

Day 6 Protective Mechanism: Denial and numbing out

Developmental trauma refers to the impact of our childhood experiences on the development of our brain and nervous system. Human beings have a need to be connected with each other. A lack of connection is experienced as a survival level threat, especially by children. We need food, shelter and we need social connection.

We need to know we matter. Many people grew up feeling disconnected, abused and neglected. Emotional neglect could be extreme or what we might see as relatively benign, yet both leave us with a feeling that we don't matter to anyone. We disconnect from ourselves and we start to turn against ourselves.

One of the major mechanisms to protect ourselves is disconnection. We find some way to leave emotionally. One price we pay for this is that we lose a sense of our own value. When we are not taken care of and attuned with emotionally, we feel invisible. This is devastating to a child.

We blame ourselves. It is too risky to blame our parents, because we need to hang onto some hope of change. If it is our fault, maybe we could be quieter or smarter, and we would be loved and protected. They would stop hurting us. False core deficiency beliefs arise with these experiences. The truth is that our parents are hurting us, not seeing us, and not protecting us for reasons related to their own trauma and circumstances.

Children who are well cared for develop neural networks for trust and connection. Because of neuroplasticity, it is not too late. We can develop those pathways as adults. It doesn't make sense to blame ourselves for not having the opportunity for optimal brain development earlier in life.

We want connection with other people and to have a rich social network of friends and community. The conundrum is that we're often hurt by others. This leads to further isolation and cements the idea we're not lovable.

When we feel safe, we're able to be open and authentic. We're not worried about feeling judged. What are the conditions for feeling safe? We need an absence of threat plus a feeling of being connected. This is why isolation to protect ourselves doesn't really work.

We can't expect to have a healthy brain and nervous system and to feel safe with people if that hasn't been our experience. Our brains change with new experiences. There is always a way to work with what troubles us and to develop healthier patterns and let go of experiences from the past. Disconnection driven by abuse and neglect is a major dysfunction in our thinking process. Our

nervous system drives compulsion and catastrophic thinking. Understanding how this works is essential in healing.

What does the freeze response look like in modern life? I would have said I was calm. Actually I was numb and shut-down most of my adult life at a high cost. It feels like living a half life. People can be anxious and depressed. We know something is wrong and that we need to connect with others, but we're stuck. We're frozen.

We may be addicted to food, alcohol and other drugs. Perhaps we get relief using shopping, gambling or overwork. Addiction is a common trauma response and is rampant in our society because it helps us escape. Some strategies are more socially approved, like a glass of wine or binge watching Netflix, and they can be useful as a way to relax. When they are driven by a need to suppress feelings or an urgency to not experience our body, then it has morphed from a source of enjoyment or a way to let off steam, to a source of suffering.

The antidote for disconnection is mindfulness. Tune in to your whole experience. We don't notice we're numbing ourselves unless it gets extreme. Recent research on loneliness indicates a negative impact on our lifespan and certainly on our happiness and the quality of our life.

We freeze because we're not sure we can afford to feel and see clearly. We have an active inner critic and shame ourselves. Many people are very aggressive towards themselves. We need direct experiences that it is okay to be present to our lives and our feelings.

[What does my heart know that I might know?](#) Listen here or read below.

Bring your attention to your whole body from head to toes. Get comfortable.

Bring one or both hands up to cover your heart center. Notice the sensation of warmth. Tune in to your own experience right now.

We have intelligence in the brain in the head, our gut instincts and the heart.

This is not a question for the brain in our head. We bring our attention in to the heart center and listen.

What does your heart know about numbing out?

Why was it necessary?

Is it still necessary?

Right now, is it okay to be connected with your heart center?

There are no right or wrong answers. Notice if you get carried away in thought and bring yourself back. With your hand on your heart, listen. Be open to more. What does your heart know?

