

Inner Emptiness in Psychopathology: Conceptualization, Prevalence, and Therapeutic Implications

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ABSTRACT: Inner emptiness is a pervasive psychological phenomenon rooted in early experiences of emotional deprivation and attachment disruptions. When fundamental emotional needs are unmet in childhood—through neglect, invalidation, or inappropriate attention—individuals may develop a chronic sense of emotional void, disconnection from self, and relational detachment. These early developmental experiences, compounded by trauma, intergenerational transmission, or life transitions, contribute to enduring affective deficits, often manifesting as sadness, loneliness, or numbness. Although frequently associated with psychiatric conditions such as borderline personality disorder, depression, and schizophrenia spectrum disorders, inner emptiness can also occur in psychologically healthy individuals during existential crises. Multifactorial etiologies include developmental, relational, and sociocultural factors. Interventions emphasize self-acceptance, mindfulness, self-care, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and professional therapeutic support, alongside engagement in meaningful activities to restore emotional integration and a sense of purpose.

KEYWORDS: Inner emptiness, emotional deprivation, attachment, childhood trauma, emotional invalidation, mindfulness, self-care, emotional regulation.

THE ORIGINS OF INNER EMPTINESS: EARLY EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES AND DEVELOPMENTAL ROOTS

Inner emptiness is grounded in early experiences of emotional deprivation. It arises when fundamental emotional needs remain unmet over an extended period of time. The roots of inner emptiness are often embedded in early developmental experiences. When children are not adequately perceived, emotionally mirrored, or accompanied by responsive caregivers, this neglect can become deeply anchored in the self.

In the absence of the reassuring experience of being seen and heard, an individual develops a deficit in inner resonance — a lack of emotional attunement that may later manifest as a persistent sense of emptiness, an emotional vacuum that appears insatiable. However, such experiences are not confined to childhood; existential crises such as separation, bereavement, or major life transitions can also evoke this affective state.

Early experiences of emptiness constitute **traumatic events** that may disrupt psychological development. Every human being depends on interpersonal resonance, relationship, and attachment. The earliest experiences of life exert the most profound and lasting influence. Encountering inner emptiness thus inevitably invites a retrospective gaze toward one's childhood. During the early years of life, fundamental emotional patterns emerge—patterns that persist throughout the lifespan.

Early attachment experiences play a decisive role in this process. Children require a secure base—caregivers who recognize their needs and respond to them appropriately. When such resonance is absent, a sense of invisibility and emotional neglect develops. This lack of acknowledgment can evolve into a profound emptiness in adulthood, one that often defies verbal expression.

Particularly detrimental are experiences of **emotional invalidation**. When a child's emotions are ignored, dismissed, or even ridiculed, the child learns early to suppress authentic feelings. Phrases such as *"You're too sensitive"* or *"Don't be so dramatic"* become internalized and lead to a disconnection from one's true emotional self.

For some individuals, emptiness originates not from a lack of attention, but paradoxically from **the wrong kind of attention**. Children who receive recognition solely for achievement or who are required to embody the role of the "good child" often lose touch with their authentic desires and needs.

Moreover, **traumatic experiences** leave enduring psychological traces. To protect themselves from overwhelming emotions, children develop psychological defense mechanisms ranging from dissociation to emotional numbing. These adaptive survival strategies, while functional in childhood, may manifest in adulthood as a chronic experience of inner emptiness.

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When parents themselves struggle with inner emptiness, they often transmit this condition unconsciously to their children. The absence of emotional connection thus becomes an intergenerational relational pattern. As adults, individuals carry these unconscious templates into their relationships until they begin the process of conscious recognition and transformation.

Individuals who experience inner emptiness often perceive themselves as mere passive observers of their own lives. They tend to feel restless and are frequently afflicted by persistent self-doubt, even if this is not outwardly evident. Such individuals often exhibit a profound longing for recognition and for a sense of fulfillment within what they perceive as a dull or meaningless existence. Enduring feelings of sadness, incompleteness, or loneliness may create a metaphorical void within the self—a psychological space that one then attempts to fill through various means, often unsuccessfully.

Researchers at **California State University San Marcos**, drawing upon an extensive review of existing literature and qualitative interviews with patients, developed an instrument designed to measure the subjective experience of inner emptiness. This instrument, the **Subjective Emptiness Scale (SES)**, identifies the following affective states as characteristic of the phenomenon:

- The feeling of being alone in the world;
- The feeling of being unfulfilled regardless of one's actions;
- The feeling of being compelled merely to exist;
- The feeling of being detached from the world;
- The feeling of being absent from one's own life;
- A pervasive sense of numbness or dullness.

In addition to these defining criteria, the psychological literature on inner emptiness frequently highlights further aspects that either accompany or typify the condition:

- Loss of the capacity to be emotionally present with others;
- Inability to attribute meaning to experiences;
- Absence of intrinsic motivation;
- Flattened affect or emotional numbness;
- Experience of loneliness even in the presence of others;
- Sadness and a sense of incompleteness.

THE FEELING OF INNER EMPTINESS AS A PERVERSIVE PHENOMENON

Among individuals with psychiatric conditions, the experience of inner emptiness is particularly prevalent. It is estimated that approximately **24–36%** of persons diagnosed with mental disorders experience a persistent sense of internal emptiness. Although the phenomenon is most frequently associated with **Borderline Personality Disorder**, it is also observed in cases of **depressive disorders**, **narcissistic personality disorder**, and **schizophrenia spectrum disorders**, with specific features varying across diagnostic categories.

Although inner emptiness is not formally recognized as a symptom of depression in either the **DSM-5** or **ICD-11**, it is conceptually and phenomenologically closely related to depressive experiences. The phenomenological psychiatrist **Jürg Zutt** emphasized that within depression, the central experiential quality is not sadness per se, but rather a profound sense of emptiness.

Similarly, the author **Sally Brampton**, in her autobiographical account of depression, described this affective state as follows:

“It is this glass wall that separates us from life, from ourselves, that is truly terrifying in depression. It is a horrible awareness of our own overwhelming reality, a reality that we know has nothing to do with the reality we once knew.” (Brampton, 2008)

It is important to note, however, that the feeling of inner emptiness does not necessarily indicate a clinical mental disorder. Many psychologically healthy individuals experience transient phases of emptiness, particularly during times of existential transition or crisis.

ETIOLOGY

When not directly linked to a psychiatric diagnosis, the origins of inner emptiness can be multifactorial. It may emerge as a manifestation of existential meaninglessness or a perceived lack of stability and coherence in life. Given its prevalence, inner emptiness can also be understood within a **sociocultural** context.

The French sociologist **Alain Ehrenberg** explored the connection between modern social transformations and the increasing incidence of affective disorders. In his work, Ehrenberg conceptualizes depression—and its pre-pathological forms, including feelings of emptiness—as a **response to the modern imperative of self-determination**.

As traditional social constraints and collective expectations have diminished, individuals are increasingly burdened with the responsibility of defining and fulfilling their own life purpose. The expansion of personal freedom and autonomy, while ostensibly liberating, has paradoxically generated new forms of psychological pressure. The obligation to achieve self-realization may lead to **disorientation, motivational paralysis, and the loss of existential meaning**.

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APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING INNER EMPTINESS

Effective intervention depends upon identifying the underlying cause. Inner emptiness resulting from **psychiatric pathology** requires a clinical approach, while that stemming from **situational stress or existential fatigue** may be addressed through psychosocial and behavioral means.

Common maladaptive coping strategies include overconsumption of food, alcohol, or drugs, compulsive shopping, or excessive work engagement. These behaviors function primarily as temporary distractions and do not address the underlying affective deficit. More constructive approaches are outlined below.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH INNER EMPTINESS

- **Acceptance of the Affective State**

Recognizing and accepting the current emotional condition constitutes a fundamental step toward recovery. Acknowledging the presence of emptiness without self-condemnation allows the individual to approach it with self-compassion rather than resistance. Acceptance facilitates emotional regulation and fosters psychological resilience.

- **Enhancement of Self-Care**

Prioritizing one's own physical and emotional well-being is essential. Individuals who consistently subordinate their needs to those of others may become alienated from their own affective life. Engaging in balanced nutrition, regular physical activity, adequate rest, and the establishment of personal boundaries contributes to the restoration of emotional stability and self-connection.

- **Development of Mindfulness Practices**

Mindfulness promotes heightened awareness of internal states without judgment. By consciously observing thoughts and emotions, individuals can reconnect with their needs and experiences. Activities such as **praying, meditation, yoga, and controlled breathing** have been empirically shown to reduce stress vulnerability and enhance emotional integration. Reflective writing or journaling may further aid in articulating and processing emotional experiences.

- **Strengthening Interpersonal Relationships**

Social connectedness is a protective factor for psychological well-being. Maintaining supportive relationships and engaging in meaningful interpersonal interactions mitigates the sense of isolation associated with inner emptiness. The quality of connections is more critical than their quantity; even a small network of empathetic individuals can provide significant emotional sustenance.

- **Utilization of Professional Support**

When the experience of emptiness arises from unresolved trauma, adverse childhood experiences, or underlying mental illness, professional intervention is indicated. Psychotherapeutic approaches such as **psychodynamic therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, or existential analysis** can assist in uncovering and addressing the root causes of emptiness. Seeking therapy should be viewed not as a failure, but as an active and adaptive response to psychological distress.

Additionally, engaging in activities that impart **meaning and purpose**—such as creative pursuits, nature immersion, or volunteer work—can foster a renewed sense of vitality and coherence. Attending to inner signals and aligning one's actions with authentic values facilitates the gradual reemergence of emotional fulfillment.

CONCLUSION

Inner emptiness is not a personal failure, nor a sign of emotional deficiency, but a deeply human response to unmet needs, loss, or disconnection. It reflects places within the self where understanding, care, or meaning were once absent or interrupted. While the experience can feel isolating and difficult to articulate, it also carries important psychological information: it signals a longing for connection, authenticity, and emotional presence. Healing does not occur through filling the void with distractions, achievements, or external validation, but through gradually turning toward oneself with curiosity, compassion, and patience. By acknowledging the origins of emptiness, reconnecting with inner experience, nurturing meaningful relationships, and seeking support when needed, individuals can begin to restore a sense of emotional continuity and purpose. In this way, inner emptiness—though painful—may become not only a symptom of past deprivation, but also an invitation to deeper self-understanding and psychological growth.

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