

IVANA VASEVSKA Sommersemester 2022 Bachelorarbeit FB Gestaltung | FH Aachen

the process of healing repressed emotions

documentation

### content

6-11 introduction\_ the stages\_ 42-53 overview\_ SUFFERING **AWARENESS** research\_ 12-23 CONFRONTATION **EXPRESSION** situation ACCEPTANCE studies healthy & unhealthy emotions anger the emotional body 54-67 process\_ problematization & solution plan photoshoot model breefing further development\_rooms concept\_ 24-41 content design\_ reflection\_ 68-73 purpose icons audience photographs use scenarios lights sources medium clothes\_symbolism acknowledgement\_ typography cover design

## introduction

Our emotions influence our mental and physical state, they influence the way we perceive and treat ourselves and others around us, how we communicate, act, react... The relationship we have with our emotions dictates the quality of our life and our overall health.

Oftentimes in our lives when we are confronted with difficult or traumatic situations, the emotion can be so intense, that we <u>suppress</u> or <u>repress</u> them, which means that they are not fully experienced and becomes stuck in our bodies. This leads to emotional pain, which is associated with four common feelings of sadness, unexpressed anger, anxiety, and guilt.

For this reason I believe that it is important to be aware of how we can have a more conscious approach to our emotions.

Emotional pain, just like physical pain can be resolved through a process of healing. Emotional healing is a process of accepting painful life experiences and negative emotional reaction associated with them. <sup>2</sup>

The concept and idea of this project is to use design and photography to visually portray different stages that one goes through when dealing with emotional pain and repressed emotions.

There are 5 main stages, and they are represented through different colored icons which are later used as a guideline for the colors and compositions of the photographs. The stages are:

\_SUFFERING
\_AWARENESS
\_CONFRONTATION
\_EXPRESSION
ACCEPTANCE

The stages do not necessarily always happen in the same sequence, because the process of healing & integrating looks and feels different for each individual. How long it takes also depends on the person. Healing happens in layers, so when we have "completed" the process, we usually find ourselves entering a new, deeper layer, one step closer to our personal truth.

<sup>1</sup>\_Repression (noun): to hold something back or to prevent an act of volition, especially by force. Repressing emotions usually happens on an unconscious level.

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>Suppression</u> (noun): to stop or block something (to force something to stop). Suppression refers to the act of consciously suppressing one's feelings, thoughts, and wants.)



### SUFFERING



AWARENESS



CONFRONTATION



EXPRESSION



ACCEPTANCE















research\_

### situation

With our society becoming more comfort-seeking, everything has become more accessible, faster, cheaper and easier to obtain, and as a result there has been a general expectation to strive for constant happiness and not experience the more difficult emotions. This kind of mindset has led most people to finding habits that escape from the inner discomfort.

We have been taught that emotions like anger, guilt, sadness, hurt, shame or embarrassment are unwanted and they make us weak or unacceptable. As a consequence these emotions stay within us and remain unexpressed and stagnant. This contradicts the whole purpose of the emotion, which is to be constantly in a state of movement and flow.

Numerous psychologist, philosophers, doctors, teachers and artists have spoken about the importance of feeling the whole spectrum of emotions and how understanding our traumatic experiences and coping mechanisms are crucial for having a more fulfilled, meaningful and healthy life.

### studies

For example, in their book, The Upside of Your Dark Side: Why Being Your Whole Self—Not Just Your "Good" Self—Drives Success and Fulfillment, authors Todd Kashdan and Robert Biswas-Diener discuss the reasons that all emotions are important to feel. They claim that being happy and optimistic all the time is not the primary concern in emotional health. <sup>3</sup>

Being able to experience all our emotions in a balanced way will give us a stable sense of wholeness and an ability to manage both the highlights and the challenges of life. They suggest that being able to manage discomfort may be a more important key than searching or pursuing happiness. In fact, pursuing happiness may lead to a greater sense of loneliness and anxiety.

Experiencing our emotional spectrum is a natural human trait, and repressing it is something that we have learned throughout our lives as a way to cope. But, this also means that this behavior can be unlearned and shifted into a healthier, more constructive one. For that we have to heal and integrate the unwanted, so-called shadow aspects of ourselves.

Research already shows that suppressing emotions over a longer period of time can lead to physical illnesses and psychological disorders.

\_In a 12-year prospective study, emotional suppression was related to a significantly greater risk of both cancer and cardiovascular disease mortality (Chapman, Fiscella, Kawachi, Duberstein, & Muennig, 2013).

\_In a comprehensive meta-analysis by Chervonsky and Hunt (2017), emotion suppression was related to poorer relationship quality, lower social satisfaction, lower social support, more negative first impressions, and lower social wellbeing.

In an experiment in which participants gave a speech in front of a camera, those who suppressed their emotions experienced more anxiety and increased heart rate (Hofmann, Heering, Sawyer, & Asnaani, 2009) <sup>4</sup>

### healthy & unhealthy emotions

anger

In most cases, suppression or repression happens as a result of our upbringings. If we were raised in an environment where it was unsafe to express (especially) our negative emotions and feelings, like anger, disappointment or dissatisfaction, it teaches us that our "negative" emotions make us unlovable and in order to survive and be loved we have to find a way to hide those feelings and put us in a state of resistence towards them.

As a consequence, we indulge in substance abuse, overeating or undereating, shopping, gambling or numbing ourselves in order not to feel that which we think we shouldn't feel.

Because of this, there is a common belief that emotions can be healthy or unhealthy. Anger for example, can often be perceived as an unhealthy emotion. For this I have illustrated examples of how emotions like healthy anger and toxic positivity can be visualized in a simple but clear way. These icons served as a guide for the development of the final icon designs.



healthy anger



toxic positivity

With the help of further research, I have come to the conclusion that it can be misleading to have this kind of view on emotions.

For example, many spiritual teachers argue that there is no such thing as unhealthy anger because anger is just an emotion.

An emotion is just an indicator of the reality of the person perceiving it. "It is always a direct reflection of some reality, whether a mental reality or external reality." <sup>5</sup> Simply put, the difference between healthy and unhealthy anger is our judgement of it.

Anger is never "wrong". It is the action that arises as a result of anger that can be seen as potentially wrong.

The first step to working with anger is to be aware that there is some sort of resistance towards ir in the first place, meaning, inner beliefs that it is "wrong" to be feeling this emotion. Anger is where our boundaries exist. It says: "This was a <u>no</u> for me and yet it still happened". So we cannot live into our personal truth if we don't have access to anger.

### the emotional body

The emotional body contains the imprints of the emotional aspect of our memories, as well as our current emotional state. It represents the bridge between our physical selves and thinking selves.

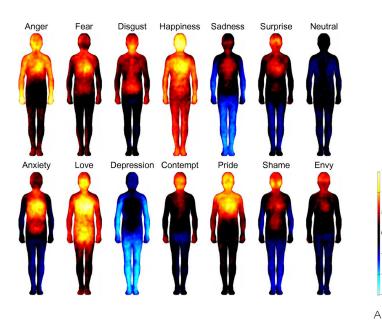
Because of the emotional body, man is able to experience their own thoughts. The thoughts are converted into feeling impressions, the physical body interprets those feelings-impressions as if 'translating the message,' it converts these messages into neuropeptides and hormones that cause the physical reactions in our body that we call emotions, ranging from anger, to fear, to stress, irritation, love, compassion, hope and happiness.

Our sense of life and feeling-based conclusions about life, our interpretations and emotional trauma are all contained within the feeling body.

If our interpretations are experienced as painful emotions, and our feelings dictate what is real, then our feeling body will continue to convey the painful messages to the body, interpreted as unpleasant emotions.

This leads to a physical reflection of those emotional states, where the trauma is constantly being relived. <sup>6</sup>

The visual representation below on how emotions influence our physical states, and how that can be represented in different colors was an inspiration to use spotlights focused on the model as a way to give the emotion a "body", but keep its abstractness.



<sup>^</sup> People drew maps of body locations where they feel basic emotions (top row) and more complex ones (bottom row). Hot colors show regions that people say are stimulated during the emotion. Cool colors indicate deactivated areas.

### problematization & solution

One of the major problems we have with mental health today is the fact that we try to help people escape from their feelings and emotions. We help them numb them out with prescription medication. We can't imagine that these feelings and emotions might actually be serving a purpose. Many in fact. We expect that the emotion will go away if we simply decide to push it awat.

We tell people that the reason they feel the way they feel is because their brain is defective, because they have a disorder. This cannot be further from the truth.

Another lie we tell is that feelings won't change unless you deliberately change them. Truth is, all you need to do is release resistance to the feelings that you feel. How?

Instead of running away from them, we turn the other way and you go in the direction of them. We fully let ourselves experience and be with them. It's about observing a feeling, and letting ourselves be conscious of feeling it completely. <sup>7</sup>

Then, the only job is to follow the way it changes and drop into that new feeling. Breathe into the feeling. We do this until the feeling changes into something that we can identify as a positive feeling sensation. Ultimately, if we continue doing this, there will be no more layers to shed and we'll be left with the true essence of who we really are.

This project focuses on the problem of our approach with emotions and how we handle them in today's society. With the 5 stages it also offers a practicle guide towards a solution to this problem.

This i why the name of the project is called FEEL IT\_HEAL IT, because only by allowing ourselves to completely be with and feel our emotions, especially the uncomfortable and painful ones, then we can we truly heal from emotional pain and heal our repressed feelings. By moving into feelings they transform on their own.

concept\_

## content

### purpose

The objective of this project is to increase awareness and make the topic of repressed emotions more open and accessible. It explores and understand how emotions are treated or can be transformed from painful to meaningful. It portrays a linear story, starting from a so-called negative emotion and ending with a positive transformation of the emotion. The goal is to "shine a light" on a topic that most people are aware of, but rarely address. If the story manage to bring any value to the person and help them shift their attention towards instead of away from their emotions, then that would mean this project has surved its purpose.

### audience

The target audience is initially any person who is dealing with emotional pain and represses their emotions, whether sometimes or on a regular basis. However, this project can also be purposeful for people who did not have a chance to be confronted with this topic, but resonate with it, as it can serve as a self-reflection tool. Any person who wishes to explore and get to know the core of their emotional needs could benefit and learn from it. It seems that just by bringing up topics like repressed emotions, it can lead to many meaningful conversations and creates space for people to open up about difficult and traumatic experiences.

### use scenarios

A possible application for the project would be to exhibit the posters in a large format around the city, without much description about them, in order to allow people to have a free interpretation of what the images mean. They could be exhibited around the city in different public areas, like train stations, bus stations, pop-up stores and cafés etc.

If the images resonate with the viewer, they can scan a QR code which leads to a landing page with further information about the topic of healing emotions and the five stages, where it would be possible to purchase the photobook.

One step step further would be the option to book a personal photo shoot where the viewer becomes the model. They would go through the same stages of healing and integration. This would give them an opportunity to work with their repressed emotions.

I believe this idea allows the project to be more interactive and helpful, and it also allows the viewer to have their own personal experience with the topic and take with them a visually symbolic documentation of the process.

### medium

Three different types of mediums have been used to communicate this project. The most important one is the photobook, which serves as a storytelling medium and a documentation of the process. The landscape format of the book helps to tell the story with a series of images, appearing in a row, one after the other.

Additional medium is the icons which are printed out as stickers. The idea behind the stickers is that each person takes with them a sticker of the stage of healing that speaks to them the most, or the stage that they believe they are currently in.

The third and final medium is the posters, one poster for each stage, and each of them is consisted of the main photograph and a 3D image of the icon. In this way, the two main visual aspects: icons and photograps are combined in one coherent poster design.



\_example for the poster design idea that is planned for the DIPLOMA exhibition.  $\_$ stage AWARENESS

### icons

In order to visually portray how the healing process looks like, I have designed an icon for each stage. A specific color and shape has been defined for every stage. The questions that I have asked myself during this process in order to come to a visual solution were:

- \_What do emotions look like?
- \_How do they feel?
- \_How can an emotion change?
- \_How to illustrate the intensity of an emotion?
- \_How to illustrate a change in an emotion?
- Where is the emotion located?
- \_How does it portray itself in a physical form?

The design of the form and colors of the icon was partly inspired by the designs and colors of the chakra system, which again corresponds with the hindu and buddhist belief that there is a "physical body" and an "emotional body".

The chakras are energy centers in our body, also known as "wheels", and they are linked to particular colors, emotional states, body organs, foods, smells etc. In the body they are ranging from the bottom of the spine till the top of the head.



A further example for the inspiration of the icon design is the illustration below which shows how our pain can be transformed when we respond to it with judgement and with compassion.

When we judge our pain we are making it feel worse than it already is, which is represented with spiky edges, while compassion softens out the edges, making the pain easier to feel, to hold and to understand. It feels softer, smoother and less dangeous.



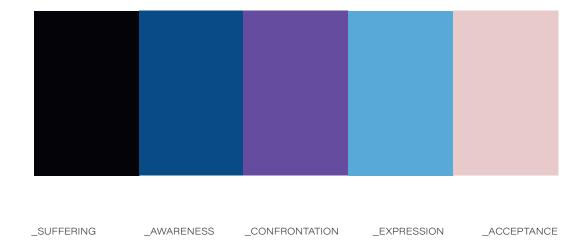
Giving an emotion a shape, form, texture and color seems to help us define it and therefore understand it better. The geometrical shapes and forms that are in the middle of each icon symbolize the emotion that is being suppressed/repressed, and the way it feels in our bodies. The color gradient bright yellow show the intensity of the emotion.

red > orange > yellow intense > calming

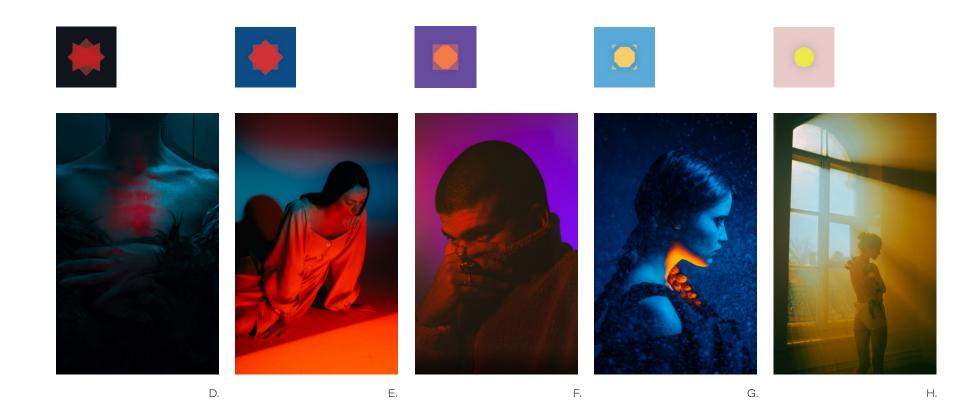
The background gradient from a dark to a light color symbolizes the colors of a sunrise, since the transition of darkness turning into light is often associated with sokme form of a positive change or transformation. Each background color represents the way our surroundings feel when we find ourselves in the specific stage.

> black > blue > purple > pink dark > bright unconscious > conscious





### photography\_moods



The light setup plays an important role in the process of this project. In order to achieve emotion, it was important to understand the basic lighting parameters:8

#### BRIGHTNESS:

Having a predominantely dark background across all stages is a way to communicate that the process requires us to step into contact with the darkest aspects of ourselves. The focused brighter lights accents the internal changes that take place during the healing process.

#### COLOR:

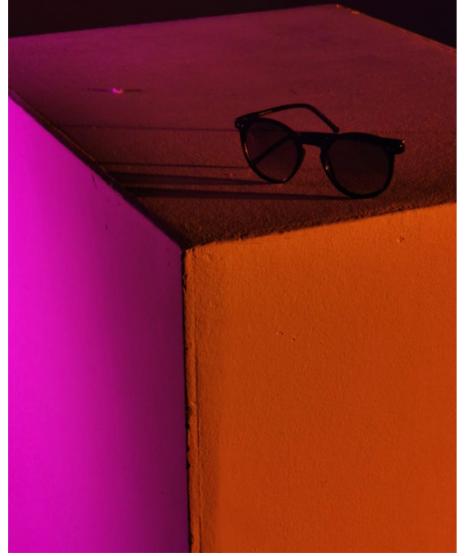
In this context, color has been used in a symbolic way. The meaning of the colors is linked to the way we perceive color collectively, but it was also a personal and intuitive decision on why the lights are in the specific color. The individual colors for every stage are explained in the stages description below.

#### CONTRAST IN COLOR:

Contrast has been achieved by setting cold tones for the background, and warm tones for the emotion/geometric-shaped icons.

#### DIRECTION

In order to achieve cohesion, one spotlight has been set up for the emotion and this one is placed on the right side and is always directed at the model. The other spotlight/s have been directed mostly towards the background or the left side of the set.



\_behind the scenes; stage CONFRONTATION

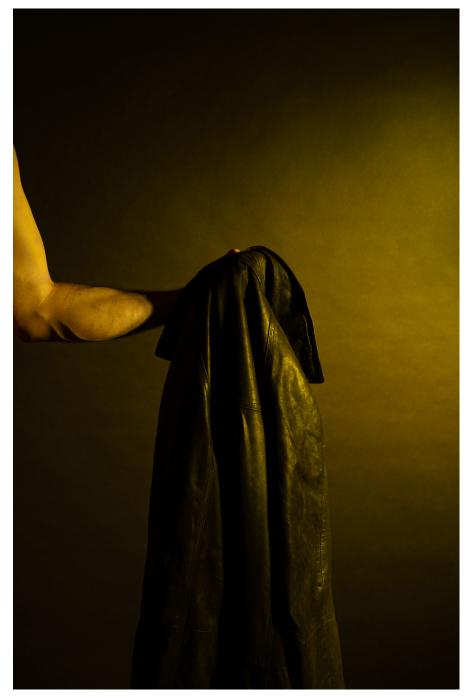
### clothes\_symbolism

The clothes have been used in a simbolic way throughout the photobook. At the beginning the model is wearing multiple layeres of clothing on him, which symbolizes the "baggage" that we carry within us as a consequence of not dealing with the emotional pain.

As each stage progresses, the model gets rid of the clothing layers one by one. When the stage of EXPRESSION takes place, the shirt is being completely ripped of as a way of letting the anger and frustration out.

The story ends with the jacket that was worn at the beginning being picked up off the ground and put on the shoulders as a "badge of honor".

This represents the last aspect of the healing process which comes after acceptance:
\_INTEGRATION. With this final act the process is completed and one has healed the painful emotion and integrated it as a part of oneself.



### cover design

A sans-serif typeface has been used all throughout the photobook and documentation. The same typeface is used as a display font for the titles and subtitels, as well as the flow text. The simple, neo-grotesque design of Acumin Pro Wide adds a complementary elemets to the images without taking away the strength of the composition and content.

The symbol underscore\_ is repeatedly used in this project as a graphical element and serves as a mark for titles, subtitles and to accentuate important aspects.

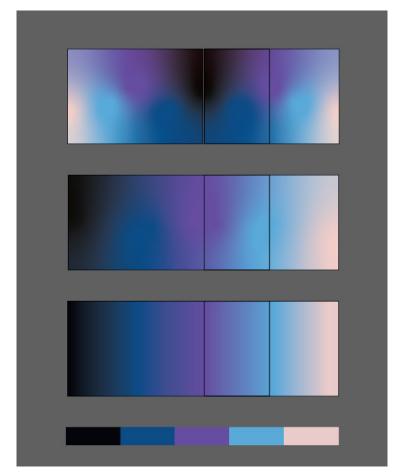
# \_Acumin Pro Wide

Acumin Pro Wide Light\_ 15 pt

Acumin Pro Wide Regular\_ 10 pt

Acumin Pro Wide Extra Light\_ 7 pt

The same colors of the icons have been illustrated as a gradient for the cover of the book and documentation. The final cover design starts with the darkest color on the front, and the brightest color on the back, following the color story within the book.



the stages\_

#### overview\_



## SUFFERING



When we find ourselves in a state of suffering it means that we are being in a resistance towards our own emotions. This means that we believe that what is happening to us is not supposed to be happening. Denying our emotions in this way has caused many symptoms of emotional distress, like: feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, feeling guilty without a clear cause, spending a lot of time worrying, relying on mood-altering substances, isolating from people or activities, irritability, fatigue and many more. <sup>9</sup>

When we suffer we are overwhelmed by our darkest aspects. For this reason the photographs have a dark, almost black background. This is how our surroundings feel when we are in a state of denial. Black is often associated with the unconscious, which is where our repressed emotions and memories are stored.

The red spotlight accents the emotion of suffering, for it is intense, painful and calls for our attention. The symbol consists of layered sharp-edged geometric forms, which intuitively signals a form of distress.



## AWARENESS



Becoming aware of the pain is the first step towards understanding and integrating it. This enables us to see and name what we feel, how we feel, and why we feel a particular emotion.

Since repression usually happens on an unconscious level, when we become aware of the emotion we have suppressed this is often followed by a feeling of shock. Painful emotions inform us of what feels hurtful, wrong or untrue, and they invite us to move forward into healthier ways of living. When we make sense of what your emotions are, you can identify the goal/need/concern that the emotion is organizing you to address. <sup>10</sup>

Just by shifting the emotion from an unconscious to a conscious level already means that a change has been made. When we become aware, although the emotion still remains painful (meaning, the light remains red), we can already see the pain from a different perspective. Our world becomes a bit brighter, which is why the dark blue color is added to the background. Dark blue or indigo is also associated with the Third Eye Chakra, which is strongly related to consciousness, awareness and perception.



## CONFRONTATION

The next stage is confronting our emotional pain. Confrontation is not an easy task and this is where most of us have a lot of resistance towards. Since avoiding and running away from the pain only makes it worse, confrontation gives us a sense of relief.

This is the stage where we stand face-to-face with the part of us that is suffering, and it is our opportunity to meet and befriend our pain. When we face our emotions,

It's about self-reflection, self-compassion and allowing ourselves to feel however we feel, and this helps us to create new meaning about the purpose of our suffering.

With CONFRONTATION being in the middle of the process, the colors acts as a bridge between the darkness and brightness, the conscious and unconscious, passive and active states. Just like the dawn, right before the sun rises- the sky remains dark, but the sun starts to peek our of the horizon.



## EXPRESSION

When we feel emotional pain, being able to express it is vital. Expression can take many forms, like talking about our pain with a person we trust, writing, screaming, crying, singing, painting, music, poetry, photography etc. <sup>11</sup>

This stage is often disapproved in our society because expressing negative emotions is seen as something that is unwanted and it is often associated with aggression or hostility. However, it can actually be one of the healthiest ways to release stuck emotions out of our body.

Expressing our emotions can be associated with the 5th chakra also known as the Throat Chakra. The symbolic color of this chakra is blue and it is the main reason for chosing the blue background. Blue is purifying, and so is the art of expression.

The yellow spotlight focuses on the throat and mouth of the model, which can be seen as tools for expression. This also accents the area of our body where the emotion is most intense when we are in a state of expression.



## ACCEPTANCE

The last stage to this process is accepting the emotion. Acceptance means being aware of our emotions and making peace with them for what they are, knowing that they won't last.

This goes even for positive emotions – we can't always be happy, joyful and positive. Accepting them can actually improve our emotion regulation, lead to fewer mood swings, and improve emotional balance. <sup>12</sup>

Acceptance is the opposite of rejection. It lets us integrate the emotion as a part of us, without trying to change it. It strenghtens our relationship with ourselves and helps us build safety from within.

This stage has been represented with a pink and yellow spotlight. Pink symbolizes softness, gratitude, calmness, intuition and compassion. Even the phrase "in the pink" means being in "good health". <sup>13</sup>

The bright yellow light shows that the emotion has been regulated and feels much more comfortable and light, cosidering the fact that yellow is seen as a color of warmness and clarity.



process\_

### plan for photoshoot

\_18.05.2022

Model: MAX DÜPPENBECKER Assistant: LUISA KEMPF

Before the photoshoot took place, we had a conversation with the model about the concept and idea of the project. We made a decision that he should pick an emotion that he believes he has repressed.

During the photoshoot he would be working with this emotion and going through the process of suffering, awareness, confrontation, expression and acceptance.

In this way the model also goes through a personal healing journey that would be documented with the photographs.

### model\_breefing



The model was given instructions for the planned poses, face expressions and movements. I have also written down affirmations in order for him to have a better understanding of what each stage represents. The rest was left to improvisation and the spontanious expressions of the model.



#### CONFRONTATION

#### "I face the pain"

- \_confronting emotions that have been avoided
- \_face to face with your inner shadows
- \_interacting with mirrors as a symbol for confronting the different aspects of ourselves
- \_reaching towards the mirrors



#### SUFFERING

#### "I am hurting"

- \_distressed, worried, in a state of denial
- \_holding the head, tense muscles
- \_frowned expression, gaze towards the floor
- \_at the end you look at the chest and become aware of the light: transition to AWARENESS



#### **EXPRESSION**

#### "I express the pain"

- \_releasing unexpressed emotions
- \_scream, yell, cry, hit, expression of anger
- \_destruction: ripping off the T-Shirt
- \_the light is focused on the throat where the emotion is being expressed from



#### **AWARENESS**

#### "I see that I am hurting"

- \_becoming conscious of the pain
- \_expression of shock, surprise
- \_looking at yourself, "holding" the emotion/light
- \_removing the jacket



### ACCEPTANCE

#### "I make peace with the pain"

- \_sense of emptiness
- \_expression of joy, gratitude, inner peace
- \_you are embracing the light/emotion
- \_tears of joy and relief

### behind\_the\_scenes

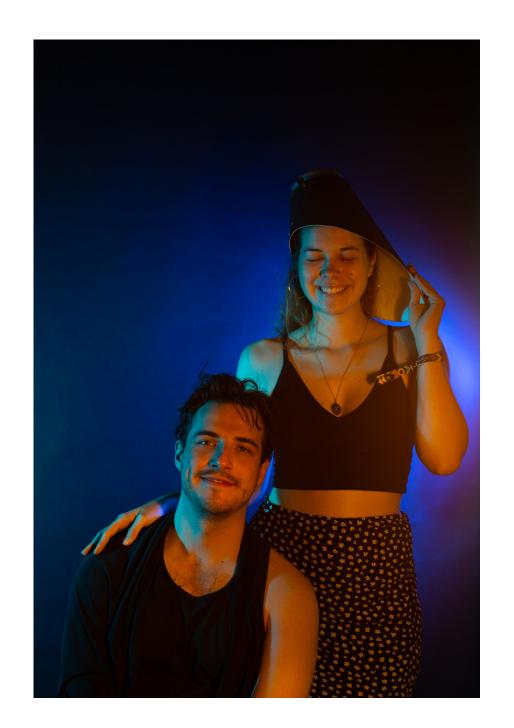








\_behind the photograph \_\_actual photograph







\_group photos

### further\_development

The following concept is an idea of how this project can be taken further in terms of photography and emotion visualization.

\_Storytelling: the 5 stages are represented with 5 different rooms. Whenever the model leaves one room and enters another one, it resembles the transition from one stage to the other, symbolizing an emotional healing journey. Each room is lighted with the colors of the icons.

The idea was to use the structure, size, mood and feeling of the room to portray the suppressed emotion. The image on the right is an example of how the transition of the rooms can be portrayed through storytelling.

\_SUFFERING would take place in a narrow, small room, like a tiny bathroom for example, the model sitting in the shower under running water. \_CONFRONTATION, for example, would take place in a room full of mirrors, with different reflections portrayed on each mirror.

A transition through the hallway would lead the model outside to the state of \_ACCEPTANCE, where the model is "freed" from the closed rooms and gets a new broad perspective.

Because of the amount of time, energy and planning necessary to realize this idea, it was left out and the priority was to create the photographs in a studio first.



68 I.

## reflection

With this project I was only able to grasp a very tiny portion of what emotions are and what they mean. It has been an intense process, both mentally and emotionally. During my personal journey with this process, I came across and overcame a lot of resistance. On one hand, because it is a complex topic, on the other hand, because it served as a constant reminder of my own unaddressed and buried emotions.

However, it has helped me become aware that one of the main emotions I have repressed over the years is anger, as it seems to be the case for many people. It has also helped me realize that I am currently in the stage of CONFRONTATION with anger.

Many thought-provoking conversations took place as a result of chosing to work on this topic. I believe people are more and more willing to understand themselves and share their traumatic experience, and to see the cause of their pain and seek for a solution.

The structure of our modern society can put us in a box that is often emotionally suffocating and difficult to break free from. But, I also see that as a collective we are ready to be more vulnerable and open, and move into the direction of compassion. By showing compassion and understanding towards ourselves we can show compassion and understanding towards the world.

Embracing emotional integration can create much safer work environments, healthier family dynamics and deeper relationships with ourselves and the people around us.

I hope to inspire people to be less afraid of their emotions and more curious about them. If we ever feel overwhelmed, this can serve as a reminder to stop, breathe and listen to what our emotion is trying to communicate with us. No matter how painful or intense it can be, it always navigates us to our personal truth.

And within our personal truth lies our freedom, the freedom to be who we really are.

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<sup>E</sup> Polina Washington @behance

F Joao Vaz @behance

<sup>G</sup> Polina Washington @behance

<sup>H</sup> Polina Washington @behance

Daniel Monteiro @behance

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