

Measuring emotional 'emptiness' could help manage this potentially life-threatening experience

March 27 2024, by Shona Joyce Herron



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Imagine a hollowness deep in your chest, a vacant space where feelings

should be. Imagine being numb and devoid of all emotion, happy or sad—with any sensations simply passing right through you. You are watching the world go by from behind a screen—so disconnected that you feel a million miles away from people you care about the most.

This is how [hundreds of people](#) have described the existential feeling of emotional "emptiness." Perhaps some aspects may feel familiar to you. After all, research has repeatedly shown that emptiness is [a common experience](#), felt by many of us around the world.

For some, emptiness may be a fleeting experience during a time of immense difficulty in our lives, which passes. Following a period of feeling empty, we may be able to sense ourselves returning, feeling gradually more connected to our inner-self, other people, and the world around us.

But for some, emptiness is a chronic, debilitating experience which has been found to be strongly connected to numerous [life-limiting mental health difficulties](#) such as depression, anxiety and experiences of hearing voices, including for people who receive a diagnosis of a personality disorder.

Recent developments including [new measurement tools](#), however, are starting to shine a light on this elusive experience, enabling researchers and mental health professionals to better support people who feel this way.

What is emptiness?

In 2022, along with a colleague, I proposed a [formal definition](#) of emptiness as:

"A feeling that one is going through life mechanically, devoid of

emotions and purpose, and therefore is empty inside, with emptiness often being bodily felt in the form of a discomfort in the chest. This is coupled with feelings that one is disconnected from others, in some way invisible to others, and unable to contribute to a world that remains the same, but from which one is distant and detached."

Our research found that while emptiness is experienced by people who have mental health difficulties, it is also felt by those who have never suffered with their mental health before, and who may have never felt the need to seek help from professionals.

Despite this, across all of those who took part in the research, it was found that greater feelings of emptiness were related to poorer mental health and lower satisfaction with life.

Emptiness and mental health

People who feel empty often or all the time are more [likely to have self-harmed](#), [thought about suicide](#), or gone on to make an attempt to end their life.

These findings add to [previous research](#) showing that emptiness is related to harmful use of drugs, alcohol, and unsafe sex. Other [studies show](#) that [feelings of emptiness](#) seem to affect every aspect of a person's individual and social world.

Self-harm, [suicide](#) and use of substances or sex can be understood, then, as ways of coping with or distracting from the emotional [pain of feeling empty](#).

Measuring emptiness

Thankfully, research in this much-needed area is progressing. Our 2022 definition has increased the understanding of emptiness among researchers and health professionals, and has led researchers to develop a new way of measuring and tracking it over time.

The [Psychological Emptiness Scale](#), created in 2022 by clinical and social psychologists alongside statisticians, is a questionnaire consisting of 19 items. It asks people questions such as whether they feel emotionally numb, that they are going through the motions, and that they have no direction in life.

This tool is now available for researchers and [mental health professionals](#) to use to formally assess a person's level of emptiness. It allows this complex, existential feeling to be accurately captured and quantified.

This will enable researchers to properly study emptiness, explore questions about how it develops, and how different therapeutic interventions may help people to manage and reduce this feeling.

Emptiness is a commonly experienced and potentially life-threatening feeling. Accurate measurement marks a significant step forward in our ability to identify, understand and provide support to people who feel this way, in the hope of ultimately reducing distress and saving lives.

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