Where Are Emotions Felt in the Body? This Infographic Will Tell You

Illustration by Maya Chastain

Have you ever said that you had “cold feet,” “a gut reaction,” or “a shiver down your spine”? You probably didn’t think anything of it, but those cliches have more truth to them than you might think. Emotional body mapping can show you why.

In the same way anxiety and depression can cause physical symptoms, emotions can “feel” like they’re gathering in one or more parts of your body. Feelings are our primary way of interacting with the world, yet many of us don’t pause and unravel how they impact us.

If you’ve ever had trouble naming an emotion, understanding the concept of physical feelings and where they live may help you feel more in tune with your body.

Body mapping might not be a concrete solution for everyone, but if you’ve ever needed a little help deciphering your feelings, this could be a good place to start. Plus, we spoke to somatic therapists for tips on tuning in when you’re ready to better connect with your body.

Does this really work?

You may have heard of the emotion wheel, which can help you categorize emotions to better understand what you're feeling. Emotional body mapping is another option, and, as with the wheel, its efficacy depends on the person.

The research on body mapping is limited so far. Enrico Glerean, the computational and statistics expert for two studies on body mapping, says the researchers are "collecting some more data, but experiments are still in progress, so it is too early for preliminary results."

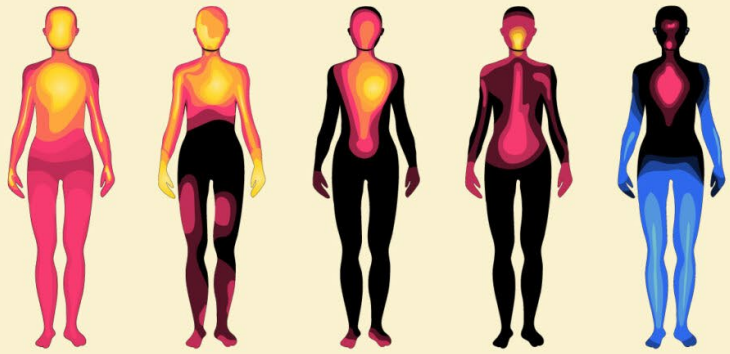
So think of the body map as a tool that, like medications, isn't one-size-fits-all. It's just one piece in a bigger kit for learning how to communicate with your body.

So, exactly where do emotions rest in our bodies?

Based on a 2014 study by Glerean and his colleagues, these are the 13 emotions and the corresponding body parts they activate (or don't activate). Like on a heat map, increased activity corresponds with warmer colors (red, orange, yellow), while decreased responses correspond with cooler colors (blue, green, indigo).

If you find these maps to be accurate to your feelings, it may help you understand metaphysical changes and how emotions impact your well-being.

WHEN WE FEEL EMOTIONS, WHERE DO THEY HAPPEN?



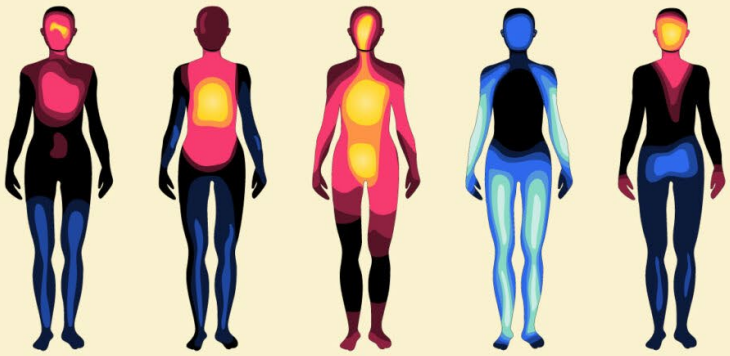
HAPPINESS:
throughout the entire body

ANGER:
upper half of the body and the arms; also some activation in the legs and feet

FEAR:
upper half of the body, excluding the arms; also some activation in the feet

DISGUST:
upper half of the body and the arms

SADNESS:
the chest and head; decreased activation in the arms, legs, and feet



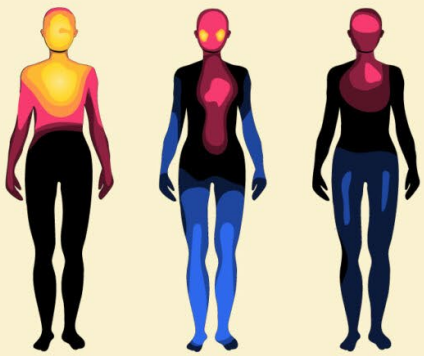
SURPRISE:
the chest and head; decreased activation in the legs

ANXIETY:
increased activation above the pelvis, excluding the arms; decreased activation in the arms, legs, and feet

LOVE:
throughout the entire body, though not much in the legs

DEPRESSION:
decreased activation in the lower body

CONTEMPT:
the head and hands; decreased activation in the pelvic and leg areas



PRIDE:
the torso, head, and arms

SHAME:
the torso and head; decreased activation in the arms, legs, and feet

ENVY:
the chest and head; decreased activation in the legs

How did they test this?

To create these body maps, researchers hypothesized that different emotions correspond with different physical reactions. They asked 701 people to color in on a body silhouette the regions where they felt increasing or decreasing activity as they reacted to various stimuli.

The stimuli they were exposed to were much like what we encounter in real life: snippets of movies, conversations, and surprise facial expressions. The results showed that, for the participant pool, different emotions consistently impacted similar areas of the body.

A 2018 study conducted by the same researchers found that the intensity of emotions was directly linked with the intensity of mental and physical sensations. In other words, the stronger the feeling is in your body, the stronger the feeling is in your mind.

This led them to believe that feelings can be categorized as follows:

- negative (unpleasant), such as anger, fear, anxiety, and shame
- positive (pleasant), such as happiness, love, and pride
- illnesses
- homeostasis
- cognition

Very few emotions, like surprise, are simply neutral.

Participants also saw that pleasant and controllable states were more frequent than unpleasant and uncontrollable ones. If you've ever felt anxiety or depression get the better of you, you might understand the feeling of not being in control.

https://greatist.com/connect/emotional-body-maps-infographic#infographic