

The Elements of Emotion: Earth - Shame, Sympathy and Worry

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Shame is not an emotion spoken of in any traditional TCM-based text, and yet it's a pervasive cornerstone of the human experience, often underlying many of our other emotional responses and behaviors. In musing on the relationships of the core emotions - joy, grief, fear, anger and shame - and their interaction within the element cycles, it seems most fitting that shame is an earth element emotion.

The virtue of the earth element is empathy: our ability to truly connect and see another as ourselves; to not only know another's experience, but also to feel it at some level. Interestingly enough, empathy is the antidote to shame. Dysfunction in the *yi* spirit, the earth element's spirit, can often lead to codependent dynamics and people-pleasing tendencies, which go hand in hand with the experience of shame.

Overthinking, worry and excess sympathy (being overly concerned with others at the expense of ourselves) are commonly associated with the earth element, yet these are somewhat surface emotions to the experience of shame. Shame is guilt pointed inward at ourselves, and it can be easy to see how the experience of feeling like we "are bad" can contribute to overthinking, worry and excess sympathy.

Using the generating, insulting and controlling cycles, we can understand how certain emotions can be created or fueled, along with how they can be transformed. Experiencing emotions is a natural part of life and isn't cause for alarm; however, being stuck in emotions, experiencing them out of context, or not experiencing them at all or repressing them can be a cause for deeper understanding and healing. Through healing and healthy processing of emotions, we move closer into living in our emotional virtues through the elements.

The generating cycle tells us about how emotions move into one and the next. In a healthy system, there is flow between states; emotions come up and move like clouds across the sky.

Anxiety (Fire) feeds Overthinking (Earth)

At the root of overthinking is anxiety at some level. We're using our *qi* to worry, which is a pointless and fruitless expression of *qi*. Anxiety is the concern about the future, which ultimately we have no control over; and this anxiety removes us from the present moment, which is where we inherently have the most power.

We may also think of anxiety and overthinking as a cycle, whereby one feeds into the other back and forth, ultimately the root of which is fear taken out of balance. We can also view anxiety as a type of manic energy; it's the high vibration of joy gone awry, vibrating faster than we have the ability to hold and work with. This excess of energy is what feeds the overthinking and rumination; since that energy has no place to go, it feeds into earth and gives rise to overthinking - steaming the thoughts and turning them into worry.

Shame (Earth) Creates Grief (Metal)

Shame is guilt pointed inward at ourselves, and it's actually quite counterintuitive to our ability or drive to survive. Shame goes against our inherent will to live, because it is directed inward, halting any and all movement and as such, desire to live.

Shame is also often harbored by the lies we tell ourselves. This keeps us in a perpetual cycle of shame and eventually depression due to the lies we tell ourselves and hold as truth. When we do this, it feeds directly into the metal element and creates grief and depression.

The root of depression is almost always found in a lie we tell ourselves; and in holding onto this lie we accept the false reality it creates for us, instead of the actual reality we are living in and experiencing. This dichotomy creates a false resonance, which creates depression.

One path out of depression is to find and release this lie. In a less severe presentation, overthinking and worry also create grief. This method of circular thinking without cause exhausts *qi* and leads to grief.

Anger (Wood) Releases Shame (Earth)

The controlling cycle tells us how we can release emotions that are stuck. In this cycle, the grandparent element comes in to discipline or guide the child when the parent element has fallen short. This is particularly effective when it comes to how we can work through the emotion of shame.

Breaking free from shame might be one of the quintessential components to the emotional healing process. Eventually, all emotional states, when stuck or in surplus, result in shame - the turning away or abandonment of ourselves. Often shame is a result of unexpressed needs, wants, desires and particularly boundaries, which are all qualities of wood.

Repressing needs and failure to set boundaries result in shame because it's the experience of self-abandonment and self-betrayal. We can use anger to help release shame by setting boundaries, expressing needs and occasionally using physical force (by way of exercise or physical activity) to intentionally release held emotions; which in turn releases us from our shame.

Excess Sympathy (People Pleasing) Suppresses Anger

The insulting cycle can give us information as to how our emotional processes can become stagnated, and also insight into our personal relationships with others and within ourselves.

This dynamic is one of the people pleaser or codependent. By being overly concerned about and sympathetic to others and neglecting our own needs, we are suppressing our anger - our *healthy* anger at first, setting boundaries and sticking up for ourselves, asserting our wants and needs.

This is where we are being overly concerned with other people's experience, reactions, etc., and neglecting ourselves in the process; which by definition creates contempt, resentment and anger. But in order to continue the relationship, we usually feel stuck and required to repress our anger further.

In reality, the way out of this situation is through the controlling cycle - by asserting healthy boundaries and ourselves.

