

The Elements of Emotion: Metal - Grief and Depression

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Editor's Note: October is National Depression and Mental Health Screening Month in the U.S., which makes this article - and part 3 of Kamala Quale's article on grief, also in this issue - particularly relevant.

If you've ever wondered why you cry when you get angry sometimes, or why and how we get depressed, the element cycles have the most elegant way of helping us understand. Grief is a powerful emotion, and it's arguably the most painful emotion, the cause of much of our experiences of suffering. The key to grief is that we have to truly feel it in order for it to pass; the more we try to block it, the more it festers and acts up in other ways.

Grief is the emotional equivalent of pain, and there's a saying that the fear of pain is often greater than the pain itself, reminding us that feeling grief is essential and attempting to avoid it only prolongs this suffering. Looking at the generating cycle, we see how grief, specifically depression, arises:

Shame (Earth) creates Grief / Depression (Metal)

Shame is guilt that is pointed inward at ourselves, and it's actually quite counterintuitive to our 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 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 dissonance creates depression.

For instance, if we are in a toxic relationship and know our partner has no desire to change, we might tell ourselves the lie that they will change one day, or reminisce about how good it once was while ignoring the reality of the current status of the relationship. The effort we must use to perpetuate this lie to ourselves exhausts our *qi* and ultimately leads to 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 the *qi* of the person and leads to grief.

Grief (Metal) Moves to Fear (Water)

If a person does not fully process and release their grief, this gives rise to fear. The pain of the grief experienced often leads to us not wanting to fully address and heal the experience, trauma or events that led to the grief in the first place.

In this denial, we create new fears or cement in previously held fear. It's a natural step to want to avoid pain, which is what leads to the creation of fear. Either we don't want to experience this pain again and create a fear of whatever occurred that caused the grief, or are so preoccupied with avoiding this pain that it leads to a fear of what "could" happen if we tried to heal: the ultimate fear of the unknown.

The controlling cycle gives us tangible tools for helping us to move through emotions with more ease. Each element helps to control or correct the next along this path.

Joy (Fire) Melts Grief (Metal)

Fire melts metal. This is an important part of the grieving process; we need and thrive on joy to help move us through it. In this respect, joy can come in and melt grief; just like a torch to copper. It's the ill-timed, yet hilarious joke at a funeral, or being able to find joy in the mundane or absurdities of life, that can help us to transform our grief.

This is how the fire element helps release and transform the metal element so that it can come back into balance, even if it's just for a moment.

It's important to also recognize when this relationship becomes imbalanced. Using joy to avoid grief is harmful, but it's a tactic used by many. We see this in the person who tells you a terrible story of their childhood abuse, while laughing over it at the same time; this laughter gives them the ability to bypass the grief. And while, yes, this is useful sometimes, we still need to feel the grief when it's safe to do so.

Grief (Metal) Cuts Anger (Wood)

When anger is a predominant emotion and we have difficulty moving past or through it, grief and crying are mechanisms to do so. Crying in particular helps to release and free anger from our system. This is the classic "I was so angry I cried" that women in particular experience due to, in some ways, systemic oppression of the expression of anger in female-identified persons.

When we don't feel like we are allowed or able to fully express anger, then grief will be the emotion that cuts the anger to release it or break it down.

In regard to grief, the insulting cycle gives us more information as to how we block and repress grief.

Anger Traps Grief

We see this relationship play out in how we repress emotion – often using anger to protect us from our grief. We saw earlier that grief can help release anger, but anger can also trap us from experiencing our grief. This is often stereotypically played out in "alpha"-type people, predominantly men, who use anger as a predominant emotion which blocks other emotions – particularly grief.

Anger says, "I'm afraid and I need to protect myself," as we see in the generating cycle, but this can extend beyond that cycle, like in this insulting cycle, when we use anger to protect us, but truly to prevent us from experiencing the depths of our grief.

Editor's Note: This is the fourth article on the elements of emotion by Dr. Peirano; see her online columnist page (see link below) for previous articles in the series.

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