Why Some Teens Feel Numb All the Time - Understanding emotional numbness and the “void”

Created by ARC with input from local young people and counsellors

Why this matters

“I just feel… nothing.”

“I’m tired all the time, but not physically.”

“It’s like I’m here, but not really.”

More and more teens are using words like these to describe how they feel – not sad, not anxious… just numb. We sometimes call this state “the void” – a kind of mental and emotional emptiness where everything feels flat, distant, or disconnected.

This isn’t attention-seeking. It’s not “just a phase.” It’s often the result of an overwhelmed nervous system and a brain that’s run out of coping space.

This guide is here to help you:

- Understand what emotional numbness is – and why it happens
- Recognise the signs in yourself or someone you care about
- Try strategies to reconnect with your emotions and body
- Know when to ask for help – and where to find it

🧠 **Emotional numbness isn’t laziness. It isn’t weakness. And it isn’t forever. But ignoring it can make life feel harder, heavier, and lonelier than it needs to be.**

🌀 What Is the “Void”?

“The void” isn’t a clinical term – but it is a real experience. It’s the name many teens give to the mental space where emotions go quiet. It’s not peace – it’s absence. Not sadness – but nothingness.

Young people describe it like this:

- “I’m not sad. I’m not happy. I just feel... empty.”
- “It’s like I’m watching my life from outside my body.”
- “Nothing feels real. Time is weird. I’m just going through the motions.”
- “I know I should care about things, but I don’t.”

This feeling has many names: emotional numbness, disconnection, “flatness,” shutdown, or dissociation.

It’s often the brain’s way of protecting us when things feel too much. Rather than panic or cry, your body switches off – like hitting emotional mute.

🧠 **This can happen:**

- After a period of high stress, trauma or loss
- When you’ve been “coping” for too long without support
- As a symptom of depression or anxiety
- After burnout – from school, social life, or online pressure
- When stuck in survival mode for too long

It can feel comforting at first – a break from feeling overwhelmed. But staying in the void too long can make everything feel grey, flat, and meaningless.

🧠 What's Actually Going On?

Your brain is constantly trying to keep you safe. When it senses danger – whether physical or emotional – it activates a stress response: fight, flight, freeze or fawn. Numbness and dissociation are often part of the freeze response.

It's your nervous system saying: "Let's pause everything until we feel safe again."

That can look like:

- Zoning out in class
- Feeling like time is moving strangely (too fast or too slow)
- Sleeping too much or not at all
- Forgetting conversations or losing time
- Feeling robotic, foggy or distant from your body
- Avoiding feelings or emotionally "checking out"

While this can be helpful in extreme stress, over time it stops you from connecting – with yourself and with others. You might feel like life is happening to you, not with you.

Overuse of screens, perfection pressure, a busy schedule with no rest, and even poor sleep can worsen this disconnect.

🧠 **You're not broken. Your brain's just trying to help you survive.**

🚩 How to Spot the Signs

You (or someone you care about) might be emotionally numb if:

- You feel “empty” most days – not sad, just nothing
- You stop reacting emotionally to things that used to matter
- You find it hard to feel excitement, joy, or even sadness
- You isolate yourself – even from people you care about
- You stop putting effort into appearance, school, hobbies
- You find it hard to explain how you feel (or don’t feel)
- You’re stuck in auto-pilot: school-home-phone-bed-repeat
- You constantly say “I’m fine” – but feel disconnected

Why these signs matter:

- Numbness is often mistaken for laziness, rudeness or apathy.
- In reality, it’s a form of emotional burnout – often due to unspoken pain.
- Spotting this early helps prevent more serious struggles like depression, disordered eating, or self-harm.

🧠 **Tip: Ask yourself – When was the last time I felt really present? Excited? Proud? Sad? If you can’t remember, it might be time to check in.**

🔁 Try This: Exercises to Reconnect

When you feel numb or “spaced out,” grounding exercises help bring your awareness back into your body and the present moment.

🖐️ **5-4-3-2-1**

Name 5 things you can see, 4 you can touch, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell, 1 you can taste. Bring yourself back to now.

🌬️ **Cold Reset**

Splash your face with cold water or hold an ice cube. This alerts your nervous system and shifts you out of freeze mode.

🎧 **Feel Something Playlist**

Make a playlist of songs that stir any feeling – joy, nostalgia, rage. Use music to find a path back to emotion.

✍️ **Unfiltered Journaling**

Set a timer for 5 minutes. Write whatever comes out. No grammar. No edits. Just empty your head onto the page.

🚶‍♀️ **Movement Break**

Stretch. Walk. Dance. Movement connects your brain and body, especially after long periods of zoning out.

🧍 **Mirror Check-In**

Look in the mirror and say: “I am here. I am real. I matter.” It may feel strange at first, but it can reconnect you with your sense of self.

💡 What Can Help?

It's tempting to wait until you "feel better" before taking action – but often, it works the other way around. Small steps first. Then feelings follow.

✅ **Small routines** – Think of these as life-anchors. Even something simple like brushing your teeth, washing your face, or changing into clean clothes signals to your brain that the day has structure. These moments of order are especially helpful when everything else feels chaotic or pointless.

✅ **Connection** – You don't need to talk deeply – even just sitting near someone or sending a funny meme can break the isolation. Humans are wired for connection. Emotional numbness feeds on loneliness.

✅ **Creativity** – Drawing, making music, writing, journaling or even rearranging your room can help you express things you don't have words for. Even doodling can count. Creativity isn't about perfection – it's about feeling.

✅ **Fresh air** – Nature resets your system. A 10-minute walk outside can improve focus, lift your mood, and reduce mental fog. Sunlight helps your brain regulate sleep and energy, too.

✅ **Talking** – You don't need to have the perfect words. Try: "I don't know what's wrong, but I don't feel right." Talking to someone – a parent, a teacher, a friend, or a counsellor – can help turn invisible feelings into visible ones.

✅ **Less doomscrolling** – Numbness often leads to hours of scrolling, which can worsen the disconnect. Try limiting screen time before bed. Replace some online time with music, journaling or a real-life activity.

✅ **Compassion** – Speak to yourself like you would a friend.
If you're emotionally numb, you're not "broken."
You're coping. But you deserve more than survival mode.

Be kind to yourself as you figure out what comes next.

💡 **Tip: Don't wait for motivation to act.**
Action creates motivation.

❤️ A Reminder for Parents

Your teen might not be “acting out” – they might be switched off. Emotional numbness can look like laziness, apathy, rudeness or “not caring” about anything

But under the surface, it’s often a sign of:

- Emotional burnout
- Overwhelm
- Depression
- High-functioning anxiety
- Digital overload
- Unspoken stress

This disconnection is not always visible – and teens might not have the language to express it. That’s why curiosity and compassion are key.

🤌 **What helps:**

- **Stay calm, consistent and kind** – Your steady presence is more powerful than you think.
- **Ask curious, not critical, questions** – Try: “You seem a bit flat lately – how are you feeling?” or “I’ve noticed you’re spending more time in your room – is everything okay?”
- **Don’t force them to ‘cheer up’** – Encouraging someone to ‘snap out of it’ may add guilt or pressure. Instead, validate that emotional numbness is a real and difficult experience.
- **Encourage small actions** – Getting out of bed, having a shower, sitting outside – these are all wins. Focus on progress, not perfection.
- **Keep the door open** – Even if they don’t respond now, knowing you’re available without pressure can help them come to you later.

🧠 **Remember: you don’t have to fix it – just walk beside them.**

📣 “I’m here. I care. You don’t have to go through this alone.” goes a long way.

Did You Know?

- **Over 40% of UK teens** report feeling emotionally “numb” or “switched off” at least once a week (Youth Voice Survey, 2023)
- **Dissociation is a common response to stress or trauma** – but many young people experience it without knowing what it is.
- **Nearly 1 in 5** young people with a probable mental health condition say they “feel nothing most of the time.” (NHS Digital, 2023)
- Emotional numbness can be linked to **burnout, depression, anxiety, trauma, overstimulation, or digital overload.**
- Teens exposed to **chronic stress** (exams, family conflict, bullying, online drama) are more likely to shut down emotionally.
- **More than 60% of teens** say they sometimes “switch off” during conversations because they feel overwhelmed (Place2Be 2022)
- **Emotional disconnection is often underdiagnosed in boys**, as it may present as irritability or disinterest instead of sadness.
- **Nearly 70% of teens** say they scroll social media when they feel disconnected or numb – but report feeling worse afterwards (YoungMinds, 2023)
- **1 in 3 young people** report feeling emotionally detached after long periods of time online or gaming.
- The **average teen in the UK now spends more than 7 hours a day on screens** – often replacing time that would be spent socially or outdoors (Ofcom, 2023)
- A 2024 report found that **52% of teens with low mood or anxiety** describe feeling “nothing at all” rather than sadness or fear (Mind UK)

Get in touch

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ARC offers one-to-one counselling to Adults and Young People across Wokingham and the surrounding areas. We provide confidential counselling at our main site in Wokingham, Oakwood in Woodley, schools and GP surgeries across the area.

ARC provides an important role within the community, with referrals coming from other agencies as well as self-referrals.

In addition to counselling, we also offer important support for 16 – 25 year olds through our Youth Access program. This program provides information to young people on where and how to access support, from housing, to work and mental health.

Our counselling services are free to young people under the age of 21 years and low cost for adults. We believe that counselling should be accessible for all and that cost should never be a barrier to better mental health.

We are a charity with over 25 years offering support within the Wokingham area.