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The healing power of emotions: Exploring the mindbody-soul connection through modern science and Unani wisdom

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Abstract

Emotions don't just reside in the mind they shape our bodies, influence our health, and colour our everyday experiences. Have you ever felt your heart race in fear, or a sense of calm wash over you after a deep breath? These aren't coincidences they're vivid expressions of the profound mind-body connection. This review explores how emotions like joy, fear, anger, sorrow, and gratitude leave deep physiological imprints, influencing immunity, heart function, digestion, and hormonal balance.

Backed by modern neuroscience, psychoneuroimmunology, and the calming science of the vagus nerve, this article also draws from ancient wisdom including the Unani understanding of *rooh* (vital spirit) and *mizaj* (temperament), as well as spiritual teachings from Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Judaism. From the Qur'anic view of the heart as the seat of emotional and spiritual harmony to the therapeutic role of prayer, forgiveness, and gratitude, these perspectives highlight the deep interconnection of mind, body, and soul.

The review presents a holistic framework for emotional healing through psychotherapy, herbal pharmacotherapy, regimental therapies (diet, sleep, exercise), and mindfulness practices like yoga and guided meditation. Ultimately, it reveals that emotions are not just feelings they are forces that can heal or harm, uplift or weaken. Understanding and managing them is the key to a healthier, more resilient, and balanced life.

Keywords: Rooh, Mizaj, emotions, mind-body connection, unani medicine, psychoneuroimmunology, spiritual healing, holistic health

Introduction

What Is the Mind-Body Relationship?

Have you ever noticed how stress can make your shoulders tense? Or how public speaking might make your stomach churn? Or how a good belly laugh can make you feel better? These are all examples of the mind-body relationship in action how our thoughts and

emotions can manifest physically, influencing our well-being, and how physical sensations and actions can influence our mood in return. The mind-body connection might seem abstract or mysterious, but it's firmly supported by real-life experiences and scientific evidence. Studies reveal that this connection is more complex and impactful than we often recognize. For instance, a persistent headache can influence our mood, while restful sleep can improve mental clarity [1, 20, 21].

The Body Speaks: How Emotions Manifest Physically

Our bodies often reflect our emotions through physical sensations, acting as storytellers of our inner state. Though physical and emotional pain differ, they share neurological pathways particularly in the prefrontal and cingulate cortices some types of pain are purely physical, while others are purely emotional; but many times, pain lies somewhere in the middle ^[8, 9].

What Are Emotions?

Emotions are reactions that human beings experience in response to events or situations. The type of emotion a person experiences is determined by the circumstance that triggers the emotion. For instance, a person experiences joy when they receive good news and fear when they are threatened [3].

Emotions can be short-lived, such as a moment of irritation at a colleague, or long-lasting, such as enduring sadness over losing a relationship ^[5].

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Government Nizamia Tibbi College, Charminar, Hyderabad, Telangana, India Women are more likely to express emotions, while men often suppress feelings like fear or sadness giving women an adaptive advantage [19].

Everyone experiences a wide variety of emotions each day. Regardless of which emotion you're experiencing, your emotions depend on how your mind and body interpret a particular situation [22].

Why Understanding Emotions Matters

Emotions deeply shape our thoughts, actions, and decisions. They influence how we perceive the world, interact with others, and choose daily activities. Understanding them can lead to greater stability and ease in life [3, 5].

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines emotions as personal mental responses that include both physical and behavioural reactions. Since emotions play a crucial role in everyday life, it is essential to understand what they are, why they arise, how they influence us, and how they can be managed [22].

To explore emotions further, let's delve into their types and how they function in everyday life.

Review of Literature Historical perspectives

Our ancestors understood the deep and intricate connection between mind and body, the mind-body connection refers to the complex interplay between psychological states, neural activity, and physical health. This concept has deep historical roots ancient civilizations acknowledged its significance. In ancient Greece, Hippocrates stressed the importance of treating the mind and body together, laying early foundations for holistic health approaches ^[2].

In *Discovering Psychology*, Don and Sandra Hockenbury define emotions as complex states with three key elements: subjective experience, physiological response, and behavioural expression. Over time, researchers have classified emotions in various ways:

- In 1972, Paul Ekman identified six universal emotions: fear, disgust, anger, surprise, joy, and sadness.
- In the 1980s, Robert Plutchik introduced the "wheel of emotions", showing how emotions can blend like colours.
- By 1999, Ekman expanded his list to include emotions like embarrassment, pride, shame, excitement, and amusement.

Theories of Emotion

Several theories explain how emotions arise:

- Darwin's evolutionary theory sees emotions as survival tools love promotes reproduction, while fear protects from danger.
- James-Lange theory claims emotions result from physical reactions (e.g., a racing heart cause's fear).
- Cannon-Bard theory argues emotional and physical responses occur simultaneously but separately.
- Schachter-Singer theory suggests emotions stem from interpreting physical responses based on context.
- Cognitive appraisal theory states that thought comes first how we assess a situation determines our emotional response [3].

Emotions arise from the brain's limbic system, which includes the hypothalamus, hippocampus, amygdala, and

limbic cortex key areas that regulate emotions and behaviour.

Emotions have three main components:

- 1. **Subjective:** Your personal experience of the emotion
- 2. **Physiological:** How your body physically responds
- 3. **Expressive:** How you express or act on the emotion

These elements combine to shape how we feel, respond, and connect with the world around us ^[5].

Types of Emotions

Primary vs. Secondary Emotions

Emotions are often classified as either primary or secondary:-

- Primary emotions are universal and experienced by all humans. While theories vary, they typically include happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, anger, and surprise.
- Secondary emotions develop from primary emotions and are more complex. They can arise as reactions to primary feelings for example, feeling frustrated about being sad. Examples include pride, jealousy, envy, and frustration [5].

Positive vs. Negative Emotions

• Positive emotions

The Power of Positive Emotions

Dr. Barbara Fredrickson's research highlights the benefits of positive emotions such as gratitude, love, awe, and connection which promote faster recovery from stress, better sleep, fewer illnesses, and overall happiness.

• Forgiveness and Well-Being

Forgiveness involves accepting a negative event and letting go of resentment. Studies show it improves mental, emotional, and physical health. In the Stanford Forgiveness Project, participants reported:

- 70% less emotional pain
- 13% reduced anger
- 27% fewer physical symptoms

Forgiveness also boosts immune function, lowers blood pressure, and supports heart health.

• Gratitude and Joy

Gratitude enhances emotional well-being. People who regularly count their blessings report greater happiness, improved sleep, and fewer health issues. Brené Brown has found that there is a relationship between joy and gratitude, but with a surprising twist: It's not joy that makes us grateful, but gratitude that makes us joyful. [13]

• Negative Emotions

What Triggers Negative Emotions?

Negative emotions can arise from a range of situations or experiences. They may be sparked by specific incidents like feeling disappointed when your favourite team loses or getting angry because someone showed up late for a date.

Varieties of negative emotions

Emotions exist in many forms, and recognizing their types can help us handle them better. Negative emotions can feel uncomfortable or distressing, they are often natural responses to life's events.

Common examples of negative emotions include

Anger, Anxiety or fear, Apathy, Contempt, hatred, or disgust, Insecurity, Jealousy, Regret or guilt, grief, Sadness, or loneliness, Shame [6].

Crying: A Natural Emotional Response

Crying is a normal human reaction to various emotions and can offer several benefits, such as calming the nervous system, reducing stress and pain, and improving mood.

There are three types of tears humans produce

- Basal tears are constantly produced to keep the eyes moist and shielded; rich in proteins and antibacterial properties, they are released with each blink.
- Reflex tears are stimulated by irritants such as wind, smoke, or onions, and serve to cleanse the eyes by washing away harmful agents.
- Emotional tears: Released in response to intense emotions, these contain higher levels of stress-related hormones and may help regulate emotional balance. [12]

Psychologist Paul Ekman identified six basic emotions experienced across all cultures

- **Happiness:** A positive emotion linked to well-being, often shown through smiling or cheerful speech.
- Sadness: A common emotion expressed by crying, withdrawal, or silence, and includes forms like grief or disappointment.
- **Fear:** Fear is a reaction to actual or perceived danger, often triggering physical changes such as a racing heart or the activation of the fight-or-flight response; in some cases, it is even pursued for excitement.
- **Disgust:** Can be triggered by unpleasant sights or smells (e.g., rotten food) or by moral judgment.
- Anger: Expressed through yelling, frowning, or aggression; it can drive positive change if managed constructively.
- **Surprise:** A sudden emotion that can be good or bad, often accompanied by a gasp or widened eyes, and may also trigger the fight-or-flight reaction ^[3].

Emotions and Health: The Scientific Connection

Scientific research, especially in psychoneuroimmunology, confirms a strong connection between emotions and physical health. Stress increases vulnerability to infections due to hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, which, when chronically elevated, weaken immunity and raise the risk of diseases. Conversely, positive emotions like joy and gratitude enhance immunity, lower inflammation, and support healing by activating the parasympathetic nervous system and releasing endorphins [8].

The Science Behind It

When stressed, the brain releases hormones like cortisol through a cascade starting in the hypothalamus, moving to the pituitary gland, and finally stimulating the adrenal glands. This process, known as the "fight, flight, freeze, or fawn" response, prepares the body to face danger even if the threat is only perceived. It results in physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat, increased alertness, and nausea [10]. Polyvagal Theory & emotional regulation: proposed by

Stephen Porges (1997), highlights the vagus nerve's role in managing emotional and physiological states. It explains how the autonomic nervous system reacts to social and environmental cues, impacting both health and emotional wellbeing. Enhancing vagal tone through practices like deep breathing can improve resilience and emotional regulation [17]

The gut-brain connection

The digestive system and brain are closely linked. Just as stomach issues can influence mood, strong emotions like anxiety, anger, or even excitement can upset digestion and lead to nausea. For instance, a stomach ache can signal the brain, intensifying feelings of discomfort and anxiety.

Understanding anxiety-induced nausea

Anxiety doesn't just affect the mind it often manifests physically. One common symptom is nausea, which can last from a few hours to an entire day. This occurs when psychological stress activates an alarm system in the brain, triggering a chain of hormonal and nervous system responses [10].

Physical symptoms linked to emotional distress

Emotional distress can weaken the immune system, increasing susceptibility to infections. Stress, anxiety, or sadness may also lead to neglect of healthy habits, such as poor diet, lack of exercise, or misuse of substances. Common physical symptoms include:

 Back pain, headaches, chest pain, digestive issues, dry mouth, fatigue, insomnia, high blood pressure, palpitations, shortness of breath, stiff neck, sweating, appetite or weight changes, and sexual dysfunction [7].

Biological link between emotional pain and heart health

The phrase "my heart hurts emotionally" reflects more than metaphor it signals a real connection between emotional distress and heart health, sometimes leading to physical heart conditions like Broken Heart Syndrome (takotsubo cardiomyopathy).

Broken Heart Syndrome, also known as stress-induced cardiomyopathy, is a short-term heart condition brought on by intense emotional or physical stress. Though it resembles a heart attack, it is not caused by blocked arteries but rather by a sudden weakening of the heart muscle.

Emotional triggers increasing heart risk

- 1. **Stress & Anxiety:** Raise heart rate and blood pressure, heightening heart disease risk.
- 2. **Depression:** Linked to inflammation, autonomic dysfunction, and high CRP levels.
- 3. **Grief:** Intense loss can trigger broken heart syndrome with acute symptoms.
- 4. **Social Isolation:** Increases risk of coronary artery disease and stroke [14].

Mind-Body Connection: A Two-Way Street

In simple terms, the mind-body connection refers to how our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours affect how our body works and how our physical health can influence our mental state. Recent research shows that chronic illnesses, hormone imbalances, poor nutrition, and gut issues can affect mood, increase anxiety and depression, and impact thinking and memory.

When this mind-body link is disturbed, it may lead to various problems, such as psychosomatic disorders, mood disorders linked to circadian rhythm disruptions, dissociation symptoms, emotional processing issues, and altered interoceptions [2].

How can trapped emotions be released?

At times, letting go of emotions happens naturally like when a child cries after falling and quickly recovers. However, in some cases, expressing emotions can be more challenging this can be for a variety of reasons. A person may feel ashamed or guilt about their emotions or what caused them. Alternatively, they might be afraid of their feelings, or simply be unaware of them [11].

The body as a medium of emotional communication

Emotional information is conveyed and interpreted through various channels during communication, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, body movements, and posture. While traditionally seen mainly as a tool for action, the body is now recognized as a key medium for expressing emotions [18]

Gender, Culture, and Emotion Regulation

Although commonly believed, clear evidence on gender differences in emotion regulation is limited.

- **Neural Differences:** Some studies suggest that men and women may use different brain regions women more often engage the left hemisphere, while men tend to use the right.
- **Social & Cultural Differences:** Social norms influence expression men are often discouraged from showing vulnerability, while women are generally encouraged to be expressive.

Emotion regulation is influenced by complex biological, behavioural, and cultural factors, which should be considered in therapeutic and social contexts [19].

Religious perspective on emotions and their impact on the body

Religious traditions worldwide recognize a deep link between emotional and physical well-being, viewing emotions as reflections of spiritual health. Ancient scriptures often highlight how spiritual practices can promote emotional balance and physical healing.

In Islam, emotional and physical harmony is rooted in the state of the heart (Qalb). The Qur'an says, "indeed, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest" (Surah Ar-Ra'd, 13:28), highlighting the calming effect of spiritual mindfulness. It also refers to the Qur'an as "a healing and mercy for the believers" (Surah Al-Isra, 17:82). The Prophet Muhammad said, "Truly in the body there is a morsel of flesh which, if it is sound, the whole body is sound... truly, it is the heart" (Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 52; Sahih Muslim, Hadith 1599). Core emotional virtues like Sabr (patience), Shukr (gratitude), and Tawakkul (trust in Allah) are strongly linked to emotional resilience and better health outcomes.

In Christianity, emotions like peace, love, and forgiveness are central to both spiritual and physical well-being. The Bible teaches, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones" (Proverbs 17:22). Practices such as prayer and entrusting one's worries to God

are seen to reduce stress and promote healing. Scientific studies also support the beneficial effects of faith and spiritual coping on overall health [28, 29, 35].

In Hinduism, the mind belongs to the *Manomaya Kosha*, one of the five sheaths enveloping the self. Emotional disturbances in this layer are believed to impact physical health. The *Bhagavad Gita* emphasizes balance: "He who is temperate in eating, sleeping, working and recreation can mitigate all sorrows by practicing the yoga system" (6:17). Yogic practices, meditation, and breath control (*Pranayama*) are integral to restoring emotional and physical harmony [30-32].

In Judaism, emotional well-being is seen as vital to both spiritual and physical health. Proverbs states, "A joyful heart makes a cheerful countenance, but by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken". Practices such as observing the Sabbath (*Shabbat*), engaging in communal support, and spiritual reflection help reduce stress and foster healing [33-35]

These religious teachings emphasize that emotional health is not isolated from the body, but deeply intertwined with spiritual practices that nurture both mind and body.

Unani perspective on emotions and mental health Historical foundations of emotions in unani medicine

The concept of Amraz-e-Nafsaniya (psychiatric disorders) can be traced back to Hippocrates (460-377 B.C.), who identified the brain as the seat of emotions and mental functions. This foundation was expanded by prominent physicians like Asclepiades, Soranus, Aretaeus, Galen, Rhazes (Al-Razi), Ali ibn Abbas Al-Majusi, Abu Sahal Masihi, and Avicenna (Ibn Sina), whose contributions shaped the understanding of mental health in the Unani system.

Unani scholars highlighted the holistic nature of health, where mental, physical, and social well-being are deeply interconnected. Despite this traditional insight, mental health remains underrecognized and undertreated globally. Today, over 450 million people suffer from mental or behavioural disorders, but only a small percentage receive proper care [16].

Concept of emotions in unani medicine

In Unani philosophy, rooh (PNEUMA) flows with blood and sustains both mental and physical functions. Any disturbance in its flow can affect organ systems and lead to emotional, mental, or physical imbalances.

Emotions are seen as natural yet passive mental responses to external or internal events. While they are part of human experience, excessive or prolonged emotional states can disturb the temperament (mizaj) of organs, upset humour balance (akhlat), and affect the flow of pneuma, ultimately weakening organ functions and contributing to disease.

Each organ is believed to possess specific emotional energy, and disruptions whether internal or environmental can impact this equilibrium. Thus, in Unani understanding, emotions can both reflect illness and contribute to its development.

Physiology of Emotions (Psychic Movements)

Unani physicians observed that emotions directly influence the nervous system and the movement of rooh (pneuma) within the body. Emotional states cause either inward or outward movement of pneuma, which may be sudden or

gradual:

- Sudden Outward Movement (e.g., in anger) cools the body's interior rapidly, possibly leading to syncope or even death.
- Sudden Inward Movement (e.g., in fear) heats the interior while cooling the periphery, potentially causing collapse.
- Gradual Movements such as outward flow in joy or inward flow in sorrow result in slow depletion of innate heat, leading to general weakness.

In complex emotions like shame or worry, pneuma may shift both ways: Initially inward due to fear/modesty and later outward as balance is restored often visible through facial redness.

Thus, emotional states alter the direction and quality of rooh, impacting internal heat, organ temperament, and overall health.

Physical Effects of Emotional Disturbances Each emotion elicits specific physiological changes

- Anger: Rapid outward movement of rooh leads to dilated blood vessels, muscle dysfunction, mental confusion, and bile stimulation. Pulse becomes large, strong, and fast. If mixed with fear or shame, pulse irregularities may occur.
- Fear: Causes digestive issues like indigestion, diarrhea, or constipation; can overload the blood with toxins, affecting kidney function. Sudden fear results in a quick, irregular pulse, while chronic fear causes variable pulse patterns.
- **Sorrow:** Leads to depletion of innate heat and vital energy, producing a small, weak, and slow pulse. It also alters blood composition.
- **Delight:** Triggers gradual outward movement of pneuma, resulting in a slow, steady pulse with good volume and resistance.
- **Joy:** Produces a large, soft, slow, and infrequent pulse, similar to delight [15].

In traditional Chinese medicine, five core emotions are each linked to a specific organ and natural element in the body:-

- Anger is connected to the liver
- Fear to the kidneysJoy to the heart
- Sadness and grief to the lungs
- Worry to the spleen [4].

Management

Positive emotions like joy and delight support health by aligning with the natural temperament of pneuma, while negative emotions such as sorrow, fear, and anger disrupt it. An integrated approach combining psychotherapy, pharmacotherapy, and regimental therapy offers the most effective and lasting outcomes.

Psychotherapy

Unani medicine emphasizes emotional balance for mental and physical health. Extreme emotions joy, sorrow, anger, fear, and delight are considered major causes of illness. The following methods support emotional well-being:

1. **Self-Control:** Unani medicine holds that five emotions i.e. Joy, delight, sorrow, anger and fear in an extreme

- state are one of the main causes of illness Regulate emotions before they become extreme using behavioural skills to identify triggers and respond healthily.
- 2. **Distraction Techniques:** The aim is to release emotional distress by avoiding harmful triggers. This can be achieved through calming activities like listening to music during periods of sadness or seeking comfort from close friends or family after a misfortune. Changing one's environment can also help deflect negative emotions and restore mental balance.
- 3. Stay hopeful during difficult times
- 4. Set healthy boundaries in relationships
- 5. Built self-esteem
- 6. One should increase social activities and networks
- 7. Pick up a former hobby or a sport you used to like
- 8. One should express oneself creatively through music, art, or writing
- 9. One should not share their emotions with others because sometimes others response may increase their pain.

Pharmacotherapy

Extreme emotions disrupt the body's temperament, causing abnormal heat or cold. If no morbid matter is present, treatment aims to restore balance. If humours are affected, therapy involves concoction and evacuation to remove the morbid matter.

Anger

Anger increases bodily heat and disperses bile, which is especially harmful for those with a bilious temperament. Cooling remedies like *Sharbat Neelofer*, *ma-al-jubn*, and *Alu Bukhara* are recommended. Camphor and rose water help retain breath by imparting coolness.

In cases of substantial hot temperament (*Su-e-mizaj Har Maddi*), treatment involves:

- Concoctive of bile (munzij-e-safra) for 3-5 days
- Cholagogue (Mushil-e-safra) for bile evacuation
- Infrigidation (Tabrid) using mucilaginous agents like *Plantago ovata* and moistening syrups to reduce dryness.

Examples of Munzij-e-ṣafra: Beikh-e-kasni, Nilofer, Shahitra, 'Unnab, Ṣandal safaid, Ma-ul-sha'ir etc.

Examples of Mushil-e-safra: Saqmonia, 'Uṣara Raiwand, Halila Kabli, Shir-e-Khisht, Alu-Bukhara, Afsantin, Tamar Hindi, Zarishk etc.

Fear and sorrow

Emotions like fear and sorrow can reduce body heat, causing a cold and dry temperament. If no morbid matter is involved, warming remedies like wine and hot exhilarants (Har Mufarreḥat) are used to nourish and restore breath. Substances like pearl, silk, amber (ambergris), and Marjan (coral) help brighten and retain the breath. Darunj 'Aqrabi warms and stimulates cold breath.

If the cold temperament is due to abnormal matter, treatment involves:-

- 1. Concoctive of black bile (munzij-e-Sawda) for 40 days
- Melanogogue (Mushil-e-Sawda) to evacuate the morbid matter

- 3. Infrigidation (Tabreed) to relieve dryness and irritation
- 4. Followed by wine and hot exhilarants as supportive

Examples of Munzij-e-Sawda: Badranjboya, Bisfaij, Aftimun, Parsiyaoshan.

Examples of Mushil-e-Sawda: Kharbakh Siyah, Shaḥm e ḥanzal, Ghariqun.

Regimental Therapy (Ilāj bit Tadbīr) Exercise

For hot temperament, mild exercise is recommended; for cold temperament, moderate to intense exercise may be advised based on individual condition. Exercise supports physical and mental health by:

- Eliminating excess toxins.
- Enhancing metabolism.
- Promoting mental calmness and detachment.
- Uplifting mood and encouraging positivity.

Relaxation exercises help reduce the harmful effects of negative emotions and may correct maladaptive behaviours.

Sleep

Healthy sleep habits are essential. Sleep should be moderate and well-timed avoiding both excess and prolonged wakefulness, which may harm mental and physical faculties. [17]

Food

Mental excitement or emotions hinder digestion. In such conditions, one should eat light foods making good chyme, eg, wine, half-boiled egg yolk, meat soup (ma-ul-laham), apple, pomegranate, and clean wheat chapati, lamb meat etc. One should not eat unless hungry, nor should he/she delay his meal until the appetite has passed off. One should rise from the table while some appetite or desire for food is still present ^[15].

Mind-Body Connection

Numerous practices can enhance the mind-body connection, with yoga, guided meditation, and tai chi being among the most well-known and effective.

- Yoga: This discipline blends physical movements with controlled breathing and meditation, enhancing awareness of bodily sensations while building mental resilience.
- 2. **Guided Meditation:** These sessions involve visualizing peaceful scenes or positive scenarios, which can trigger real relaxation responses in the body.
- 3. **Tai Chi:** A gentle and fluid exercise, Tai Chi emphasizes the coordination between breath and movement, promoting harmony between body and mind [21].

Conclusion

Emotions are powerful they don't just influence how we feel, but how we heal. From racing hearts in fear to the healing warmth of joy, each emotion tells a story our body understand. From the gentle science of the vagus nerve to the timeless wisdom of Unani medicine, the message is clear: our emotional state deeply shapes our physical health. Unani concepts like *mizaj* (temperament) and *rooh* (vital

spirit) remind us that true healing involves harmonizing the inner self. When spiritual practices, emotional awareness, and scientific understanding come together, they form a complete, compassionate model of care.

In today's fast-paced world, where emotional distress is often ignored or misunderstood, recognizing the mind-body connection is no longer a luxury it's a necessity. Real healing begins when we stop treating the body and mind as separate. To heal the body, we must listen to the heart. To restore health, we must honour the soul. Only when we embrace this unity can we move towards true, lasting well-being mind, body, and soul as one.

Conflict of Interest

Not available

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