

How To Go Numb

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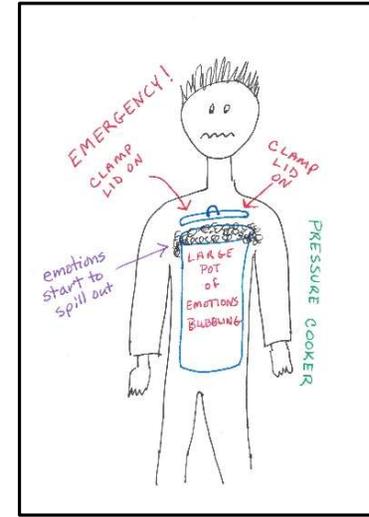
“Going Numb” happens when life becomes too scary, too overwhelming for kids who do not have nurturing and safe-enough caregivers to help them through painful things. It is a survival mechanism that prevents them from fully feeling terror and fear.



FEELING NUMB IN BODY, MIND, AND SOUL

How to go numb...how does that happen? Think of it like this. When emotions start to bubble up, if they can be felt, they dissipate. However, if it's too scary to feel the feelings, something else happens. It's like having a pressure cooker inside the body that holds

in our emotions. When the lid gets clamped on, the emotions stay stuck inside and we don't feel them.



Somehow the body clamps that lid down on those emotions! This can happen in a fraction of a second, automatically and unconsciously.

It's a survival response to extreme threat, to help someone not be as overcome by terror.

DANGER! CLAMP THAT LID DOWN!

It can happen in situations like car wrecks, natural disasters, or abuse. For small children, in unsafe homes, going numb can become an automatic and habitual way to survive.

Zoey Feels Numb

Today Zoey feels numb. In fact, her feet feel numb, her mind feels numb, and her hands even feel numb. She's needing to make a decision with her husband, but feels darn confused, knowing that he wants something she does not want. He wants to go somewhere she dreads—to a friend's birthday celebration at a bar.

On top of the childhood trauma Zoey experienced, she also had been taken advantage of at a frat party in college and had nightmares for weeks. Because she doesn't have a clear memory of the night due to being drunk and it also feels shameful, she has avoided thinking about it as much as she can. And she certainly does not want to go to places where people are getting drunk. Dear Husband doesn't know this part of Zoey's history and feels irritated that she makes excuses to avoid going out with him and friends for a few drinks.

Why does Zoey go numb? As a baby, when her dad became angry, she got startled by his angry tone and she cried. He would tell her mom, "You either shut the kid up or I'll shut her up." Her mom, to keep Zoey from being hit, quickly took her to the back bedroom, gave her a pacifier and left her there, to return to her angry husband, who then beat her up with words or fists or both (but notice Zoey didn't get hit because her mom did kind of protect her).

Zoey learns not to cry. While in the crib, Zoey cried and cried, but no one came to help her. Finally, after a few months of this, Zoey learned not to cry anymore. No, Baby Zoey didn't say to herself, "Buck up, little girl. Stop crying." Zoey's autonomic nervous

system kicked into survival mode. This wasn't done consciously. Going numb helped her not be as overcome by terror. Because this pattern happened over and over again, today Adult Zoey's nervous system easily gets triggered into feeling numb.

Babies who learn not to cry. Babies who cry and are not responded to learn to stop crying as quickly as 30-60 days (this happens in some orphanages). People often think these kids are "easy babies" because they don't cry.

But these are extremely neglected babies have learned several hard lessons early in life:

People are scary.

No one helps calm me down.

I am alone.

Their bodies unconsciously repress their emotions and help them become numb, SO THAT THEIR FEELINGS OF TERROR, FEAR, AND ALONENESS DON'T KEEP OVERWHELMING THEM.

When Baby Zoey continued to cry and her mom wasn't there to rush her to the back room, her dad slapped or pinched her. See how much better it is for Baby Zoey to have learned NOT to cry? And to have

her body feel NUMB instead of terror and fear?
Repressing emotions and going numb is an autonomic nervous system response to fear that can happen inside of abused and neglected kids.

What Zoey Needs Now

Adult Zoey isn't very skilled at feeling her feelings (you can see why, can't you?). She doesn't know how to feel much. And Zoey's TERRIFIED to start feeling those repressed feelings because she wasn't soothed by a nurturing caregiver who helped her move from fear back to peace and rest. Her abusive dad and abused mom didn't have that skill set!

So, Zoey doesn't really know what all is bubbling inside of her. She doesn't know good ways to calm herself down (overeating and drinking help some, but they aren't the best long-term strategy). She doesn't yet know that learning to feel these difficult emotions will actually let her feel the good stuff in life, like joy, happiness, peace.



BUBBLING POT OF REPPRESSED EMOTIONS

Now you know how Zoey over and over again learned some damaging and "BIG LIFE LESSONS" at home, even though she couldn't articulate it. Her body knew danger and it was her dad.

To heal, Zoey will need to have somebody help her to learn to move from numb to a place of true calm. She will need to learn to feel her overwhelming feelings (that feels way too scary for her right now!) with empathic, safe people. Can you see what a big endeavor it will be for Zoey to learn to feel safe?

It's a Jesus-sized problem. Jesus plus a good friend or counselor can help Zoey in this journey to thaw out that darned numb feeling. And remember, Jesus is good at putting broken people back together. In fact, I'd say, "It's His specialty." He knows how to help Zoey and He knows how to help you!

The End

Additional ways to engage with this piece

(Tell your story to yourself, a safe friend, or Creator.)

Do you, like Zoey, feel numb?

Do you recognize yourself in a part of the article?

What feelings or body sensations do you experience as you read it?

What does this article remind you of in your own life?
Any kid or adult memories?

What part of this article touches your heart or is hard for you?

Feel free to mark up this article—make it yours! Put your name in it, rewrite passages, cross out what doesn't apply.

Share it with others who might be encouraged by it.

*I created the character Zoey
(who writes poetry) to help
people understand and heal
from childhood trauma*



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