

# When People (Appear to) Have No Feelings

We cut off from feelings when they're too dangerous

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**“It’s** as if there’s nothing there,” says Grace, “as if he’s just empty inside....”

Most therapists like Grace are attuned to anger and despair, to the feelings of sadness and hatred behind a young person’s façade, to all the feelings powering a young person’s behaviour. Therapists listen for feelings all the time; they ask questions, they delve, they expect to find the most vivid feelings powering the most vivid behaviour. But when a young person appears to be feeling nothing? To be entirely empty of feelings? What then?

“He just looks at me blankly,” she says in our supervision meeting. “I can tell he’s bright; he understands everything and answers all my questions, but he just doesn’t appear to be feeling anything!”

I ask why 14-year-old Matteus was referred for therapy in the first place.

She explains that his teachers had observed him becoming more and more withdrawn. They suggested therapy and Matteus agreed to meet with Grace. “I’ve asked him about every part of his life,” she goes on. “I’m searching for his feelings all the time, but so far, nothing. He just doesn’t appear to have any!”

She’s desperate to help, caring about Matteus as she cares about all the young people she’s seeing, moved by their plight and full of empathy for their situations. Now she looks at me as if to say, “So what am I supposed to do?”

“People cut off from their feelings or sometimes appear to have no feelings for good reasons,” I say. “They’ve learned to do it in order to survive. Some of them – and this might include Matteus – have learned to do it so well that it becomes habitual, with the result that, long after any danger has passed, they continue to hide their feelings. It becomes a way of life. You have to remember that, for some people, feelings have been dangerous. Hiding from the enemy, a child has to keep silent or risk being caught....”

I tell her about a young asylum seeker I once worked with. He came to see me for therapy because of mysterious chest pains, having been examined by a doctor who could find no physiological explanation for the pains. The boy and I talked about his earlier experience on the run, hiding in forests with other refugees all through the winter months, frozen, desperate to avoid capture.

He said he was numb, indicating that his numbness was from the neck downwards. “I couldn’t speak or else the people I was with would hit me, because the soldiers would hear me and we would be found.”

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At various points in the story, I asked him what he'd felt, what he'd been feeling at the time. He shrugged his shoulders, looking at me as if I was slightly mad, never answering my questions but always going back to recounting the practical circumstances of the story. Before long, it dawned on me that he *couldn't* answer my questions about his feelings because he had no vocabulary for feelings. Growing up in a war-torn country, he'd never learned words for feelings. He'd become numb, not only physically, but linguistically and emotionally. My guess was that his physical chest pain was a psychosomatic expression of the emotional pain encasing him, disavowed, locked away inside his chest, unprocessed. Hurting.

I went away and made a long list of 'feeling' adjectives on a piece of cardboard with a translation into his home language beside them. After that, whenever I asked a question about his feelings, I produced this piece of card and invited him to point and say which word on the list best described what he was feeling in his chest, in his arms, in his stomach, in his legs. To begin with, he simply didn't understand some of the adjectives on the list, so I acted out their meanings for him, often to his utter bemusement, my facial expressions and bodily contortions obviously meaning nothing to him.

We continued to talk, little by little trying to unfreeze the numbness, trying to give him back the feelings in his physical body and in his emotional heart. But it was slow, slow work.

"People cut off from their feelings for very good reasons," I say to Grace. "They do it in order to survive. And daring to feel feelings again takes time. As you know, people only talk when they feel safe. The good thing about Matteus is that he's still coming to see you, which might mean that he knows something's not right, even if he can't explain what it is. You're in for the long haul, Grace."