

The Curse of Apathy: Sources and Solutions

Beware of apathy—it can be your worst enemy.

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What, exactly, is apathy anyway? In a sense, it's something like falling in love. You can describe it all you want, but until you've experienced it, you can only guess at what it feels like. Paradoxically, what makes the feeling of apathy unique is that it's essentially the feeling of *not* feeling. And doubtless, it's something that at some point in your existence you've encountered. We all have. For whenever you feel that something vital is missing from your life, yet lack the [motivation](#) or drive to pursue it, you're afflicted with this curiously "emotionless" emotion.

Through much psychological research, it's now accepted science that you must experience feelings about something if you're to take personally meaningful action on it. And without any compelling emotion to direct your behavior—and apathy literally *means* "without feeling"—you just aren't sufficiently stimulated to do much of anything.

True, apathy is a feeling—though, like going numb, it's one so muted or held with such unrecognizable tension that you may not feel it at all. But it's also an attitude. And sadly, that attitude is one of indifference . . . unconcern . . . unresponsiveness . . . detachment . . . and dispassion. Such an attitude saps you of so much energy that you feel lethargic, listless, and enervated—almost too "paralyzed" to act—and certainly without the will to do so. Which is why apathetic individuals are easily identified by their very passivity. De-motivated and lacking enthusiasm, their interest in confronting life's challenges is seriously compromised. They just don't *care* enough. And frankly, they don't care that they don't care.

Unquestionably, there are times (however short-lived) that we've all hit the wall like this. So let's look at the various *clues*—and *causes*—of apathy, and leave it up to you to decide on what characterized your own unique "engagement" with this troubling emotion of non-engagement.

Where Apathy Comes From—and What It Looks Like in (In)action

The focus of this article is on the *psychology* of apathy: its more mental causes and cures. But since there can be biological and medical factors in play as well, let's briefly enumerate some of its physical or organic causes. It's been noted ([J. Ishizaki & M. Mimura, 2011](#)) that apathy can occur in such disorders as "[schizophrenia](#), stroke, Parkinson's disease, progressive supranuclear palsy, Huntington's disease, and dementias such as Alzheimer's disease, vascular [dementia](#), and frontotemporal dementia." In less scholarly fashion, many other writers have linked its onset, and duration, to problematic lifestyles characterized by [sleep](#) deprivation (and general fatigue), poor [diet](#), and lack of exercise; or to organic defects, such as a malfunctioning thyroid gland or limbic system. As regards more [psychiatric](#) diagnoses, it's also been associated with dysthymia, major [depression](#), and [bipolar disorder](#)—as well as with the heavy use of certain [drugs](#) (from pain medications, to [marijuana](#), to [heroin](#)).

But independent of etiology, the ultimate *consequence* of all these conditions—and others, too—are pretty much the same. That is, for all who suffer from apathy, what's lost is the fundamental hope that personal [happiness](#) or fulfillment is possible. Either they've ceased to believe in the intrinsic value of the goals they'd earlier set for themselves, or they've lost faith in their *ability* to achieve these goals. So they can't think of anything worth striving for. As a result the raw mental, physical, or emotional energy for accomplishing what in the past may have been valued by them disappears. It's lost, and no- where to be found. Additionally, although feelings of depression frequently go hand-in-hand with apathy (and at times are almost indistinguishable from it), it should be noted that apathy can sometimes occur all by itself.

Here are a few things that might lead to apathy. See whether you can relate to any of them:

- Have you been having negative thoughts about yourself, or your prospects? Are you afraid to act for [fear](#) that you might fail? be rejected? confirm—once and for all—that you're inferior, incompetent, inadequate, worthless? Or is it possible that not that long ago you actually *did* experience some failure or rejection—and because of old, never rectified defeatist “programming,” you haven't been able to rebound from it?
- Did something recently happen to you, or someone you deeply care about, that has left you not simply disappointed but demoralized, pessimistic—or downright hopeless? For that matter, have any local, or perhaps global, events left you feeling *cynical*, as though whatever you might attempt to do to change things couldn't possibly make the slightest difference?
- Have you become so bored, or worn down, by tedious daily routines that it seems there's nothing to look forward to? Without quite realizing it, is there something inside you that's simply given up on creating a more joyful, gratifying future for yourself? Instead of “seizing the day” (or “taking the bull by the horns”), have you—fatalistically— become resigned to a lifetime of tedium?

If any of the causes above explains your apathy, or you can identify other factors responsible for your non-engaged state of being, it's likely that you'll be able to relate to one, or several, of the descriptors below. And whether this vaguely distressful state is one you're feeling right now, or have experienced in the past, here's an opportunity to explore which of the following characterizations resonates for you.

So, can you recall a time when you:

- Felt no interest in what, up till now, generated excitement or enthusiasm in you—such as a project, hobby, sport (whether as participant or observer); or getting together with a date or [friends](#) to watch a movie, listen to a concert, go to a favorite restaurant, etc.;
- Couldn't get yourself motivated in your [job](#) or profession: were bored by all its repetitive tasks or responsibilities, with the result that just showing up for work felt like an ordeal and your performance was imperiled by your “going about your business” half-heartedly and with minimal emotional involvement;
- Wasted time by vegetating in front of the TV, playing video games, or mindlessly surfing the Internet —knowing full well that there were much better ways to occupy yourself but, feeling run-down or washed-out, unable to prevent yourself from frittering away your time;
- Stopped exercising, but told yourself you simply weren't up to it—along with, possibly, indulging yourself with “comfort foods” of very little nutritional value;
- Couldn't devote, or commit, yourself to *anything*—for no goal, pursuit, or activity seemed worth the effort: you felt overtaken by indifference and ennui (call it a critical case of the doldrums).

If there's an overarching cause for apathy, it's probably [pessimism](#) about your future. And that self-defeating attitude could derive either from early [childhood](#) programming, which led you to believe that no matter how conscientiously you applied yourself, you *still* couldn't succeed—or, more commonly, a series of events in your present life that left you feeling you simply couldn't win for losing.

So when you've sunk down into the deep pit of apathy, and climbing out seems far too arduous for the amount of energy at your disposal, what's to be done? . . . Quite a lot, actually—though effecting such an “excavation” is generally a gradual, multi-step .

Solutions For Apathy

Although there are many practical things you can do about your apathy, you won't be able to do *any* of them unless you manage to change your mind-set. Regardless of what initially caused you to feel so unmotivated, it's your present-day outlook on it that now keeps you stuck. Your immediate task, then, is to alter this outlook. In short, you're much better off focusing on how to fix what's *inside* your head than what lies *outside* it.

And no question but that you'll need to force yourself—yes, *force* yourself!—to uproot what's already taken residence deep inside you.

So ask yourself: “Am I willing to make a commitment to myself to give this apathy the fight of its life, even though doing so feels like it will take a lot more energy and effort than I'm now capable of?” Remember, if your languor continues indefinitely, its repercussions can be enormous. You can't possibly live life to the fullest—be happy, fulfilled, or content—if you give up actively pursuing your goals and desires. In addition, failing to act can lower your [self-esteem](#), and eventuate in such distressing feelings as worthlessness, [guilt](#) or [shame](#).

Here are some solutions to consider:

Determine where your apathy is coming from, and contest its underlying assumptions. Since apathy is fundamentally about attitude, begin to look at yourself and your history from a different perspective. And that's one in which you offer yourself greater compassion, [empathy](#), and understanding—and possibly [forgiveness](#) for any past insensitivities, transgressions, or shortcomings. If you've come to identify yourself as simply lazy or unmotivated, can you now regard yourself as most likely immobilized by irrational doubts and fears, especially about failure? It's time to move beyond whatever negative messages you received about yourself in the past and realize that, as long as you don't set your sights unrealistically high and are willing to apply yourself diligently to whatever is important to you, your success is virtually guaranteed.

Transition from passivity to problem-solving. What can you do *right now* to move beyond your mental or emotional inertia? What's the easiest, most do-able first step you can take to pull yourself out of the torpor you've slid into? This is a time to brainstorm: to make a list of what isn't working for you and what could make your situation better. And if your particular circumstances aren't susceptible to change, can you accept them for what they are, get over them—and move on? The crucial thing here is simply to get unstuck from what's left you in this state of suspended animation.

Inject some novelty into your routine. Routines can become dull and tiresome, so find ways of breaking loose from them. Maybe challenge yourself to initiate a conversation with someone at work you don't know very well. Or change your exercise regimen—when, where, or with whom you work out; or what exercises you typically perform. Or make some changes in your diet, trying out new dishes or food combinations. Go on a trip, take a long walk in nature. Maybe consider applying for a new job, or going back to [school](#) to pursue an interest you'd forgotten about or earlier dismissed as impractical. And so on, and so on. Whatever might give you a new lease on life is well worth your consideration.

Challenge your apathy in every way you can. What turned you on before you were beset with your present malaise? Any friends you've lost track of, but always enjoyed talking to—especially if they made you laugh? Any particular music you found appealing, maybe even tapped your feet to? places that inspired you, whether art galleries, botanical gardens, concert halls, sporting events, etc.? Though in your quandary, engaging in such activities might not engender the same excitement it once did, the more things you try, the more likely you'll eventually be able to extricate yourself from the binding chains of your apathy.

Recall—and reawaken—happier times when you felt more enthusiastic and alive. What hobbies or leisure-time activities might you once have engaged in that you found exhilarating?—drawing? painting? reading? doing crossword puzzles? making music? dancing? designing? gardening?—even, well, blowing bubbles. It hardly matters *what* delighted you in the past. Anything at all will do here. I once published a post for *Psychology Today* called [“The Purpose of Purposelessness,”](#) which argued that so-called “purposeless” activity serves the essential purpose of reawakening you to the simple joys life has to offer—apart from their “practicality.”

Direct your [attention](#) to a goal you might pursue right now. Considering your values, aptitudes, and preferences, choose whatever goal might best capture your attention and interest, and help you creatively re-engage with life. Even if it means arbitrarily selecting among three or four things you considered in the past, don't let yourself anguish. Choose something right now. You can always change your mind later on. What's imperative is that you lift yourself out of your current morass. But don't choose anything so complex that just thinking about it makes you feel overwhelmed. Given your present lethargy, you don't want to make starting a new venture daunting, but as easy as possible. And whatever you select, you can always divvy it up into easily implemented parts.

See a professional therapist. If, after working with the above suggestions, you're *still* unable to escape your apathy, chances are you're suffering from a deeper, underlying depression. And for this, you probably need to get yourself into [counseling](#). I can hardly over-emphasize that what you can't do on your own could be greatly facilitated by enlisting the assistance of someone who can understand the dynamics of your dilemma—and offer viable ways for you to overcome it.