

BEGINNING TO FEEL

For Survivors, feelings can seem like problems. Even pleasurable feelings like love and sex can be connected to painful thoughts. In a crisis, you may be experiencing distress, such as flashbacks, sudden memories and suicidal thoughts. It is understandable if all you want to do is stop feeling all together.

Survivors often get into this habit of not feeling much. They may describe themselves as 'spaced out', 'numb', 'unreal', 'not connected', 'not all there'. This spacing out can take a number of forms:

- **Being 'in your head'. This means that you split your emotions off. It's like they don't exist. You're able to talk about things but the emotions that go with the thoughts don't seem to register.**
- **Not being aware of your body. This can almost feel like you don't have a body. You may ignore your physical needs and not register pain or when it's time to eat, drink, sleep...**
- **Seeming in a different world. Your mind may drift off into a world of daydreams, or you may get the sensation that you're actually watching yourself from outside your body.**

Does any of this ring a bell for you?

Not feeling is a habit formed in childhood. It's easy to see why, as a child, you may have worked out that your best way of surviving was not to have feelings:

- **When you were abused it was too scary to cope with. Your mind had to do something to help you through it, so it 'spaced out'.**
- **If your abuse involved a great deal of physical pain, or if you were physically abused as well, your brain may have gone 'numb' to protect you from the pain.**
- **After the abuse you had to find a way to carry on. It's very hard to face up to the fact that those who should have loved and protected you, actually abused you or failed to prevent it. And you may have had to go on living with them afterwards. This is an impossible position to be in. Your mind went 'numb', 'spaced out', to protect you from feeling how bad it was.**

When you look at it this way, going numb is revealed as a very useful way of surviving. You did well to survive it.

But there comes a point when it's no longer as useful. As an adult, not feeling can be a handicap – one faced by many individuals, even those who haven't been sexually abused as children.

There are a number of problems with not being in touch with your feelings:

- **Feelings provide a lot of information. Recovery from abuse involves taking in new information and experiencing lots of feelings. Your feelings will tell you, how you're doing, what issues are around for you, what progress you're making.**
- **Feeling 'numb' and 'spacing out' doesn't help you when you have to make choices, decisions and plans. You can't do this when you're numb because your head is 'somewhere else'. Recovery is all about choices, decisions and plans. This pack encourages you to make lots of them:**
 - Who should be in my support team?
 - How do I get myself safe?
 - Which relaxation methods work for me?

Being 'numb' can stop you concentrating on sorting out crisis and recovering.

- **If you're around people who aren't safe, or your surroundings aren't safe, your feelings will help you to assess the danger. Then you can do something about it. If you feel numb you're more likely to put yourself in danger, or to stay in abusive relationships when you should get out.**
- **If you're cut off from your emotions it's hard to get close to people and to let them in. Dealing with crisis and recovery involves reaching out to supportive people. To do this you need to be able to establish close relationships.**
- **If you can't establish supportive relationships you may get isolated. This may feel the same as when you were a child. Recovery is very hard in isolation.**
- **If you 'space out' to deal with painful feelings that doesn't mean the feelings disappear. They may emerge later, sometimes explosively:**
 - Feelings of rage may re-appear leading to violence.
 - Feelings of shame may re-appear leading to self-harm.

It's not OK to hurt yourself and it's not ok to hurt anyone else.

Beginning to Feel

Changing habits – beginning to feel after years of not feeling – is hard work. Particularly, when as a child, there were such good reasons for not wanting to

feel. But there are good reasons now to change and here are some ideas that may help:

- **As with sudden memories and flashbacks, try to identify the triggers that occur before you go numb.**
- **Try to become aware of going numb as you're doing it. This is a first step in getting some control.**
- **If you decide that you're not going to space out, then ways to get in touch with your feelings are:**
 - Focus on your body. Sometimes feelings emerge as a pain or sensation in the body
 - Breathe. Slowly and deeply. We tend to restrict our breathing and hold ourselves tightly when we don't want to feel. Deep breathing also helps deal with panic.
 - Afterwards try to identify what you have felt. If you cannot put a name to it you could draw it/paint it, or mould a model of it in plasticine. Anything which gets the feeling out into the open.
- **Remember you still have the option of continuing to space out or go numb if you want to. You don't have to feel everything. This might be overwhelming, particularly in a crisis. You can choose to go numb if it does not feel safe to have your feeling, or if you just haven't got the energy. You might make this choice if:**
 - You're trying to cope with an addiction. Having your feelings might be overwhelming and drive you back to the addictive behaviour.
 - You're in a pattern of hurting yourself. Spacing out might be an alternative to hurting yourself. However, be careful with this. If your pattern of self-harm involves hurting yourself as a way of jolting you out of numbness, then you'll need to find a way of coping other than spacing out/going numb.
 - You think that having your feelings could lead to rage which could result in violence.
- **Always try to tell a member of your support team about the feelings you've had.**

The important thing is to get some control and start to feel your feelings. Getting control helps you to take charge of the crisis. Beginning to feel takes you through the crisis and into recovery. You're steering your life raft over the rapids and into the calmer water beyond.