

Chapter 3.4 Awakening From Emotional Numbing

This chapter is about emotional numbing, which can be a way of adapting to an abusive situation, but later the numbing results in feelings of alienation.

Billy talked a lot about the effect of the trauma on his emotions. He said, "I have a numb feeling. I am numb to the world. I would like to feel emotions like everyone else. I would like to laugh to feel alive. I can't cry. Dahmer beat me harder if I cried or screamed. You find a way not to make a sound. The first hit hurt the worst. When Dahmer broke my hip, he went with me to the infirmary. I told them that Dahmer did it, but he convinced them otherwise. They sent me back to the room with him. Then he forced me to dance with him. When I cried out in pain, he told me to shut up and he pulled my hair."

Emotional numbing is a frequent symptom of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and results in a feeling of alienation from humanity. Often the only emotion the person feels is anger, which results from identification with the abuser. Something unexpected will trigger anger. The person feels a loss of control and will often say, "That's not like me to behave that way." Billy said, "I get angry at the strangest things."

Crying was something Billy wanted to be able to experience. He said that feeling something unpleasant was better than not feeling at all. When Dahmer beat him until he stopped crying, he had the belief that crying was a weakness. Once when he was talking about a favorite aunt who had recently died, his eyes teared up just for a moment, and then he stopped himself, feeling that crying is a weakness. I asked him to remember when Robert Kennedy was crying doing a televised eulogy for his brother John. I asked him if he thought that Robert Kennedy was weak when he cried or that perhaps a strong person can allow himself to be seen crying. So is crying a sign of weakness or of strength? This helped him to be able to let the tears flow.

It seems that an individual can consciously be aware of a limited number of items at one time. Billy's anxiety made him acutely aware of any threatening or negative element in his environment; at the same time it limited his noticing anything else. When he became less anxious, he became aware of other things, such as birds singing, flowers, or a butterfly, and he was also able to notice positive emotions.