

Feelings, Emotions, and Affect Part 3: Energetics – The Flow of Feelings & Depression

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I am now going to shift directions. The following essay arises out of years of studying Wilhelm Reich, MD and his followers, the general field of body therapy and the specifics of what is often called Energetics. To me, this is the study of energy - human energy. As I refer to energy I am talking about that which makes us go and that which we lose when we die. It is very much a body thing.

Background

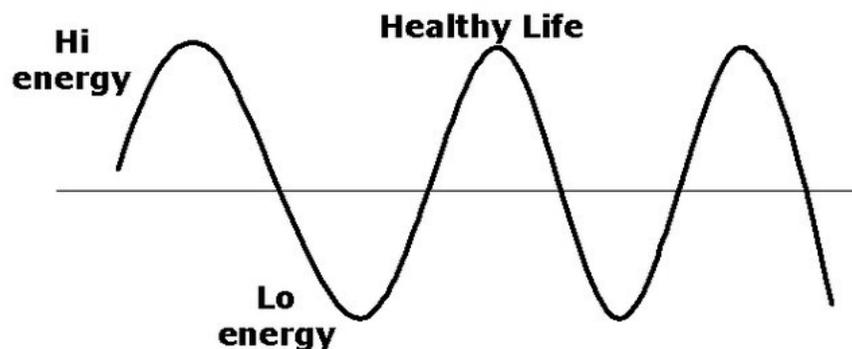
This is part three of my [four part essay](#) about feelings. I have taught all four parts as a class many hundreds of times. I am taking my time in putting down my words along with charts to be helpful to people in understanding my thoughts. These papers should probably be read sequentially. [Part 1](#) covers my general understandings and definitions of feelings/emotions and how they are inextricably tied or linked to thoughts. I think that if a person is talking about thoughts without including reporting on the accompanying feelings, then they tend to mislead or misdirect their audience. Understanding and thus Validation becomes very difficult. [Part 2](#) is a review of the four central emotions that influence our lives. In this I attempt to clarify what I see is the cultural confusion around the emotion of Anger. Part 4, (yet to be written), is a review of how to express emotions appropriately with the goal of reducing conflict and improving health.

Energy

I just want to be clear about what I am talking. When I think of low energy, I am thinking of people sleeping, being tired, lassitude, going slow. When I think of high energy I am thinking of people running around, being very active or very tense, going quickly. When I think of relaxing, I think of a time while we are rebuilding our energy. When I think of satisfaction, I often think of people who have discharged their energy – move from higher to lower levels of energy.

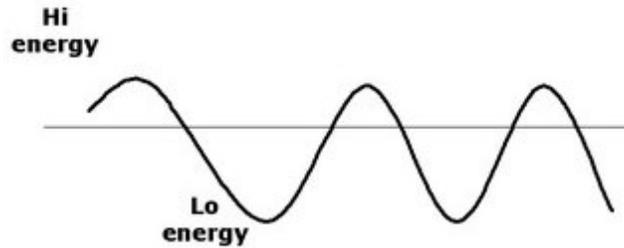
I think that energy can either be expressed or contained. A person full of high energy may be physically active or not moving, but very tense. High energy moves or tenses muscles. Low energy has relaxed muscles.

Energy displays a kind of economy – input and output. We build it. We take it in – eating, etc. We let it out – exercise, etc. Life to me is a kind of cycle building and discharging energy. When the cycle stops, I call it death. I think this cycle is designed to be smooth, as in the following figure.

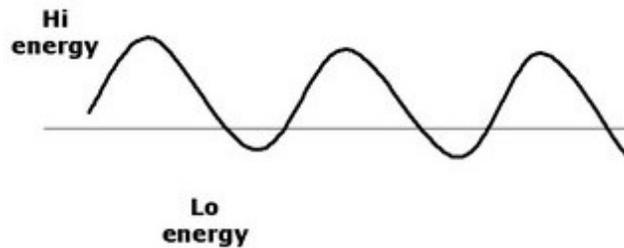


We wake up in the morning with energy. Eat breakfast and gather some more energy. Work hard and then get tired. Sit down and rest or siesta. Our energy starts to rise again and we go back to work. This all seems normal to me.

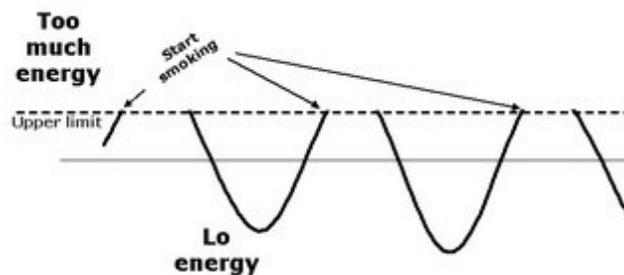
Anything that blocks input, keeps us tired. Do not eat and go around all day feeling low energy. You can see this in a person's breathing. If they don't take in a deep breath, but let out a lot of air, their lungs are consistently under inflated. When they sigh, they have to first take a breath in. Not very healthy way to go.



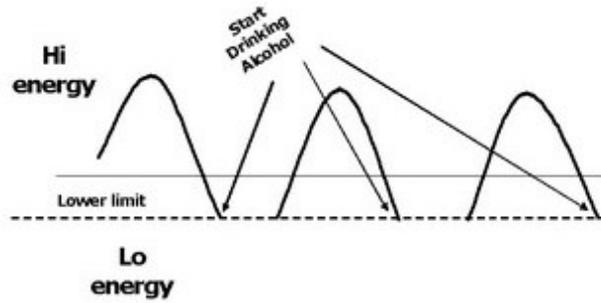
Anything that blocks output, keeps us tense. Do not discharge or let out your energy and you go around all day tense. You can see this in breathing. These people take in a lot of air and don't let much out. Their lungs are consistently over inflated and they sigh a lot. Also not a very healthy way to go.



But amazingly worse than this is the problem of limiting how much energy is permitted. I think in general our society teaches people to not get "too" excited or not get "too" quiet. The result is that most people get anxious when their energy gets high. As their energy rises they get more and more tense. So they smoke cigarettes or use other means to limit their excitement.



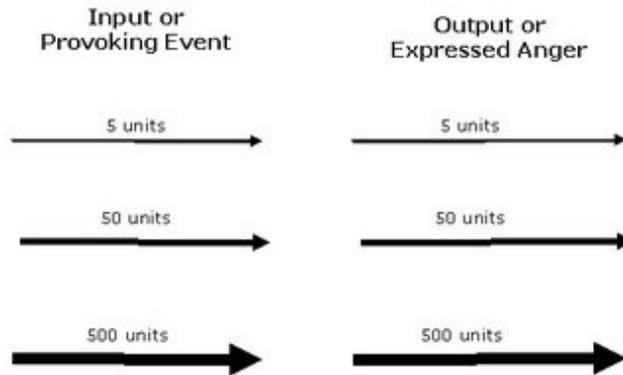
Or they are anxious when their energy gets low. As they start to get lower in energy, they get tense and so they drink alcohol or use some other means to keep from getting too low.



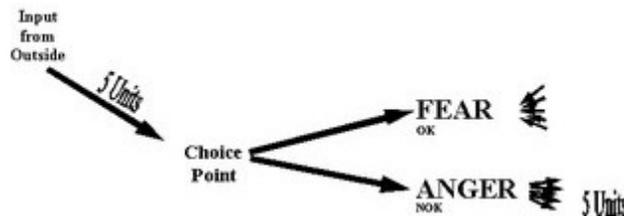
This may be interesting and useful, but I only share it here to set up the issue of emotions and the flow of energy.

INPUT and OUTPUT

Now that I've talked about energy I want you to look a piece of common experience. Let's focus on Anger for a moment. Does it make sense to you that a small input may lead to a small amount of anger and a large input may lead to a large amount of anger? Can you "get it" that input is related to output. Take a look at the chart below. (I think this is easier to see in a small child who has not had the complicated training of an adult.) A small provoking thing will lead to a small expression of anger. The larger the input, the larger the output. A child will explode as much as it needs, and then stop. It's all over. I think this is pretty normal - except in adults.

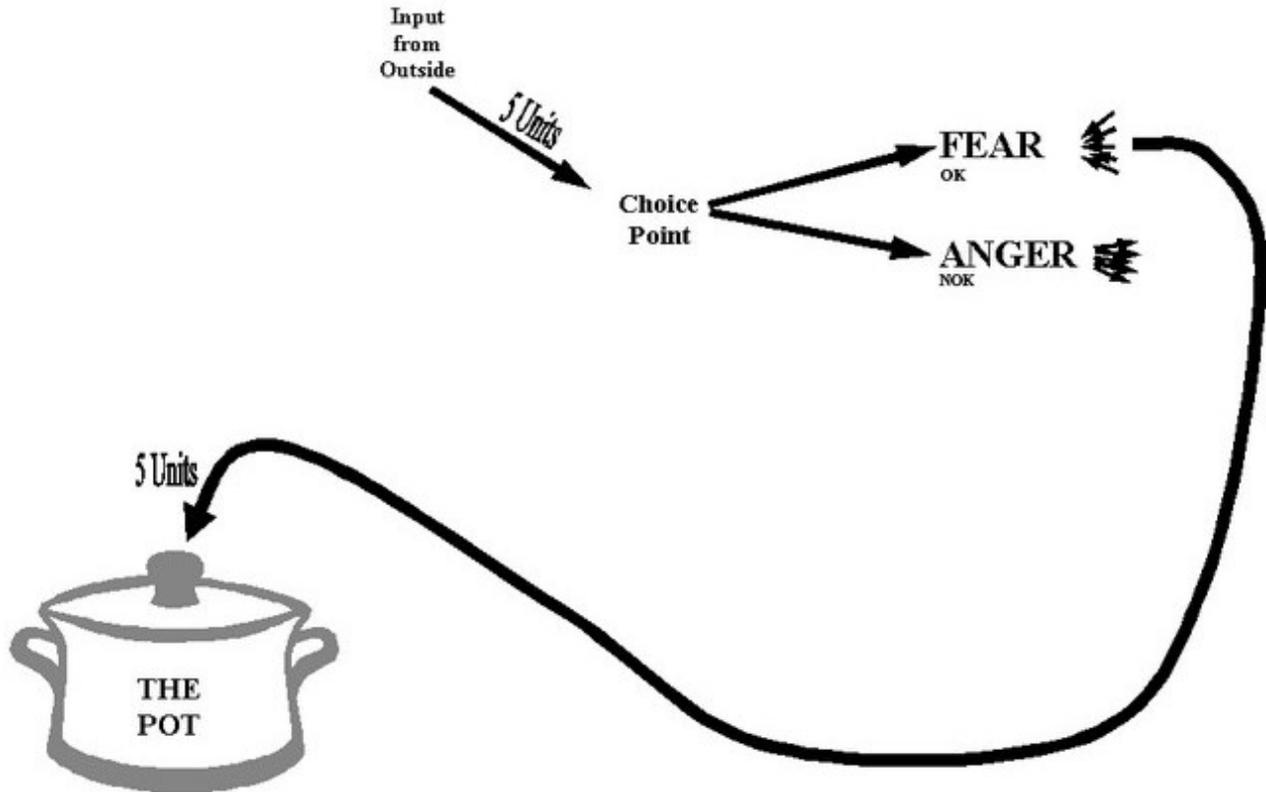


Now, once you have this concept of energy in, and energy out. I want you to think about what happens when a person has been taught to not express their anger, to hold it in, to fear expressing anger, to contain it. Where does that energy go? 5 or 50 or 500 units input and nothing expressed. And recall that fear is, from the point of view of energy, a constrictive or contracting emotion. Fear makes a person hold in. Anger is an expansive or expressive emotion, all about noise and action. So, again, where does the energy go? Here's the chart showing an input of 5 units of provocation and an output of 5 units. All balanced.



THE POT

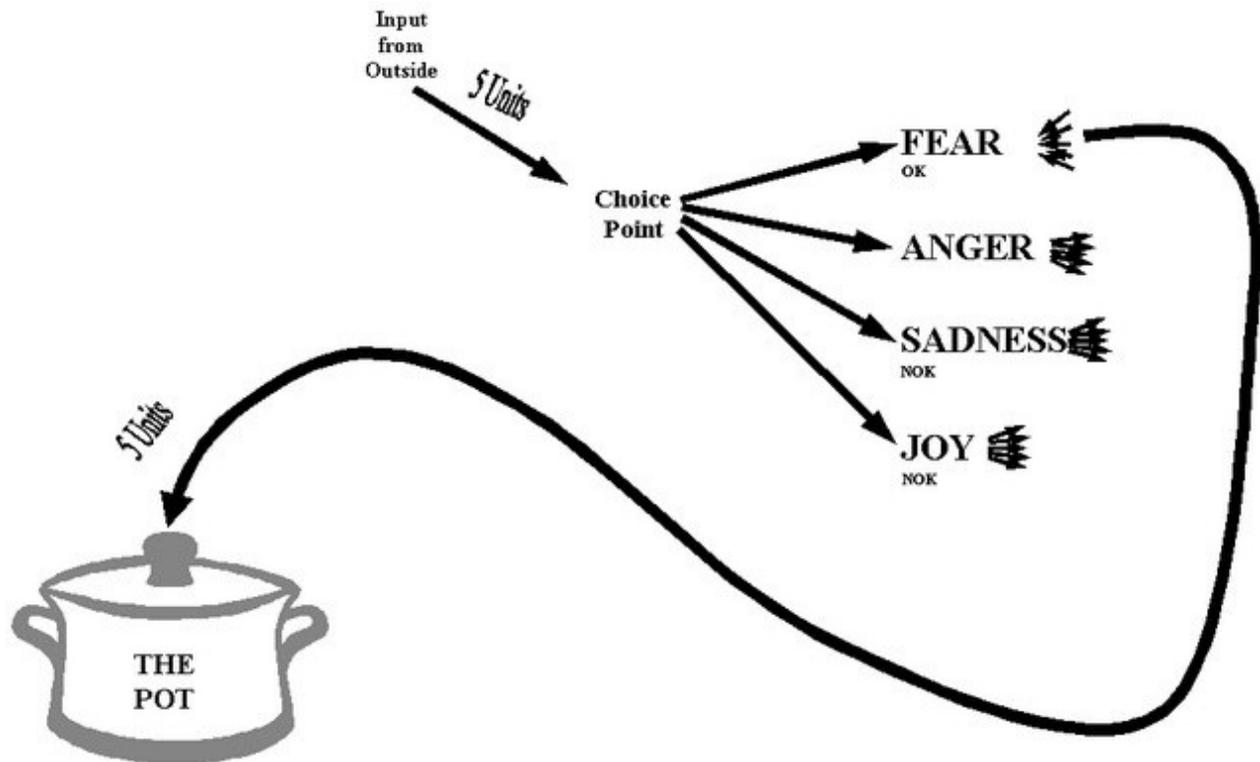
The answer is, that the energy goes into something I call The Pot. Here's the picture. I've made the chart bigger to prepare for more detail.



The Pot is real, not imaginary. You have one. I have one. It is where a person stores all the unexpressed feelings or emotions. Physically the Pot is the muscular structure of your body. The way I see it, everytime you do not express an appropriate emotion or an appropriate level of energy, your muscles bunch up and get tense somewhere in your body. You have to. These muscles stay tense for a long time. They may stay that way for the rest of your life.

It is relatively easy to see or touch your Pot. Look at a person's jaw muscles. When you have to keep your mouth shut, you have to bunch up those muscles. The bigger the muscles now, probably the more you had to "shut up" as a kid. Look at sore backs. Many people have to hold back from expressing anger with their fists and arms, and thus their back muscles become bunched up - from holding back. This may seem silly, but there it is. All body therapies are about teaching people to relax, let the bunched up energy out of their chronically contracted muscles - their tight spots.

It gets a bit worse. The only emotion that is permitted in our society to all people is Fear. Generally the other three major emotions (Anger, Grief, Joy) are forbidden and thus all of those emotion energies end up in your pot. Here's the expanded chart.



Thus, if you come from a family like mine which discouraged all expression of feelings, all your Anger, Sadness and Joy may have found its way into your POT, and still be sitting there. This is why people sometimes burst into tears when someone gives them a massage. The POT was opened for a moment.

Lots of people are walking around with an enormously overfilled POT. I like to think that most people around 20 years old or older have about 35000 units of unexpressed emotional energy in their bodies. And I think it takes between 20% and 80% of our calorie intake, our food every day to maintain this Pot. No wonder we are tired. Letting go of the Pot actually gives a person more energy. Have you ever cried hard and felt more energized afterwards? Have you ever let out some anger and felt more alive afterward? Here's the reason. You aren't spending so much energy holding back any more.

Why are you not aware of this? Well, consistently tight muscles become numb after a while. The only time many people thoroughly relax their muscles is during deep sleep maybe, during full anaesthesia for surgery or at death. Wow! Just poke those Pot muscles and see how sore they are.

FIRST TRY – Things that Work

Most people want to know how to reduce the size of their Pots. And so let me give you the options. First, you can express Anger, Sadness, Joy appropriately. That does the job. I will talk more about this in the next essay. But that is not all.

MOVE

You can MOVE your body. Wow. Yup, all expressive emotions involve muscles and so if you exercise you can express some of the bunched up energy before it gets into your Pot. Or you can, over time start removing some of the energy from your Pot. That is why we all tell people who are angry to go for a walk or to hit the punching bag, etc. It works – a little. I like to think that if you are angry 50 units worth and immediately exercise, perhaps you can

MOVE out about 10 units, and only 40 will go into your POT. Heck that's better than all of it.

By the way, another form of MOVING is to move your body away from the input - move to Florida. That also helps some.

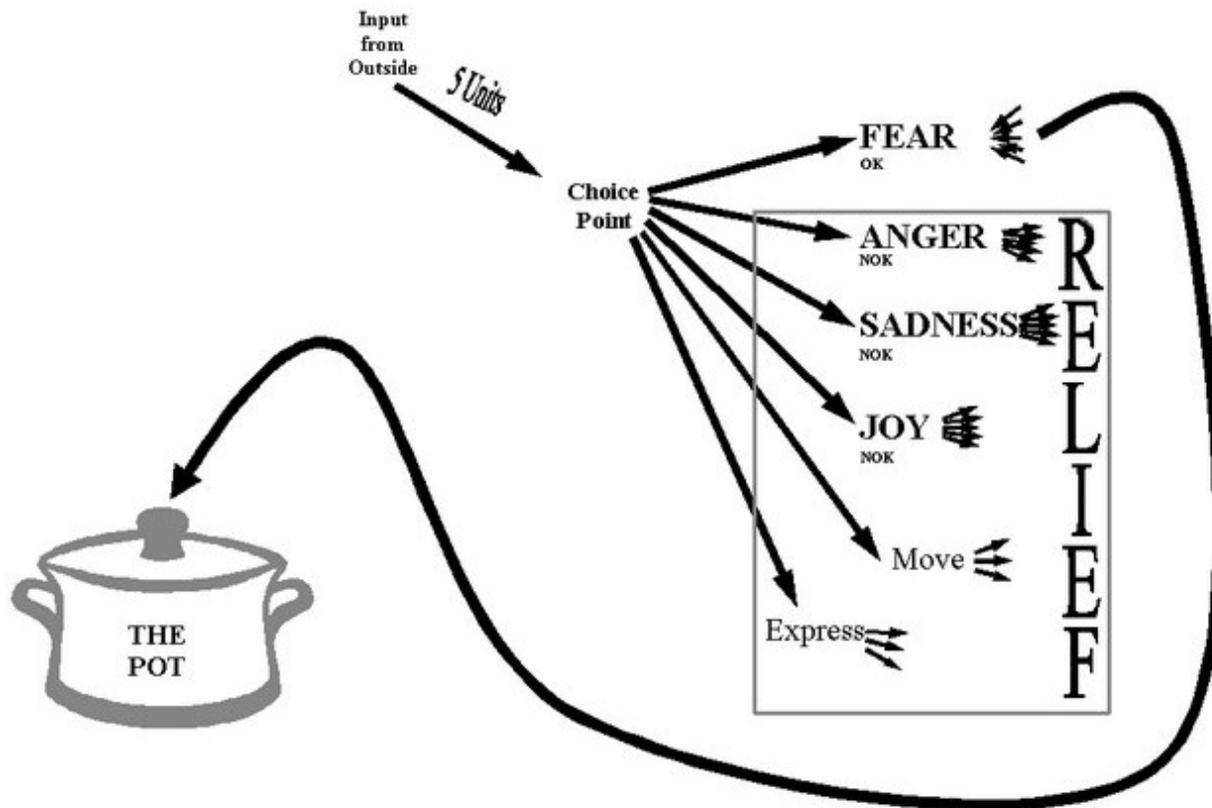
Express

Talking also helps. That is often what counseling is about - letting people talk out some of their energy. Most of us have experienced this. Have you ever seen some awful site (car crash) and then you just seem to need to tell someone. If the first person doesn't listen well, you keep looking for another person to hear you. When the right person listens well, you stop needing to tell. You got RELIEF. Again, talking isn't very good for large amounts of energy, but is useful for small amounts.

RELIEF

In a real way what we are looking for is a sense of relief - a sense of completion. I was taught, years ago, that this was completing the emotion. It is as if an emotion provoking experience winds us up, and we need to unwind to feel better.

And so let me be kind of harsh. The only things that remove the energy of emotions are appropriate expressions of a) anger, b) sadness, c) joy, d) movement, e) talking. That is it. Nothing else works. Relief is spelt ROLAIDS.



Things That Don't Work

This is not the end of the story, for there are several things a person can do about this situation that do not work.

NUMB OUT

This is a tried and true method that doesn't work at all. Yet we see people trying this all over the place. Numbing out means finding something to do so that we will not feel our feelings. These are all the addictions: alcohol, drugs, religion, chocolate, french fries, sex, TV, etc. etc. These are all based on the idea that "if I do this thing I won't feel my feelings."

I believe that the biggest addiction in the United States for men is "work." Work-aholism helps men have no feelings. And they get paid for it. The crisis for men so addicted occurs when they lose their job or when they retire. Kind of like "the liquor store closing."

I believe that the biggest addiction in the United States for women is "children." Taking care of those little ones leaves no time for personal feelings. To a woman so addicted, the crisis occurs when their youngest child reaches 10-14 years of age and they realize that "the liquor store is leaving town."

I believe that the biggest, most pervasive addiction in the United States is "being in a rush." Having no time for feelings, numbs one out. Being in a rush does it.

A friend of mine from Africa once told me the following story. He went back to his village in Western Africa and told the elders about the great United States. They asked him, "what do people do in the morning?" He told them that they rushed through getting dressed, they rushed thru breakfast, they rushed to work. One old man stopped him and said, "Now, I know what getting dressed is. And I know what breakfast is. But this work thing that they are rushing to, I don't know what that is. Is this work thing running away from them?" And my friend said, "No. It is not rushing away." The elder paused and said, "We must think on this. Why would a person run toward something that is not running away?" And there was silence. After what seemed like hours, another elder spoke. "I think I have it. It is not that they are running toward something that is not running away. That is the wrong question. The right question is what are they running away from that they would face if they did not run." I believe, with awe, that in a couple of hours of silence they put their finger on the biggest addiction in our country.

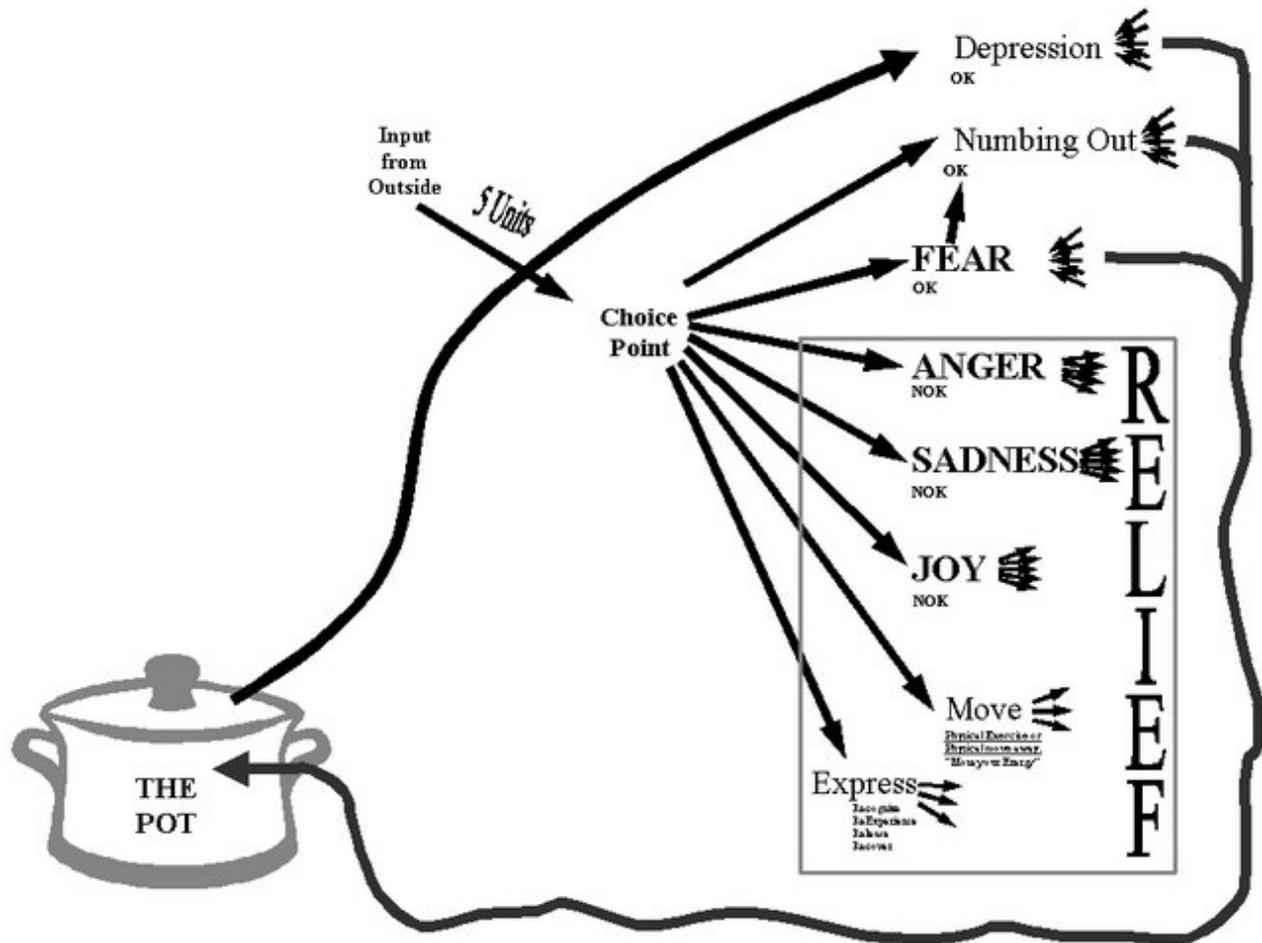
The problem with Numbing out is that all the energy goes into The Pot. That's why when a person gives up an addiction they may switch to another. They still need another way of numbing out. Numbing out never works.

DEPRESSION

Another tactic is to get depressed. Here is out this seems to work. At some point a person's POT gets so big that it can be sensed. The Pot becomes an INPUT on its own. Now the person cannot get away from the provocation, for the energy input. And so the freeze up in a kind of continuous numbness. Input from their Pot triggers depression, and the energy just goes back into the Pot again. This seems so hopeless.

I know that if I can trigger a depressed person into anger or sadness or joy (God help me) or get them to exercise or get them to deeply express, then for a short while they will feel better. But usually, depressed people are deeply committed to not expressing any emotion or anything else. They are stuck.

Here's the whole chart with the choices.



The Problem: Too much

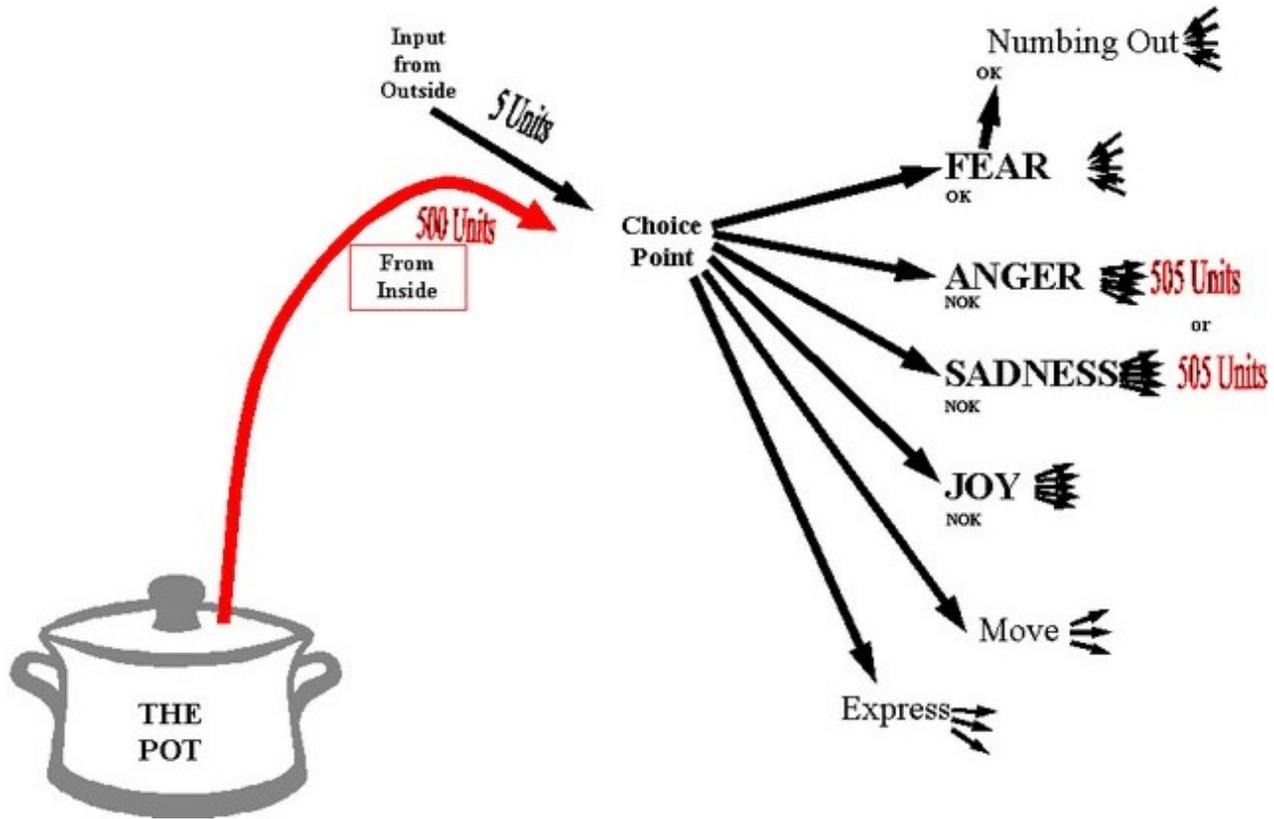
For me the central problem is that all emotions and strategies for reducing the level of energy in a body, all the output methods, are limited or restricted. Thus over time people in our culture get more and more tense, over-charged. They seek relief but almost all ways of getting it are forbidden. At the same time, the ways of holding in the tension, building up the charge, are encouraged. No wonder we have so much trouble with violent outbursts. The Pot is running over. This tendency to explode becomes particularly true in an intimate relationship.

Letting it Out: Three Ways

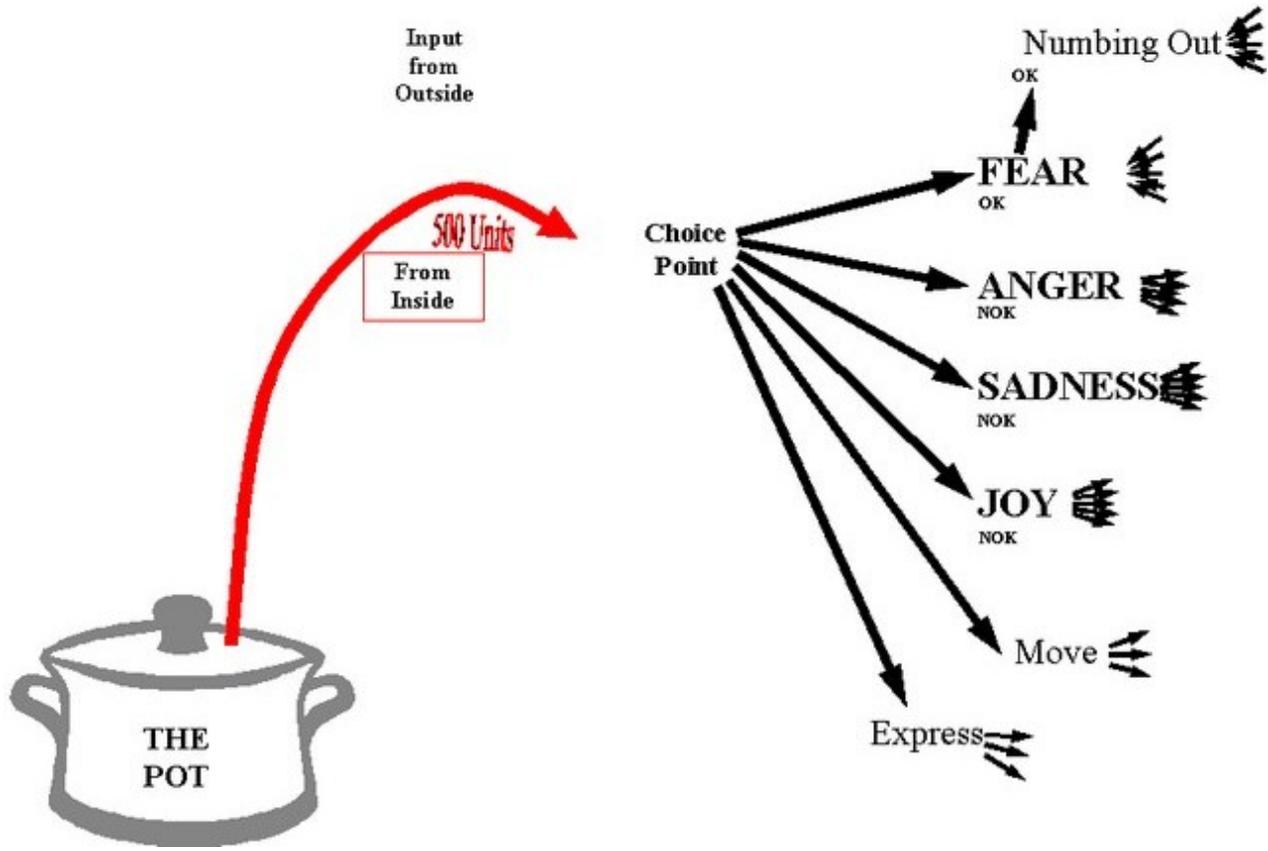
For years I have been aware of the common ways that people have used to try to reduce the size of their Pots. Remember that a person is a much healthier and nicer soul when they have relaxed.

Method #1 The Add-On A person waits until they have a small input and then they add-on a whole pile of energy from their Pot and try to express it all at once. This looks like what we call "over-reacting." A person experiences a small, 5 unit, provocation, they add 500 units from their Pot, and they get angry 505 units worth. Or a person has a small sad thing happen, they add 500 units of grief from their Pot, and they cry for a long time. We say they are getting angry over nothing, they are crying over nothing. But in another reality, they are

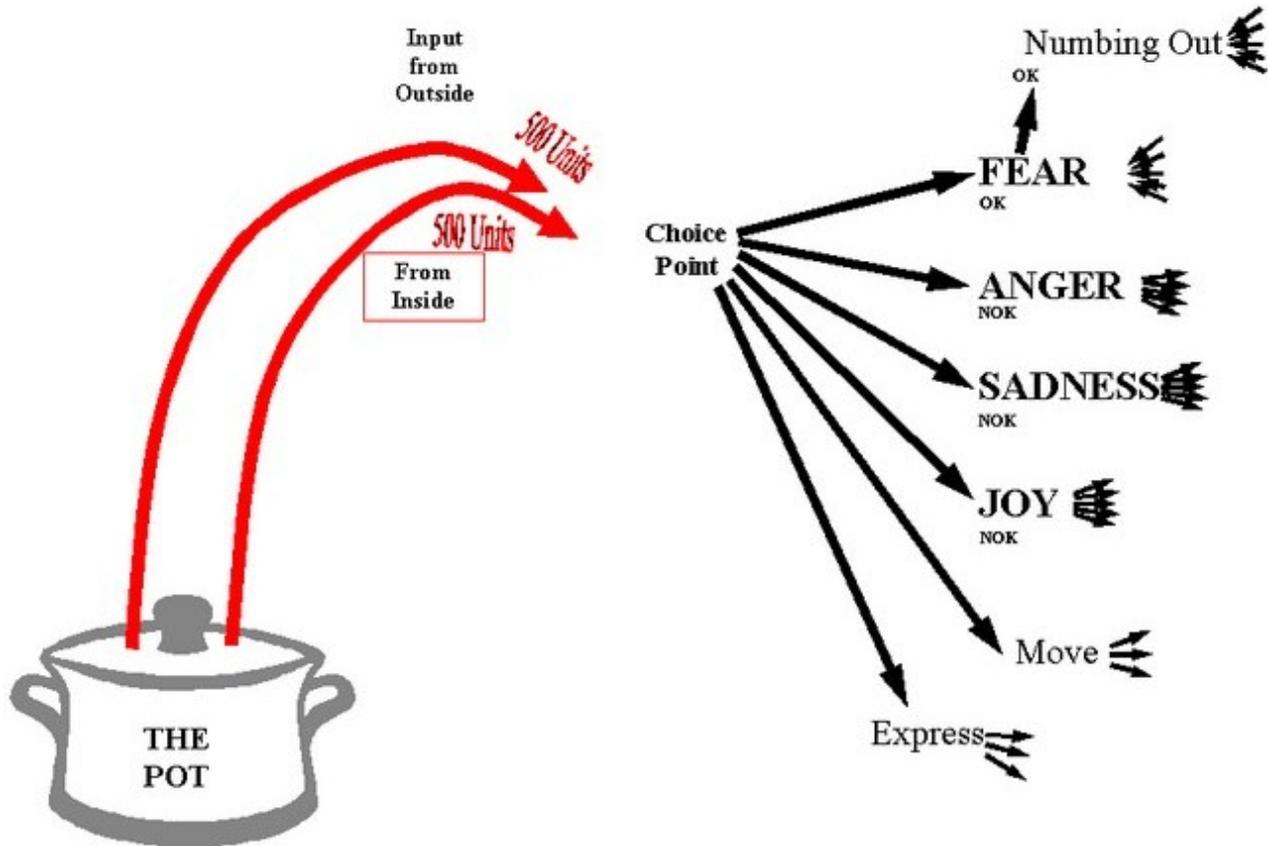
taking advantage of the situation to unload some of the emotional burden they are carrying. And recall that expressing anger is permissible if the anger is "justified." No one says anything about the amount of anger permissible. Thus a little thing that "justifies" a little anger often results in a huge amount of expressed rage.



Method #2 Walking on Eggshells This one is very common. You come home and your partner has 500 units of rage ready to go. And you haven't done anything. Your body can sense this situation. And so you start "walking on eggshells," trying not to set off your partner. You are good. You do everything right and then slip and whammy, they blow. Now remember, they are trying to get some relief from the held energy in their Pot. And you are not helping them. You are giving them no "excuse." The situation looks like this.



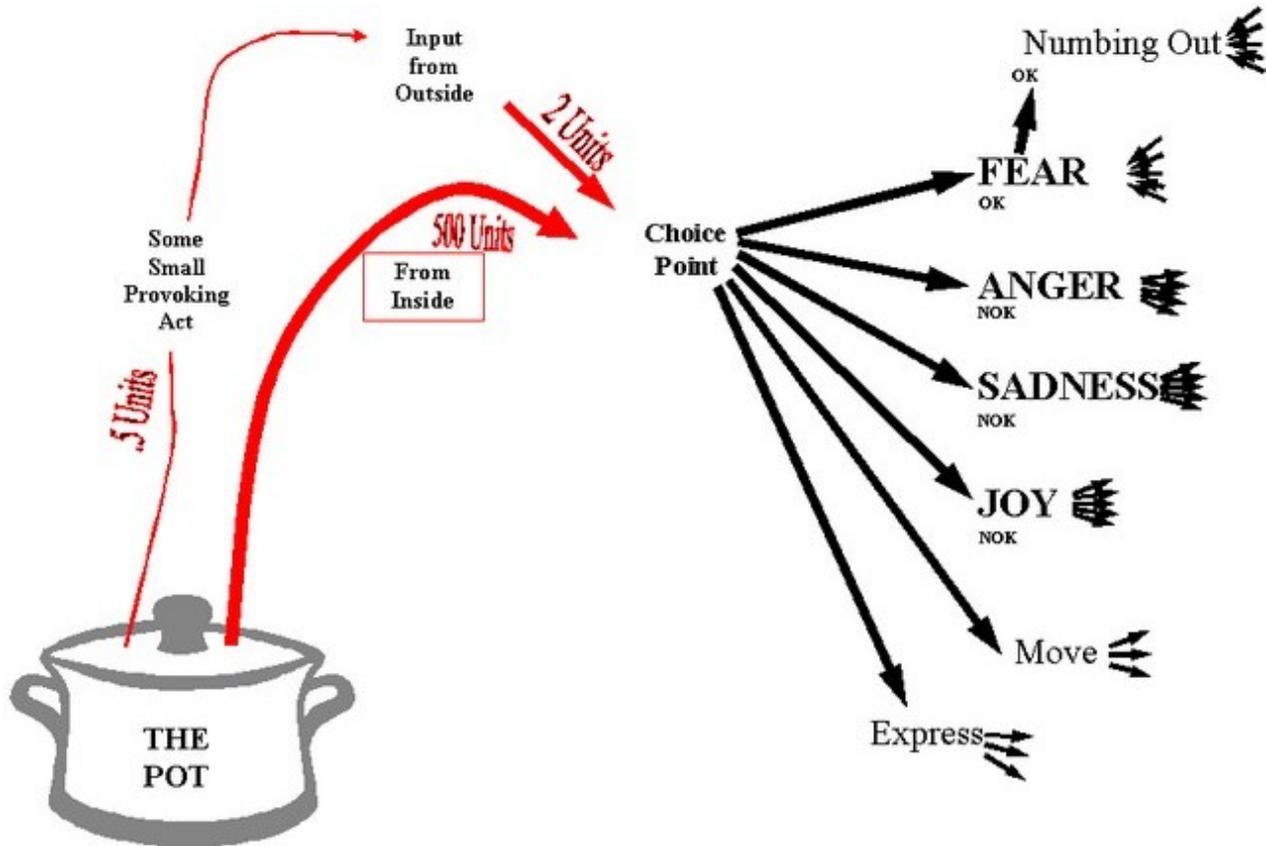
And, if you are good long enough you will be rewarded by they adding another 500 units. Like this.



Being "good" does not help. Helping them release safely works.

Method #3 Provocation – Masochism

For a person who really needs to release their pent up emotions, and who cannot do it themselves, there is always the method of the Masochist. If your partner won't do something "wrong", something that justifies your letting go, well just go and provoke them. You take a tiny bit of energy from your Pot, do something that pushes your partner to act, and then blow up at their action. It looks like this.



And over thirty years I have never met a person who was aware at the time that they were doing the provoking behavior. It can be something so simple as forgetting a birthday, an appointment, or just being late.

The Solution

The next section of this paper will round out about the solution, but I can give it to you now. Your job is to take all the NOK emotions and make them OK, encouraged, supported, appropriate and safe. Your job is to increase your use of Movement and Expression. Your job is to consciously move held back emotions out of your Pot. Your job is to Exorcise the Pot. Like this.

