

Emotional Alchemy

Transforming emotions for better emotional health

by Anna Holden

Our culture today doesn't value emotions, sensitivity, or emotional sensitivity. We live in a time where emotional outbursts are seen as hysterical or the people experiencing them “fragile,” whereas really, moving emotional energy through our bodies is a natural and healthy human activity. There are few things to understand about emotions so that you can begin to work with them effectively.

Emotions Are the Body's Way of Expressing Itself

Our emotions live in our body, but we often don't think of them that way. Due in large part to the aforementioned cultural stigma around emotions, we have often been taught to ignore, repress, or “talk out” our emotions. In fact, when I ask people about their emotions, they often tell me a cerebral version of their emotion, rather than the emotion itself. They say, “I feel like I want my husband to understand me better,” when really, the emotions are fear and despair. Or they say, “I had a hard week,” when they are trying to explain a feeling of hopelessness. Each time, clients tell me how they feel about their feelings, rather than explain the feelings themselves. Yoga calls this “the disease about the disease.” This is where suffering occurs – not in the emotion itself, but in our response to the discomfort of the emotion. In order to work through our emotions effectively, we must learn how to identify them, point to their source in our body and allow them to move, flow and transform.

Emotions live in our body. We may have been told over and over that emotions are “all in our head,” and we just need to stop thinking about them so much. This idea is so damaging to the body and the psyche. Emotions are energy within the body that actually change our cellular structure. They are our subconscious mind communicating to our conscious mind, a process which takes place in our body. Emotions are forces that need to be recognized and released or transformed. Because of the very physical reality of emotions, telling someone to hold it in is like saying, “You have to poop? Just stop thinking about it. Hold it in, you'll feel better.”

The brilliant neuroscientist Candace Pert proved in her research that emotions actually change the structure of our cells. Not only are emotions real and alive in our body, but they actually have receptors that click into place in our cells and affect their function within us until released. Further, when we store an emotion and then experience it again, that new experience of an emotion finds and sticks to our old experience of that emotion, allowing us to feel our entire lifetime experience of that emotion all at once. Here, we have an opportunity to release more of that emotion if we wish. This experience can be rather difficult, and is why people who are angry can get angrier if they don't seek out emotional tools.

Emotions live in our body, which means they are not a psychological problem. This is important to remember, especially as traditional psychoanalysis has largely pathologized certain emotions. Suddenly, despair – a natural, human emotion – is considered clinical depression and treated using psychiatric methods like talk therapy and anti-depressant medication. Despair, like any other emotion, is a message or a signal from the body, not a pathology.

We don't have pathologies for someone who experiences a constant flow of “good” emotions. We don't label them with clinical exuberance. We add prejudice to what we don't understand and what we fear. We do not understand emotions and we fear discomfort. We like to categorize emotions as bad and good, but just like all energetic information, emotions are neutral. I like how author Miriam Greenspan categorizes the more uncomfortable emotions of despair, fear and grief as “dark” emotions because we like to keep them in the darkness and not look at them.

Emotions live in our body and we need to process them from there. Greenspan, the author of one of my favorite books on emotions, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions*, offers us several exercises to transform uncomfortable emotions into positive experiences like joy and faith. We will explore variations of these exercises later in this chapter. I love this paragraph about how learning from our emotions, especially the painful ones, is a skill. She says:

The word *shaman* means “to see in the dark.” There is a shamanism of the dark emotions – a way of maintaining awareness in the midst of the chaos and turbulence of

the darker regions of the psyche – that ultimately alters our perception of who and what we are. Painful emotions challenge us to know the sacred in the broken; to develop an enlarged sense of Self beyond the suffering ego, an awareness that comes from being mindful of life's difficulties, rather than disengaging from them; to arrive at a wider and deeper perspective not limited by our pain but expanded by it.ⁱ

Understanding Emotions as Energy and Information

Just like thoughts are energy moving in the mind, emotions are energy moving in the body. Because emotions are energies, they are inherently neutral – it is only our mind, which tells us a story about our experience, that labels them as good, bad, pleasant or unpleasant. Inherently, emotions are none of these. Instead, they are information that our body is relaying to us about the environment of the body.

In *Healing Through the Dark Emotions*, Greenspan explains that the latin root of the word *emotion* is *movere*, which means “to move out.” Emotions, then, are literally energies that move us and ask us to move – to feel, to change, to express, to act. When emotions are strong and unpleasant, it can be easy to label them as negative, but remember, emotions are inherently neutral. It is our attitudes or reactions to our emotions – or the actions we take because of our emotions – that can rightly be called positive or negative.

Spiritually speaking, we are here to learn – to gain information and learn from it. Our emotions are one of the ways in which our body teaches us. The energy of emotions is sacred – it comes from the same source as all other energy. In yoga and Ayurveda, that energy is called *prana*, or life force energy, the way we understand our consciousness. In other traditions, it's called *chi*, or simply life force. This is the energy behind our emotions.

Given this understanding, we can see that our job is to move and learn from emotions, to see what they can teach us, to allow them to do what all energy naturally does without restriction – transforms. By learning to work with our emotions, we can learn the art of transformation.

Emotions for the Highly Sensitive Person

Like any form of stimulation, emotions are often felt more intensely by highly sensitive people. Emotions, like any other form of stimulation in the physical environment (including

physical pain) are processed more deeply in the nervous system of an HSP than a hardy person. This is why HSP's are often so deeply affected by movies, art, beautiful scenery and acts of generosity.

When you processes emotional situations more deeply than others in a world that already deems emotions “super weak and scary,” you can be left with the feeling that your emotions are very, very wrong. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your emotions, and the depth at which you process them, provide you with information for growth, which is always, always right.

Greenspan says, “We live in the world and the world lives in us.” Nowhere is this more true than in the body of a highly sensitive person. Because of the powerful microphone that is your nervous system, not only will you process your own emotions, you may also find your system processing the emotions of those around you (emotionally “tasting” the atmosphere of a room), and the emotions of the world around you. I have HSP's call me all the time in what they usually refer to as an “emotional crisis” because the world feels so painful. When we don't know how to respond to our emotions, and we process an unfair share of worldly emotions, the energy of these feelings can feel like it might crush us.

Repressed Emotions Can Cause Physical Problems

When emotional energy isn't expressed and transformed, it can build up in the body (literally, as Candace Pert showed) and cause both energetic and physical blockages to health and healing. Emotional energy can affect us in a myriad of ways physically that we are just now beginning to understand. For example, fear and vulnerability can tighten the iliopsoas complex, creating digestive, pelvic or low back problems.

Emotional Transformation

In order to work effectively with emotional energy, we need to remember a few things. First, emotions are information and need to be treated with respect. Embrace an “emotion-positive” attitude. Second, talking about our emotions to heal them isn't always helpful, but letting them speak to us from the body is. Finally, like all healing, emotional transformation is not a linear process, so the more you can hold space for the process to unfold, the easier it will be. The process I'll be explaining requires for you to stay present while you deal with painful

emotions. This can be difficult at first for the HSP because emotional pain can feel deeply painful. You *can* do this, and what I've found that when you do, the transformation feels incredible. The act of staying present feels scary because it's so vulnerable, but your emotions will not hurt you. In fact, by being present, they will heal you.

Transforming Difficult Emotions (adapted from *Healing Through the Dark Emotions*)

For this tool to be effective, it's important to keep a few foundational ideas in mind.

- Difficult emotions aren't inherently negative, they're just energy.
- Transforming emotions begins with setting the intention to use emotional energy as a means for healing and transformation.
- Emotional energy is information to teach us, and it wants to be released. It drives us forward and asks us to act. The only way we stop this process is if we get in our own way, usually by focusing on how uncomfortable we feel.
- Emotional energy is aborted by fear. If we fear our emotions and how they make us feel, we will thwart the process of energy healing.
- All emotions, even uncomfortable ones, serve a purpose.
- Emotions live in the body and should speak to us from there.
- The only way to process our emotions is to be in the present moment, undistracted.

During times of difficult emotions, a six step process can be followed. The first two steps are mandatory, and you may want to use a journal to record your information. The final steps are all additional tools to help your emotions transform.

1. Set an intention – Our emotions are here to teach and heal us.

Allow your intention to let your emotions teach and heal you. An example of an intention would be to be to tolerate the emotion without panic or numbing. Tell yourself something like, *“What I'm feeling is (insert dark emotion here). It's just an emotion, not a final destination. I can have tolerance of this energy and be with it. When I pay attention to it, it will move and heal.”*

2. Affirmation – Affirm the value of your emotion.

Look for ways that your emotion teaches you. For example, grief and mourning is a universal expression of loss. Write down three or four affirmations about the wisdom that can come from facing dark emotions. For example, *Despair teaches me deeper truths that lead to freedom.*

3. Body Practices – Exercises to help us find, focus on and talk to the emotion as well as soothe the body.

During times of dark emotional expression, the body needs tending to. While in dark emotions, the body may have lost its capacity to find joy or pleasure, so we can cultivate these. Some ideas are:

1. Conscious breathing – the 16 breath meditation from Defense, with an added twist. When you breathe deeply, become aware of where your darker emotions are living in your body. Acknowledge it without trying to change or move it. See what happens as you breathe into it.
 2. Aromatherapy – Set a diffuser with your favorite uplifting essential oils. Simple oils like lavender and sandalwood bring balance. I enjoy the “Elevation” blend from doTerra.
 3. Body Work – Schedule a massage, energy work or cranial-sacral therapy.
 4. Listen to beautiful music – Perhaps combined with the Constructive Rest Position
4. Stay Mindful – Allow for the process to unfold.
Encourage this process of non-action through meditation on the emotion. Conversely, find something beautiful in your day and meditate on it. You can also try conversing or speaking with your emotion. This, combined with deep breathing and awareness, can lead to answers about what needs to happen next.
5. Act – Once you understand what your emotion is asking you to do, do that!
One action that may help is mindful exercise – letting the dark emotions pulse through you on their way out, or walking with your emotions in mindful movement. You may also want to create a project from your dark emotions, letting them out and onto a creative platform. Or, try talking to a friend or two who won't try to fix you but rather allow for your process; to simply hear the emotion.

6. Surrender – allow for your emotion to run its course.

You can use chanting or prayer to help facilitate this process.

- i Greenspan, Mirium. *Healing Through the Dark Emotions: The wisdom of grief, fear, and despair*. pp. 27. Boston:Shambhala Publications. 2003.