

The Desensitization of Our Emotions

The negative side effects of pornography have long been known by psychologists as well as most of the general public. One of the most prominent side effects that men experience is desensitization to the content that they consume. The longer they watch porn, often times the more intense the content has to become in order to achieve the same satisfaction, escalating until real human connection no longer satisfies you, and you're only left with extremely graphic and intense content just to try and feel something.

This has been talked about at length, but recently, it occurred to me that we're experiencing this everywhere in all facets of life. Humans are becoming desensitized to their emotions more and more everyday.

Recently while driving around with my 15 year old sister, she asked me if she could put on her podcast, I said yes, actually excited by the idea of her listening to something besides y2k pop.

That excitement didn't last long as we began listening to a woman recount in great graphic detail the history of a certain famous serial killer while she applied her makeup. I, to say the least, was horrified and disturbed. My sister, on the other hand, was enthralled.

Now this is nothing new. Obviously this woman has built a following on people consuming this content, no matter how twisted you may think it is, and of course, we've been listening to murder mystery podcasts and watching "who done it" shows for decades. But the question is why? I think once upon a time, the idea of this kind of content consumption would be horrifying to the average person. Only very disturbed

people were interested in this kind of information.

We've been discussing since the early 90s the effects of violent video games on a child's psyche and rather or not violence in TV and video games can desensitize you to real life violence (evidence would suggest yes, it likely does) And now, it seems like we're only seeing more violence portrayed in media that we were 30 years ago.

Now this really isn't about becoming desensitized to violence. It's much broader than that. I would argue that as a society we're become desensitized to everything.

I think the biggest example of this is social media, and the way we consume content. Scrolling on social media releases dopamine by activating the brain's reward pleasure system. Unfortunately, this is a rather unnatural way to release dopamine, and over time we become addicted to these quick fixes, giving us instant dopamine hits. Just like a regular drug addict, after time we need more and more to achieve the same effect, but this isn't just "more" in terms of quantity. It's more flashy, more instant gratification, louder and more dramatic content needed to grab our attention and release the same dopamine hit.

"Doing things that are hard is one of the best ways to pursue a life worth living, because the pleasure we get afterwards is more enduring,"

-Constant craving: how digital media turned us all into dopamine addicts

The immediate access to instant pleasure is a problem worth talking about, however, I think there's another deeper layer here contributing to our desensitization that makes this a two-fold issue.

The number of people on antidepressants, mood stabilizers, and

other psychiatric drugs has skyrocketed over the last several decades, and I largely believe that this is a huge contributor to our desensitization. While these drugs are often used for their ability to alleviate depression, these drugs can alleviate all emotions, leaving us a shell of our former self, maybe not sad anymore, but maybe not much of anything else. Unable to feel intense joy, sorrow, or anything in between.

“This flattening of feelings, also called “reduced affect,” is a potential side effect of antidepressants, especially selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). Around half of people taking antidepressants report some degree of blunted emotions, according to research.[1] “

-All About Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs): Types, Side Effects, and More

As a society we have two things working against us at once. These drugs, numbing our emotions, and this huge influx of instant dopamine at our fingertips. It's a perfect combination for an overly addicted, numbed, zombie-like society.

The question is what can we do about it? It seems many of these things are unavoidable, and in a way they are. It's hard to get by in the modern world without a smartphone.

I think the answer is to start small. Find offline hobbies, try leaving your phone at home when you're going somewhere you won't need it. I often like to leave mine at home when I'm going out with my parents or other close family members. Try a social media detox. I recently did this and found it to be enlightening. You can read more about my experience with that here. Try engaging with your peers in the real world without a screen in your hand, talk to a stranger at a coffee shop. Imagine what life would be like, what you would do if you didn't have a phone, and then try that.

I'm not perfect. I can't tell you how many times I stopped

what I was doing to check my phone in the middle of writing this article. As a matter of fact, I'm sitting outside a coffee shop right now writing, rather than engaging with the world around me (sometimes you have to work) but last weekend I went to a party with my family and left my phone at home. Last week I lost my phone and decided to let it be lost when I went to bed. I found it again the next morning, and nothing bad happened.

Being aware of these issues is, in my opinion, one of the crucial first steps to making changes to the world we live in.

- *Emotional Desensitization to Violence Contributes to Adolescents' Violent Behavior*
- *Constant craving: how digital media turned us all into dopamine addicts*
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