

“Help! I feel so numb”

Distancing ourselves from our feelings is a natural defense mechanism—but emotional numbing also cuts us off from joy. Here, easy ways to feel *all* the feels, including hope and happiness

Discover why Start with your backstory

If you find it hard to acknowledge difficult emotions, it may be because you learned to suppress them long ago, observes Christian minister Don Follis. “Many people, including me, grew up in households where everyone—Mom, Dad, the dog—were always ‘just fine.’” To grow more comfortable with both painful and positive feelings, simply label them. “You might say, ‘I’m excited my grandkids are visiting and I’m worried about my sister because she’s sick.’” This is the start of your journey out of what Follis calls “the land of numb” and into a world where it’s okay to express feelings.

Outsmart this fear
“Women tell me all the time they’re weary of feeling too much,” says therapist Kay

Gackle. Quell the fear of an emotional tsunami by focusing on a few ways you might respond to a stressor. “You could decide to go for a walk or take a few deep breaths.” Reminding yourself that you have *choices* helps ensure your emotions are no longer so scary.

Take one small step
Worrying that we can’t live up to too-high expectations is another reason we “numb out,” says expert Suzette Bray. “Women, especially caregivers, have to get so much done every day, it becomes overwhelming, and they often tell themselves, ‘I just don’t care.’”

When you feel helpless, she urges doing one small thing to restore your sense of control. That may mean researching where to find help or joining a support group. “This shifts you out of numbness and into self-efficacy.”



Open to hope

Recruit a pen or a pal
“Externalizing what we’re struggling with—either by journaling or talking to a trusted friend—pulls us out of a numb state and brings us into a place of emotional awareness,” says Gackle. In other words, making difficult emotions, like worry or fear, more concrete or tangible is a way of “off-loading” them, so that you can create room in your heart for joy.

Let yourself play
Years ago, when Bray was teaching her young son how to ride a bike, she jumped on one herself and started furiously pedaling for the first time since she was a teenager. “I’ll never forget in that moment going from ‘zombie mom’ to feeling the wind in

my hair,” she recalls, explaining that because it represents the comfort of the familiar, nostalgic adult play—such as cycling or blowing bubbles—helps us start to feel again in a way that’s safe and reassuring, rather than overwhelming.

Tap ‘somatic self-care’
Nurturing our body minimizes the urge to numb ourselves by, say, overeating or zoning out on social media, observes Bray. She says that *somatic* self-care simply means tending to our physical needs with simple stress-management strategies like eating mindfully and getting enough sleep. “When we take care of our body, we reduce our vulnerability to extreme emotions—this helps bring *balance* back into our lives.”

Our expert panel



Don Follis, author of *Leaving the Land of Numb*, directs Pastor-to-Pastor Initiatives, a ministry helping leaders connect their emotional and spiritual lives.



Kay Gackle, author of *Numb*, is a licensed marriage and family therapist in both Florida and Oklahoma. More at TLCCok.com.



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