

The “Five Emotions” of Chinese Medicine

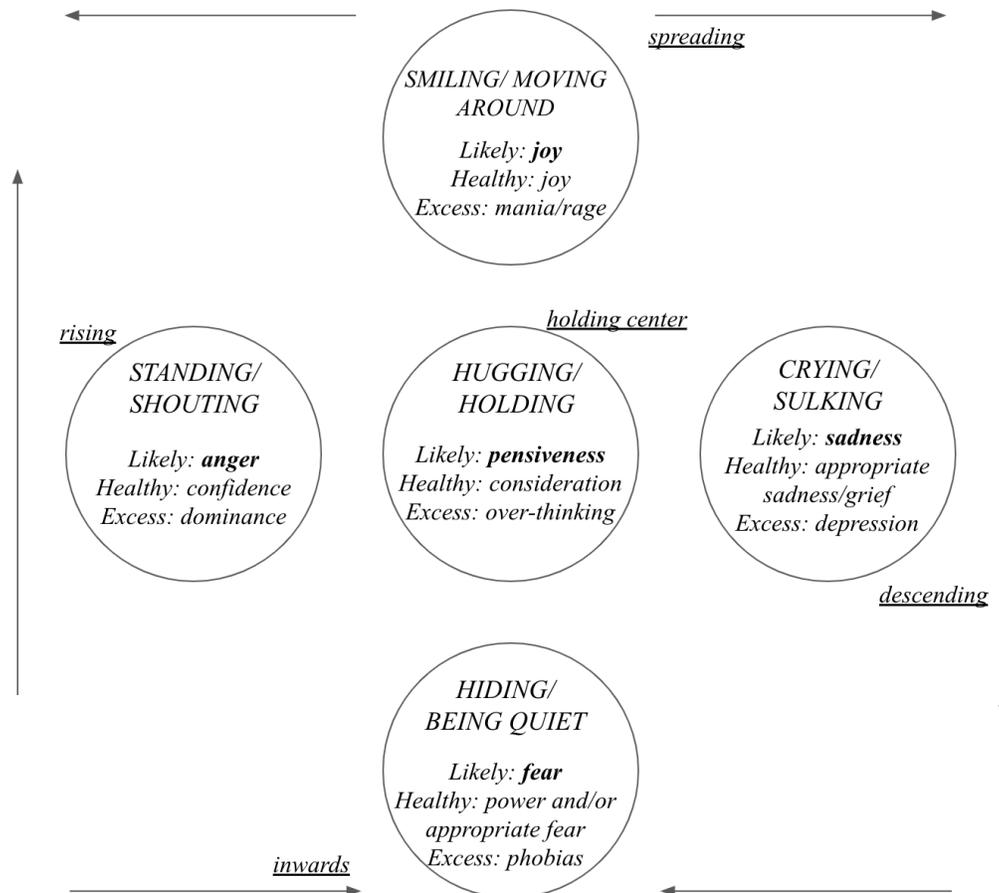
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Emotions are inner forces that move us in specific directions. They can sometimes be overwhelming, especially if we do not have a clear vocabulary and system for defining, relating, and contextualizing them. This system of Chinese Medical understanding of emotions is offered as a map to the otherwise nebulous landscape of our feelings.

There are many words for describing emotions. When we develop sensitivity to the subtlety of our feelings and cultivate our relationship with *feeling* our feelings, we can develop and utilize vocabulary to describe and navigate our emotions and relationships. This is wonderful work that is possible for us, though it might feel daunting to think about for many people. Navigating emotions and relationships is a skillset, like cooking - you likely didn't expect to cook a feast the first time you cooked, but if you practiced and kept cooking, you eventually would be able to cook delicious and nourishing meals.

In Chinese Medical classical texts¹, emotions are presented as arising from the cardinal directions: *rising (East)*, *spreading (South)*, *descending (West)*, *inwards (North)*, and *holding center (orientation point)*. Thus, there are five emotions listed: Anger, Joy, Sadness, Fear, and Pensiveness, respectively.

This is how to find yourself on the map: Which direction is my emotion taking me? HOW AM I EXPRESSING THE EMOTION? And/or, what is a simple name for this emotional experience?



“Emotional health” from a Chinese Medicine perspective means that a person is in a dynamic relationship with their world and when emotions arise they are experienced, expressed authentically and appropriately, then move on smoothly. Pathology of emotions generally refers to an emotion that is stuck on repeat and a person is only able to express or experience their world through that one feeling. Other pathological emotional experiences exist, including unable/unwilling to feel feelings (suppression), lack of awareness of feelings (repression), overwhelming emotional experience (traumas), etc.

One of the most important and distinguishing aspects of the emotional experience in Chinese Medicine is that there is no separation between body and mind. The emotions and the mind live in the body, in the organs, and they move through and are intertwined with the blood (ie: hormones traveling through the blood in response to thoughts, sensations, or feelings). In Chinese Medicine, there is no such thing as separating the body and mind, and there is no such thing as a human being separate from nature.

It should be noted that while most of the time emotions are listed as five in Chinese Medicine, there are also teachings that include two additional emotions. The “five” are listed as directional, therefore can be physiological as well as pathological when out of balance, but the additional two that add up to seven are inherently pathological: shock-fright, and worry. Shock-fright arises from an experience that is overwhelming to the system, and likely shows up with excessive movement inward, but can also create an excessive movement outwards and a ‘heart outside by body’ kind of experience. Worry indicates obsession and ‘spinning around in circles,’ which is seen as an excessive movement around the center.

Though it can be hard to *feel* our feelings, and even harder to *name* our feelings, this simple map is offered as a starting point for everyone to help get oriented to the field of our emotional experience. Any time we feel lost, check the map - which way is this feeling taking me? We can see where the emotion might be coming from (look one step counter-clockwise), where it will go or not go if it is not remedied (one step clockwise), or even more interestingly, what that expression might be balancing or compensating for (opposite direction). From these simple and achievable orientating ideas, we can find our way ‘home.’ And, help exists for those who seek it.

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