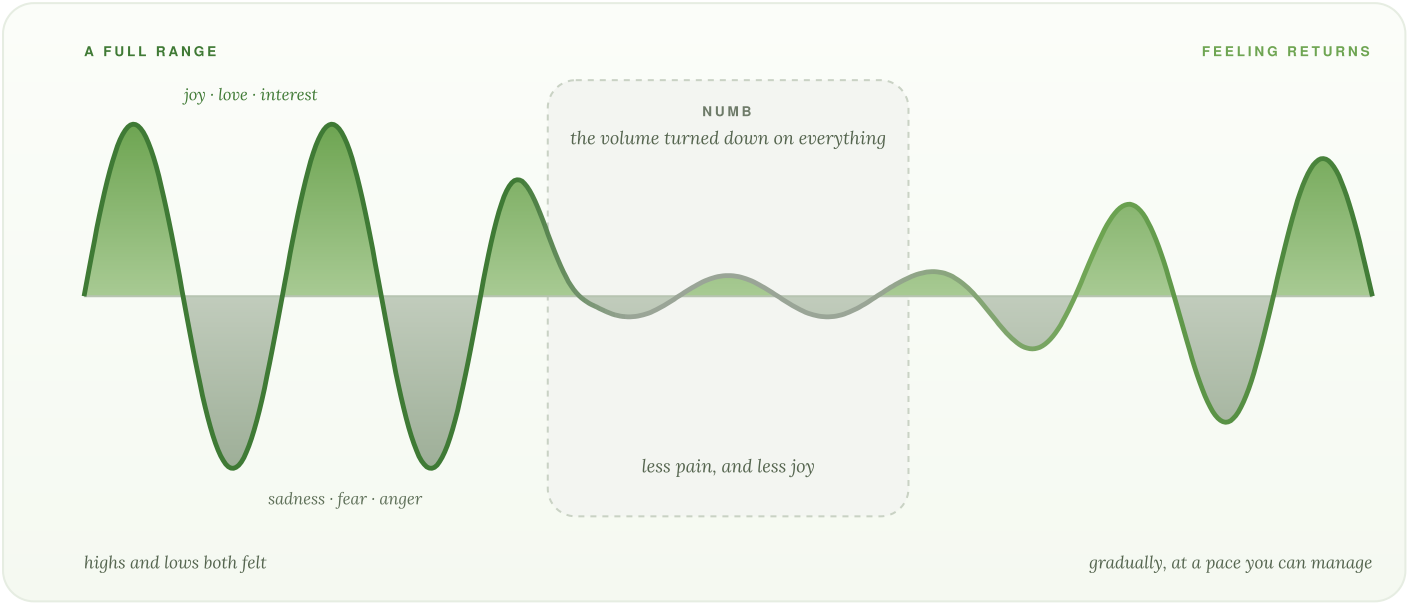
Emotional Numbing

EMOTIONS · FEELING FLAT OR DISCONNECTED

When the volume on feelings is turned down

Emotional numbing means feeling less than you used to, or feeling flat, cut off or "behind glass." It often affects good feelings as well as painful ones. It is a common human response, frequently linked to trauma, ongoing stress, low mood or medication, and it can change.



01 What it can feel like

tick what you recognise

- ☐ **Flat or empty,** even when good things happen
- ☐ **Distant from people I care about**
- ☐ **Little interest** in things I used to enjoy
- ☐ **Feeling "behind glass"** or slightly unreal
- ☐ **Going through the motions,** as if on autopilot
- ☐ **Unable to cry,** or not reacting as I expect to
- ☐ **Knowing I should feel something,** but not feeling it
- ☐ **Difficulty naming** what I feel

02 Why it can happen

often more than one

Protection when overwhelmed

Turning feelings down can shield us when emotions feel too much to bear.

After trauma

Numbing is one recognised response after trauma, and part of how PTSD is described (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

Low mood and depression

Losing interest and pleasure is a common feature of depression.

Long-term stress or burnout

Being on high alert for a long time may leave less emotional energy (Litz et al., 1997).

Medication

Some people taking antidepressants report feeling emotionally blunted (Price et al., 2009).

Alcohol or other substances

These can dull feelings in the short term, and keep numbness going.

03 How numbing differs from...

related experiences

Feeling calm

Calm feels settled and present. Numbing tends to feel absent, empty or cut off.

Feeling detached or unreal

Dissociation, such as feeling unreal or outside yourself, can overlap with numbing and is worth mentioning to a clinician.

Simply being tired

Tiredness lifts with rest. Numbing tends to persist across days, places and people.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

In studies of PTSD, numbing has been most closely linked with ongoing hyperarousal, consistent with the idea that emotional resources can become depleted (Litz et al., 1997). Some people taking SSRI antidepressants describe emotional blunting that they can distinguish from their low mood (Price et al., 2009). Numbing usually improves as its causes are addressed, and feelings tend to return gradually.

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04 My feeling range

how much I can feel each one now, 0–10

FEELING	BEFORE, IF I RECALL	NOW
Joy or pleasure	___	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Interest or curiosity	___	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Love or closeness	___	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Calm or contentment	___	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Sadness	___	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Fear or worry	___	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Anger or frustration	___	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

not at all — *fully*

05 Noticing numb moments

when the volume seems to drop

WHEN *day, time, place*	WHAT WAS HAPPENING *situation, people*	WHAT I NOTICED *in my body and mind*	WHAT MIGHT BE UNDERNEATH *stress, a reminder, tiredness*

06 Gently turning the volume up

small, safe and at your own pace

THROUGH THE BODY

Notice small sensations

Warmth of a drink, the feel of fabric, a taste or smell. Sensations are often easier to notice than emotions at first.

☐ I tried this

THROUGH WORDS

Name even faint feelings

"A little calmer," "slightly irritated." Small or uncertain feelings still count.

☐ I tried this

THROUGH ACTION

Do things that once mattered

Plan small, enjoyable or meaningful activities, even before the feeling returns.

☐ I tried this

One small thing I will try	When, and how often	What I noticed afterwards

When to talk to someone. If numbing lasts for weeks, follows a traumatic experience, or is affecting your relationships or daily life, talk with your GP or psychologist. If you think a medication may be involved, discuss it with your prescriber rather than stopping it on your own. If feelings return strongly or suddenly, it can help to have support in place.

SOURCES

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.).

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