understand. Dr. Brene Brown's research has shown that *we cannot selectively numb our emotions*. If we numb the bad, we numb the good. By trying to escape our feelings of being overwhelmed, scared, hurt or fearful, we also end up escaping joy, love, fulfillment and passion. We become numb to life. Emotional numbing is a vicious cycle we get caught up in. It's a positive feedback loop for the destructive numbing behaviors. We feel bad so we numb with a behavior; we can't feel as good as we want when something good happens, so we supplement the experience with the behavior as well. Pretty soon, our lives are the ebb and flow of our numbing addiction.

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Emotional numbing is not something over which to be critical of yourself. We all do it. It's the mind's way of coping with extreme discomfort. The thing is, usually what is triggering the numbing behavior is an area of your life that needs your attention, ultimately for your greater good. Emotional pain, like physical pain, is meant to be an awareness mechanism for deep healing, and if you are open to it, spiritual growth. If you sustain a physical wound, you know that you need to take measures to make sure that wound heals and doesn't become infected. Small wounds can heal on their own. Larger wounds

need your help, otherwise you risk much more damage to your tissues. Similarly, emotional wounds need to be addressed and cared for, otherwise they will fester. Ignore a bad gash on your leg, and you might need an amputation. Ignore a bad gash on your heart, and you might amputate your ability to feel love and joy. We must understand that pain of all types has a higher purpose.

“Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains.

It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”
C.S. Lewis

The first step in stopping the numbing cycle is to be aware that it is happening. When you find yourself engaging in your numbing behaviors, stop and consider what event triggered your feelings of discomfort. That emotional pain is demanding your attention for a reason. Use your [tools of self-compassion](#) to heal the emotional wound. Figure out what behaviors you can engage in that would actually make you feel better about yourself, not worse. Acknowledge your feelings, and even though your instinct is to escape, be with those feelings intimately. [Breathe.](#) Accept what the moment is giving you with courage, knowing that what you are feeling are *growing* pains. It is by feeling these difficult emotions that joy can become a greater presence in your life.
