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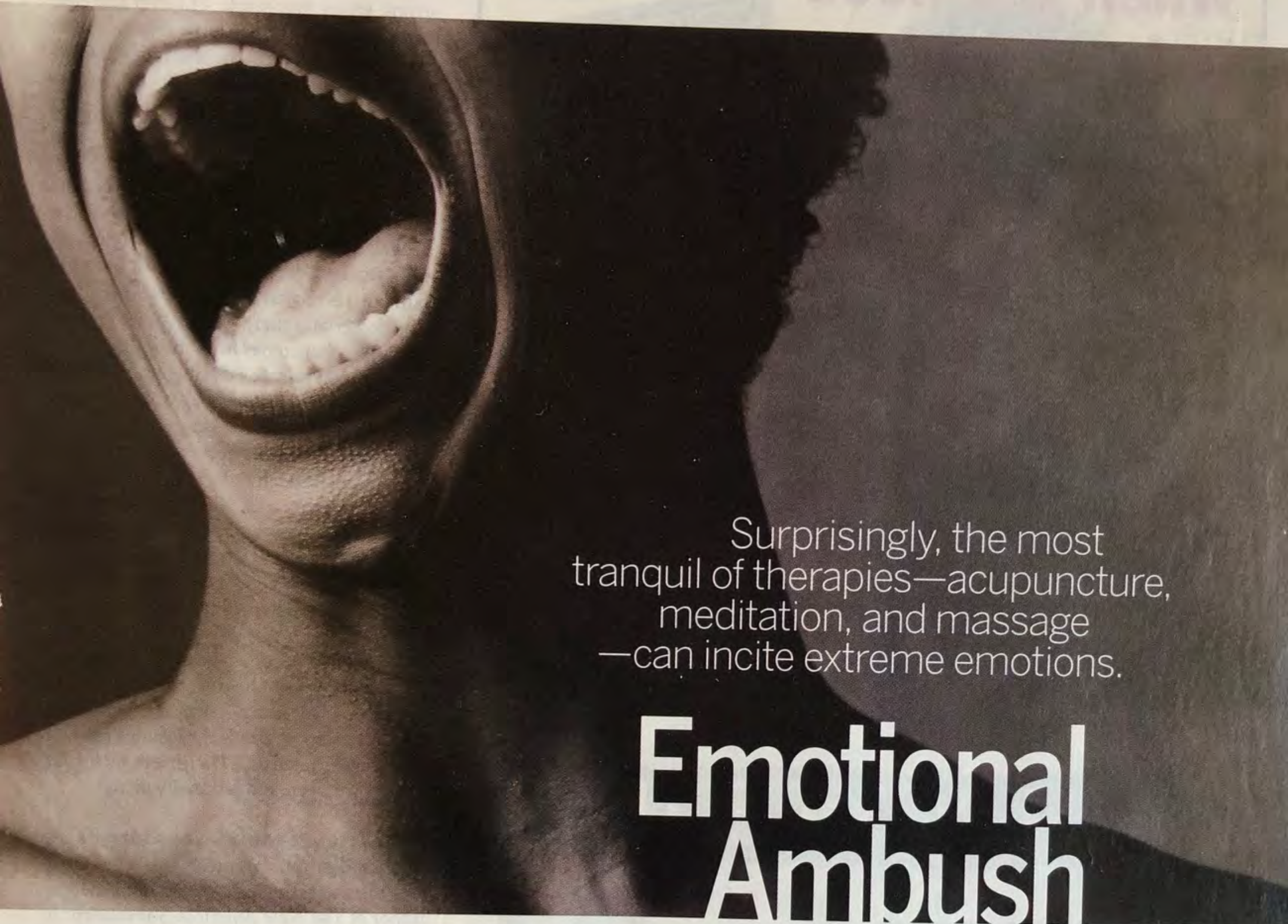
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Surprisingly, the most tranquil of therapies—acupuncture, meditation, and massage—can incite extreme emotions.

## Emotional Ambush

FIVE YEARS AGO, Gail Cohen (name changed upon request) the head of a nonprofit educational organization in Washington, D.C., was struggling with unsteady emotions brought on by menopause. On the advice of friends, she decided to try acupuncture.

Cohen couldn't have predicted what would happen to her at the Song Ho Health Center in Silver Spring, Md. After talking briefly with her acupuncturist, Nianzu Li, L.Ac., Cohen lay down on the paper-covered table. Li placed several slender needles into Cohen's skin, along her legs, in her lower abdomen, and between her thumb and forefinger. When he finished, he left the room.

Suddenly Cohen began sensing that she was in another, distant place—China. "It was mystical," she says—more real than a dream. Fog surrounded her and she could feel its moisture on her body. She saw she was a much younger woman, and noticed that Li was there too. When Cohen looked at him, they recognized each other as if they were soul mates. "We walked together in the fog, along the countryside, and by pagoda-style buildings that I could practically touch," she says. "I felt a great sense of joy ... and it brought me to tears."

Few people expect gentle therapies like acupuncture to be cathartic. In fact, emotional releases—as practitioners call them—like Cohen's are rare. "I'd say [they] occur in less than 1 in every

100 of my clients," says Amy Hull, L.Ac., who practices in Danvers, Mass., and teaches at the New England School of Acupuncture (NESA) in Watertown, Mass. Patients who have been traumatized in the past or harbor unresolved emotions are most susceptible. But sudden outpourings of tears, euphoria, rage, or even laughter can strike anyone, anywhere.

Experts believe these "bursts" come from repressed or forgotten feelings. "If a client refuses to acknowledge [hidden] emotions, the ailment will return until the emotional component is expressed," says Eric Popp, L.Ac., a practitioner in Peabody and Burlington, Mass. Here's how emotional releases during acupuncture, meditation, or massage can help you heal.

**ACUPUNCTURE: RELEASING BLOCKED QI** When you bury or inappropriately express your emotions—by yelling at strangers, for example—you can weaken or block your vital energy, or qi, says Hull. Acupuncture helps qi flow smoothly through the body's organ and energy systems. During an emotional release, Hull explains, "you are feeling the release of stagnant qi."

Traditional Chinese medicine practitioners believe each organ has an emotional counterpart. For example, the lungs and large intestine are linked to grief and sadness, so when the acupuncturist's



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## Mind & Body

needle stimulates the area around these organs, crying may result. The liver and gallbladder are associated with anger, which during treatment can manifest as agitation.

Certain sounds made by patients also correspond with the organs, according to Angela C. Wu, L.Ac., O.M.D., who runs a healing center in San Francisco and teaches holistic health at San Francisco State University. The sounds vary in tone, but acupuncturists can recognize them. "When someone is releasing their worries, you will hear a 'whu-ahh' sound that is related to the spleen," says Wu. "And sometimes there will be groaning, like 'uhh-uhh,' that comes from the kidneys."

Emotional releases during acupuncture aren't always audible. About two years ago, Heather Howes, a massage therapist in Chattanooga, Tenn., noticed that the area around her chest felt tight and closed off. "It was like having a rock where your heart is," she says. Howes went for acupuncture hoping to relieve the tension. Soon after the acupuncturist placed a needle where her right wrist meets her palm (the heart chakra meridian), "I felt this wave hit me and all of a sudden I saw my ex-boyfriend's face." Immediately her chest heaved and tears started pouring down her face. Howes felt her heart opening, and as the feelings washed over her, she realized, "It's time to finally let him go. It's over, and it's totally okay."

**MEDITATION: OPENING YOURSELF UP** "A deep meditation can often make me cry," says Elizabeth Lesser, a meditation teacher, author of *The New American Spirituality: A Seeker's Guide* (Random House, 1999), and co-founder of the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, N.Y. "That mystical feeling of longing ... is why I keep on meditating."

Generally, two types of emotional release occur during meditation. A sense of oneness with the world can signify an "opening of the heart," says Richard Does, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and Buddhist meditation teacher in Burlington, Vt. You may laugh and cry simultaneously during this type of feeling, which experts call "sad joy." But if you feel suddenly struck by a wave of anger, lust, or jealousy, says Does, it could be an attack of *klesa*. *Klesa* is Sanskrit for "personality imperfection," and it signifies a subconscious issue. According to meditation teachers, people have emotional releases during meditation because it creates a clear space from which buried feelings may rise.

During a week-long retreat the first year he began meditating, Does took a dislike to a person in the group. "As I meditated, I had



this sense of incredible rage that dominated my mind for a whole day," recalls Does. "I couldn't shake it." Does finally handled the klesa attack by observing his thoughts with "kindness and curiosity," rather than by judging himself. By the end of the day, the feeling of hatred dissolved. Does went forward knowing that his experience was natural—nothing more than an emotional burst.

#### MESSAGE: FINDING LOST EMOTIONS

According to Suzanne Torrenzano, Ed.D., a massage therapist in Reston, Va., our emotional history is stored in our bodies. For example, if you are avoiding crying, the area from your diaphragm to your throat may tighten. A tense face, neck, and shoulders often corresponds to feelings of fear; a taut back could mean you are holding in anger. When a massage therapist works on one of these areas, the touch might trigger a burst. Lying down on a massage table may accentuate that effect, adds Torrenzano. "One of the reasons Freud used the regressive position—lying horizontally—is because it stimulates the unconscious mind."

People who experience emotional releases during massage tend to be of two types, say experts. Some individuals have an innate openness to change that makes them more likely to burst. Others have a specific issue they'd like to solve. They could be recovering

from a divorce or a miscarriage, or even from a violent trauma. However, the majority don't realize they have something to recover from until they have a catharsis.

When Jennifer Lowe (name changed upon request), a massage therapist based in the southern United States, was in massage school, one of her classmates burst out crying while Lowe was working on her leg. "When I asked her what was going on," says Lowe, "she told me that she had broken that leg in a car accident while she was pregnant"—more than a year earlier. "She told me that her best friend had been driving the car, and she hadn't really talked to her since." Although the break had completely healed, the patient's emotions clearly hadn't.

**IF IT HAPPENS TO YOU** Signs of an emotional release can range from a single sigh or wet eyes to shaking or shouting. Bursts usually strike during treatment, but feelings can trickle to the surface afterward. Emotional releases are powerful healers; don't be afraid to explore them (see "How to Handle an Emotional Outburst," below). However, if the sensations are too strong to bear or if they won't subside, you may want to see a professional therapist. ■

*Amy Eden Jollymore is a freelance writer based in the Boston area.*

## How to Handle an Emotional Outburst

ALTHOUGH THEY CAN BE OVERWHELMING, EMOTIONAL RELEASES during acupuncture, meditation, or massage are rare and experts consider them gifts that help you heal. If you feel a burst coming on, don't try to suppress it—you may destroy its curative powers. Instead, think of your feelings as waves that wash in and out, and follow the steps experts recommend below to use them to your benefit.

#### ACUPUNCTURE

**What to do:** Angela Wu, L.Ac., O.M.D., who runs a healing center in San Francisco, advises you to open your eyes and focus on the colors and shapes of different objects in the room.

**How this helps:** Observing your surroundings will help you anchor yourself and keep your emotions in perspective.

**Recover and heal:** Walk to your next destination; eat lightly and drink tepid water during the rest of the day.

#### MEDITATION

**What to do:** Avoid analyzing your experience and categorizing your emotions, says Richard Does, Ph.D., a Buddhist meditation teacher in Burlington, Vt. Instead, think simply "Strong emotions are rising," or "Crying is happening." When your meditation is over, touch the floor with your hands; then let go, physically and emotionally.

**How this helps:** Noting the experience without judgment allows you to keep the emotions in perspective. Letting go of what you learned will help you develop an open mind.

**Recover and heal:** Prepare and drink tea; write briefly in a journal.

#### MESSAGE

**What to do:** If you feel a burst during a massage, Suzanne Torrenzano, Ed.D., a massage therapist in Reston, Va., recommends that at the end of the session you slowly get off the table and hold your weight in your lower body, feeling the ground beneath you. Temporarily contain your feelings—in your mind or on paper. Then focus yourself on a task, such as planning the next 30 minutes of your day.

**How this helps:** It allows you to go back to your daily activities without feeling overwhelmed.

**Recover and heal:** At your next session, talk about your experience with your massage therapist.

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