

## Being Strong: Emotional Shutdown as a Socially Misinterpreted Psychological Experience

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### ABSTRACT

Sometimes what looks like strength is actually silence hiding pain. This study explores emotional shutdown and how it is often misunderstood as a sign of being strong. Emotional shutdown, where a person slowly lose the ability to feel or express emotions, usually develops because of too much stress, trauma or emotional overload. It acts more like a protection, not real strength. Drawing from ideas of Carl Jung, James Gross, Richard Lazarus and Bessel van der Kolk, the study shows that emotional suppression and true resilience are not same, even if they seem similar outside. It further looks at how society plays a role in this misunderstanding. Cultural norms, gender expectations, workplace pressure and family environment often make emotional silence and composure look like maturity. Because of this, people starts believing that not expressing emotions is a good thing, even when it slowly affects them inside. The study also highlights the impact of long-term emotional shutdown. It can lead to feeling disconnected, delayed emotional processing, strained relationships, burnout and difficulty in seeking help. While emotional shutdown and resilience may appear alike externally, they are very different in what they mean internally and how they affect a person over time. In the end, the study points out the need for more awareness, emotional understanding and support, because many people are struggling quietly and it often goes unnoticed.

**Keywords:** *Emotional Shutdown, Emotional Regulation, Emotional Suppression, Resilience, Emotional Numbness, Psychological Coping*

Emotions are central to human psychological functioning and play a critical role in shaping cognition, behavior, and interpersonal relationships. They influence how individuals interpret experiences, make decisions, and adapt to changing environments. Emotional responses provide valuable information about internal states and external situations, guiding individuals in responding appropriately to both opportunities and threats. From a psychological perspective, the capacity to experience, understand, and respond to emotions is considered an essential component of mental health. Emotional awareness allows individuals to recognize distress, seek support, and process experiences in ways that promote psychological growth and resilience (Gross, 1998; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

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## **Being Strong: Emotional Shutdown as a Socially Misinterpreted Psychological Experience**

Among those who have shaped our understanding of emotional experience, Carl Jung offered particularly influential insights into the complexity of the unconscious mind. Jung suggested that psychological imbalance does not always manifest through intense emotional reactions such as panic, anger, or grief. Instead, he argued that a more subtle and potentially dangerous state may emerge when individuals become emotionally detached from their experiences, an unnatural calm in which individuals appear composed and unaffected even in situations that would normally evoke emotional responses (Jung, 1964). When a person confronts emotional pain yet feels nothing, this absence of feeling should not be interpreted as strength or maturity. Rather, it may represent a defensive response of the psyche, protecting itself from overwhelming distress by temporarily "anesthetizing" emotional experience (Jung, 1968).

In this state of emotional detachment, life may appear normal on the surface. Individuals may continue to engage in everyday activities, working, communicating, maintaining social roles. However, internally, a withdrawal from emotional engagement occurs. Jung believed that when emotions are suppressed or disconnected from conscious awareness, they do not disappear; instead, they move into the unconscious, where they continue to influence thoughts and behaviors in indirect ways. His concept of the shadow, parts of the personality that individuals tend to repress, is directly relevant here. When emotions such as fear, anger, grief, or vulnerability are repeatedly suppressed, they may accumulate within the shadow and later manifest through dreams, recurring thoughts, or psychological emptiness (Jung, 1968).

The psychological processes described by Jung are closely related to the modern concept of emotional regulation, the ways individuals manage and respond to emotional experiences. Healthy emotional regulation involves recognizing emotions, understanding their causes, and expressing them constructively, thereby maintaining emotional stability while preserving a full range of feelings (Gross, 1998; Thompson, 1994). However, emotional regulation is often confused with emotional suppression. While regulation involves acknowledging emotions and managing them thoughtfully, suppression involves inhibiting emotional expression or avoiding emotional awareness altogether. Over time, habitual suppression reduces emotional awareness and can lead to emotional shutdown, a psychological state of diminished capacity to feel or express emotions. By reducing emotional responsiveness, the psyche attempts to shield the individual from further psychological distress (van der Kolk, 2014).

Despite these psychological implications, emotional detachment is often socially interpreted as a sign of strength. Cultural expressions such as "stay strong," "be tough," and "don't let emotions control you" reinforce the idea that emotional restraint reflects resilience and maturity (Hochschild, 1983). The distinction between genuine resilience and emotional shutdown is therefore critically important. Resilience refers to the ability to adapt to adversity while maintaining psychological flexibility and emotional awareness, whereas emotional shutdown involves a reduction or absence of emotional engagement. This review paper examines this distinction, drawing on psychological literature and theoretical perspectives to clarify how emotional numbness can emerge as a defensive psychological response and how it becomes misinterpreted as resilience.

### ***Conceptual Clarification***

Understanding emotional shutdown requires clear distinctions between several closely related psychological constructs frequently used interchangeably in everyday language.

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Emotion is a complex psychological and physiological state involving subjective feelings, physiological arousal, cognitive appraisal, and behavioral expression. Paul Ekman identified several universal basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust, while Richard Lazarus emphasized cognitive appraisal as central to emotional experience (Cacioppo et al., 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Because emotions serve adaptive functions, guiding attention, motivating behavior, and facilitating communication, their absence may indicate disruption rather than strength.

Emotional regulation refers to the processes through which individuals influence how they experience, express, and manage emotions. James Gross (1998) describes it as occurring through stages including situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation. Healthy emotional regulation allows individuals to remain emotionally aware while responding adaptively to stress (Thompson, 1994), it does not require eliminating emotions but balancing their expression with situational demands.

Emotional suppression refers to the deliberate inhibition of emotional expression or awareness. Unlike regulation, suppression attempts to prevent emotions from being expressed or consciously recognized. Research suggests suppression may reduce outward emotional expression without reducing the internal emotional experience, and over time can be associated with increased anxiety, reduced interpersonal satisfaction, and decreased emotional awareness (Gross & John, 2003).

Emotional numbness or emotional shutdown describes a psychological state in which individuals experience a reduced capacity to feel emotions, broader than suppression, involving disengagement from emotional experience altogether. Individuals may report emptiness, detachment, or disconnection from themselves and others. This state, often associated with trauma or prolonged stress (van der Kolk, 2014), functions as a defense mechanism that protects against further emotional overload while potentially pushing unresolved emotions into the unconscious (Carl Jung, 1968).

Coping refers to cognitive and behavioral strategies used to manage stressors, problem focused (addressing the source) or emotion focused (managing the distress), and may be adaptive or maladaptive depending on long term effects (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Resilience, by contrast, is the broader capacity to adapt and recover from adversity while maintaining psychological well being and emotional awareness (Bonanno, 2004; Werner & Smith, 1992).

Finally, psychological strength involves emotional awareness, self regulation, and the ability to face difficult experiences without losing psychological balance (Rogers, 1961), a definition that diverges from social definitions that prioritize emotional restraint and endurance (Hochschild, 1983). Clarifying these distinctions is essential for understanding emotional shutdown not as a form of strength but as a complex psychological response deserving careful attention.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Understanding emotional shutdown requires looking at different theories that explain how people deal with overwhelming emotions.

- a) Emotional Regulation Theories. James Gross (1998) explains that emotions can be managed at different stages, from choosing situations to controlling responses. In this

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model, suppression is a response focused strategy, it reduces what people show outside but not what they feel inside. Research shows that using suppression too much can reduce emotional awareness and increase mental strain, which slowly can lead to emotional shutdown (Gross & John, 2003; Thompson, 1994).

- b) **Defense Mechanisms.** Early psychoanalytic theory explained defense mechanisms as unconscious ways of protecting the mind from anxiety (Sigmund Freud, 1936). Repression pushes painful emotions out of awareness, while emotional withdrawal creates distance from difficult experiences. From Carl Jung's view, these suppressed emotions become part of the shadow and later show up indirectly through dreams, symbols or inner tension (Jung, 1968), showing that avoiding emotions can have long term effects.
- c) **Coping Theories.** Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) divided coping into problem focused and emotion focused. Avoidance and emotional disengagement are considered unhealthy when they stop a person from dealing with real issues (Carver & Connor Smith, 2010). In this sense, emotional shutdown may act as a coping response when everything feels too much, giving short term relief but making things harder later.
- d) **Trauma and Emotional Numbing.** Research on trauma explains emotional numbing as a reduced ability to feel or express emotions after extreme stress (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Bessel van der Kolk (2014) explained how repeated stress affects the brain's emotional system, leading to numbness as a form of protection. This is not only about big trauma, even long term stress, conflicts or repeated emotional hurt can cause similar detachment.
- e) **Attachment and Emotional Detachment.** John Bowlby (1988) explained how early relationships shape emotional behaviour. People with avoidant attachment, usually developed when closeness led to rejection, may look emotionally independent but struggle with expressing feelings or asking for support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Emotional distance then becomes a learned way to handle stress in relationships.

### ***Social Construction of "Being Strong"***

The idea of "being strong" is not fixed, it is shaped by society through cultural norms, expectations and shared beliefs about how emotions should be shown. These meanings strongly affect how people understand their own feelings, sometimes in ways they don't even realize.

Across many cultures, strength is linked with تحمل hardship without showing distress. The idea of emotional display rules, explained by Arlie Hochschild (1983), shows how societies decide which emotions are okay to express and which should be controlled. In many places, staying emotionally quiet is seen as maturity, while expressing emotions is seen as weakness, which slowly pushes people to hide what they really feel (Nolen Hoeksema, 2012).

This idea is also shaped by gender roles. Men are often taught to hide vulnerability and stay in control, where being emotionless is seen as masculine (Nolen Hoeksema, 2012). Women, even though they can express more, are expected to take care of others emotions while ignoring their own, which is also restrictive in a different way. Families also pass on these beliefs. Children are told to "stay strong" during tough times, while caregivers hide their own pain to look stable (John Bowlby, 1988; Linehan, 1993).

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Workplaces also play a big role. Arlie Hochschild's idea of emotional labor explains how people have to manage emotions at work, showing calmness or positivity even when they don't feel it. Those who hide stress are seen as professional, while those who show it may be judged as weak. Over time, this can create emotional exhaustion and even lead to shutdown (Pennebaker, 1997).

One of the biggest issues is how silence gets praised. People who don't react emotionally are often seen as mature and in control. When this keeps happening, people start believing that expressing emotions is wrong. But psychologically, real maturity means understanding and expressing emotions in a healthy way, not just staying silent (Rogers, 1961).

### *Emotional Shutdown as a Socially Reinforced Pattern*

Emotional shutdown often emerges gradually through repeated social experiences that reward emotional restraint. Social praise for composure encourages individuals to maintain emotional control in difficult situations, reinforcing the idea that restraint is socially valued. When composure is consistently praised, individuals begin to prioritize external stability over internal emotional processing (Hochschild, 1983).

Beyond praise, social systems may also indirectly **reward suppression**. Research by Gross (2014) indicates that suppression reduces outward emotional expression while leaving internal emotional experiences largely unchanged. However, when suppression is consistently rewarded by social approval, individuals may rely on it as a primary strategy the repeated use of which reduces emotional awareness over time, transforming suppression into emotional disengagement (Gross & John, 2003).

Through this process, individuals may **internalize expectations** of emotional restraint, internalizing beliefs such as "I must stay strong," "I should not react," and "I cannot let my emotions show." Psychological theories of self-regulation suggest that internalized standards strongly influence behavior; once individuals internalize the belief that emotional reactions should be avoided, they begin to monitor and control emotional responses more strictly and automatically (Linehan, 1993).

As emotional restraint becomes habitual, individuals may **incorporate strength into their personal identity**. Once they begin to see themselves as emotionally controlled, they feel pressure to maintain this image even when emotional expression would be beneficial. Expressing vulnerability appears inconsistent with their self-concept. From a Jungian perspective, when aspects of emotional experience are consistently rejected to maintain a socially acceptable identity, they become part of the unconscious shadow (Jung, 1968) contributing to further emotional distancing.

The final consequence is **emotional invisibility**: the individual's internal emotional experiences become consistently hidden, unrecognized by others and eventually by the individual themselves. Because others perceive them as strong and stable, they receive little encouragement to share emotional struggles. This creates a feedback loop in which emotional silence leads others to assume the individual is coping well, reducing opportunities for support and validation (Pennebaker, 1997) and reinforcing continued emotional shutdown.

### *Psychological Consequences of Emotional Shutdown*

Prolonged emotional shutdown leads to a range of significant psychological consequences affecting emotional awareness, cognitive processing, interpersonal relationships, and overall mental well-being (Gross & John, 2003; van der Kolk, 2014).

**Emotional disconnection** is among the most commonly discussed consequences a reduced ability to experience, identify, or express emotions. Chronic suppression reduces emotional awareness and limits an individual's ability to recognize what they are feeling, contributing to a sense of numbness or detachment from both self and others. Individuals may report feeling little emotional response even in situations that typically evoke strong reactions, with emotional blunting interfering with decision-making, motivation, and social interaction (Gross & John, 2003; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

**Delayed emotional processing** occurs because suppression does not eliminate emotions but prevents them from being consciously processed. Unprocessed emotions may resurface unexpectedly individuals who suppress distressing emotions may later experience sudden emotional reactions when confronted with reminders of the original event. This accumulation of unprocessed feelings increases psychological tension and may manifest as anxiety, irritability, or sudden emotional outbursts (Pennebaker, 1997).

**Relationship strain** develops because human relationships depend heavily on emotional communication and empathy. When individuals consistently suppress their emotions, they struggle to express their needs or feelings, creating barriers to open communication. Partners, friends, or family members may interpret emotional absence as indifference, reducing closeness and mutual support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Chronic emotional suppression may also reduce sensitivity to social cues, making it harder to respond empathically to others' emotional needs (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

**Burnout** is another associated consequence. When individuals continuously suppress emotions, they exert additional mental energy to maintain control over reactions. Studies in occupational psychology have found that employees who frequently hide emotions report higher levels of stress and fatigue, with burnout characterized by emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, and depersonalization (Hochschild, 1983). Finally, emotional shutdown creates **difficulty seeking support** individuals accustomed to managing emotions privately develop beliefs that expressing vulnerability is inappropriate, avoiding discussions of personal difficulties even when support is available (Pennebaker, 1997), increasing isolation and prolonging psychological distress.

### **COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: EMOTIONAL SHUTDOWN VS. RESILIENCE**

While emotional shutdown and resilience may appear superficially similar both can manifest as calmness and composure during stressful situations their underlying psychological mechanisms and long-term implications differ substantially.

**Genuine resilience** is a dynamic process through which individuals adapt successfully to challenging circumstances. Rather than implying an absence of emotional distress, resilience acknowledges that adversity produces emotional reactions such as fear, sadness, or grief, and what distinguishes resilience is the individual's ability to experience these emotions while continuing to function and gradually restore psychological balance (Bonanno, 2004; Werner & Smith, 1992). Resilient individuals demonstrate flexibility in emotional and cognitive processes, maintain adaptive coping strategies, and preserve meaningful

interpersonal connections. Exposure to difficult circumstances may also encourage new perspectives and greater emotional awareness what Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) term post-traumatic growth.

**Functional emotional regulation**, closely related to resilience, involves acknowledging and modulating emotional responses according to situational demands rather than eliminating them (Gross, 2014). A person may temporarily suppress visible emotional expression to handle immediate tasks, then later process the emotional impact through conversation or journaling (Pennebaker, 1997). This remains flexible and context-dependent, maintaining internal emotional awareness even when outward expression is deferred.

**Emotional shutdown**, by contrast, produces surface-level composure that can be mistaken for strength. Individuals experiencing emotional shutdown appear calm externally while internally reporting detachment, numbness, or emptiness. The underlying psychological process involves a withdrawal from emotional awareness not balanced regulation but disengagement. Unresolved emotional material may manifest indirectly through fatigue, irritability, or persistent exhaustion, revealing that disengagement does not eliminate distress but changes its form (van der Kolk, 2014).

A key difference lies in **flexibility versus rigidity**. Resilient individuals adjust emotional and behavioral responses to changing circumstances (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). Emotional shutdown involves a more rigid pattern of emotional disengagement that becomes a default response across multiple contexts, restricting the range of emotional responses available to the individual. Over time, this leads to distinct outcomes: resilience supports recovery, emotional growth, and maintenance of supportive relationships, while emotional shutdown may contribute to ongoing emotional disconnection, limiting reflection and emotional resolution.

Recognizing this distinction invites a reframing of strength. Rather than equating strength solely with emotional silence or endurance, strength can be understood as the capacity to remain emotionally present while navigating challenging experiences — the ability to regulate emotions without losing awareness of them (Rogers, 1961; Seligman, 2011).

### ***Synthesis of Literature***

The literature across earlier sections shows some clear patterns. First, emotions are always seen as important for thinking, motivation and relationships, and when they are missing, it usually shows something is wrong, not strength (James Gross, 1998; Fredrickson, 2001). Second, ways of managing emotions can become unhealthy when feelings are constantly avoided. Suppression may help in short term, but it disturbs proper emotional processing in long run (Gross & John, 2003). Third, emotional detachment works like a protection, helpful at first but later it can reduce emotional awareness, affect relationships and overall well being (Bessel van der Kolk, 2014).

From a social side, when emotional control is always praised, people start learning that hiding emotions is a good thing (Arlie Hochschild, 1983; Nolen Hoeksema, 2012). This is very common in workplaces, caregiving roles and also in gender expectations. Slowly, people internalize this idea and start suppressing emotions automatically, without even realizing. Over time, this emotional restraint becomes part of their identity, like being strong and dependable (Linehan, 1993).

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A major confusion comes when resilience and emotional shutdown are seen together. From outside, both may look same, calm and composed, but internally they are very different. A resilient person still feels and processes emotions, while emotional shutdown reduces emotional awareness completely. Research has not focused enough on how people confuse these two in real life, and how emotional silence gets rewarded as strength. Because of this, there is a need to redefine strength, not as staying silent, but as staying emotionally present and aware (Rogers, 1961; Martin Seligman, 2011).

### *Research Gaps*

There are some important gaps in the research that still need attention.

First, there is a lack of qualitative and meaning focused studies. Most research on emotional detachment depends on numbers and measurements of emotional regulation or symptoms of numbness. But this doesn't fully capture what people actually feel or go through. Methods like narrative or thematic analysis could give deeper understanding of how individuals experience emotional shutdown and how it changes over time.

Second, emotional shutdown is often over pathologized. Many studies only talk about it in terms of trauma related disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), ignoring that it can also happen in everyday life without any major trauma. Seeing it only as a clinical issue kind of limits understanding. It should be seen more as a spectrum, where emotional detachment can exist in different forms and intensities (Carver & Connor Smith, 2010).

Third, there is limited focus on socio cultural factors. Even though theories accept that society shapes emotional expression, not many studies deeply explore how ideas of strength, control and composure actually encourage emotional shutdown. Looking at this through both psychology and sociology, like the work of Arlie Hochschild (1983), can give a more complete picture of how these patterns develop.

Lastly, there is very little discussion about identity. Research rarely looks at how a person's identity, especially when they see themselves as strong or resilient, connects with emotional shutdown. From a Carl Jung perspective, this can create conflict, because accepting distress may feel like going against their own self image (Jung, 1968). Future research should explore how emotional shutdown interacts with identity across different life stages and cultures, to better understand why it continues and what it really means for individuals.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this review carry important implications across several domains. **Mental health awareness** must expand to include discussions of emotional shutdown, which may be invisible precisely because individuals appear outwardly stable and responsible. Increasing awareness may help broaden public understanding of the diverse ways emotional distress manifests, encourage individuals to reflect on their emotional patterns, and challenge the stigma associated with emotional expression (Seligman, 2011; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

**Emotional literacy** the ability to identify, understand, and communicate emotions is a related priority. Promoting emotional literacy helps individuals develop familiarity with their emotional experiences, improve emotional clarity, and support effective communication within relationships. Educational settings, workplaces, and community organizations all have roles to play in creating environments where emotional awareness is nurtured rather than discouraged (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Gross, 2014).

**Psychoeducation** can empower individuals by explaining the distinctions between healthy emotional regulation, suppression, and shutdown enabling more informed decisions about emotional well-being and reducing the tendency to interpret emotional expression as weakness (Gross, 1998). Finally, **reframing the discourse on strength** is essential: emotional engagement can coexist with stability and competence, and vulnerability within relationships facilitates trust and mutual understanding. When emotional awareness is understood as a component of resilience rather than its opposite, healthier emotional environments may develop within families, workplaces, and communities (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Rogers, 1961).

## CONCLUSION

This review explored emotional shutdown and how it is often misunderstood in both psychology and everyday life. A clear pattern emerges: when people appear calm, silent, or emotionally distant, others often perceive them as strong or mature. But what is happening beneath the surface is usually more complex. Emotional shutdown a state where a person disconnects from their feelings as a way to deal with stress or overwhelming situations may help in the short term but, when sustained, affects both mental health and relationships.

Emotions play a key role in how individuals understand situations, make decisions, communicate, and maintain relationships. When someone becomes disconnected from their emotions, these processes become disturbed. Emotional shutdown therefore reflects a deeper change in how a person relates to themselves and the world. Healthy emotional regulation means being aware of feelings and responding to them in a balanced way, whereas suppression involves holding emotions back a strategy that, when habitual, reduces emotional awareness and leads to shutdown.

Social and cultural expectations strongly reinforce this pattern. Staying composed is seen as a sign of strength; people who do not show emotions are praised, reinforcing the idea that emotions should be hidden. This shapes identity: people come to see themselves as strong only if they remain emotionally controlled, a belief reinforced through family expectations, workplace norms, and gender roles. A major concern is that emotional shutdown is often mistaken for resilience but true resilience involves facing emotions and adapting through them. When emotional shutdown is praised as strength, people continue avoiding their emotions instead of working through them, leading to delayed emotional reactions, relationship difficulties, mental exhaustion, and barriers to seeking support.

Real emotional strength lies not just in enduring difficulties, but in acknowledging, understanding, and integrating one's feelings fostering clearer thinking, better relationships, and healthier long-term coping. Emotional silence should not automatically be equated with strength. By understanding the distinction between emotional composure and emotional disengagement, we can move toward healthier ways of coping and create environments where people feel safe to engage with their emotions rather than shut them down.

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***Conflict of Interest***

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